



Thai Omnivores' Motivation and Barrier of Plant-based Food Consumption

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Abstract

This study investigates Thai omnivores' motivations and barriers to consuming plant-based food. Based on in-depth interviews with 10 Thai omnivores aged 20 to 55 who consume plant-based food occasionally or frequently—ranging from 9 to 150 days per year—this qualitative study finds that the primary motives for plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores are subjective norms and Buddhist religious beliefs. Health consciousness ranks as the third most common motive, whereas concerns for animal welfare and environmental impact are less influential. These findings highlight the significant role of cultural perspectives in shaping plant-based food consumption in Thailand. Therefore, marketers of plant-based food may need to design promotional strategies that align with these key motivations to encourage greater adoption of plant-based diets. Conversely, subjective norms serve not only as a motivation but also as a barrier to more frequent plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores. Another major barrier is perceived behavioral control, specifically the limited availability of plant-based food options in the Thai market. To address these challenges and promote plant-based food consumption, restaurants could introduce more vegan and vegetarian-friendly menu options, making it easier for consumers to choose plant-based meals even when dining with others who consume animal products.

Keywords: Plant-Based Food, Thai Omnivores, Subjective Norms, Religion Belief, Perceived Behavioral Control

Introduction

The former studies related to plant-based food's motivations and barriers were mostly arranged in Western countries where plant-based food's trend has increased significantly in the recent years due to the fact that it is believed to improve animal welfare, environment and human health (Aschemann-Witzel & Schulze, 2023; Bryant & Sanctorem, 2021; Denver, Nordstrom & Christensen, 2023.) However, there is fewer studies about plant-based food's motivation and barrier arranged in Southeast Asian countries where plant-based food's trend has not been as much as popular compared to the Western Countries (i.e., European, or North American countries) (World Population Review,



2024.) Phongpiyawit (2022) found that there might be more barriers in plant-based food consumption in Southeast Asian countries compared to European countries such as perceived behavioral control (i.e., convenience and market availability.) However, Thailand, one of Asian countries, seems to have a number of omnivores who are interested in consuming plant-based food these days, especially during Vegetarian Festival in October for cultural and religious things (Thailand Now, 2024.) Therefore, to investigate the motivations and barriers of Thai omnivores that are unique and different to Western countries, this research will do qualitative research by utilizing 10 in-depth interviews to predict the future of plant-based food market and find the ways to increase plant-based food consumption in this country.

Objectives

There are five objectives that this research intends to study and find the answers as listed below:

1. To investigate the top motives of Thai omnivores when they choose to consume plant-based food.
2. To investigate the main barriers of Thai omnivores for the reasons why they cannot consume plant-based food more often.
3. To investigate Thai omnivores' attitude towards meat-like food.
4. To find the relationship between organic food & plant-based food choices chosen by Thai omnivores.

Concept theory framework

Omnivores' motivation for plant-based food consumption

There are top three motives among consumers who choose plant-based food over animal products which include animal welfare, environment, and health consciousness (Aschemann-Witzel & Schulze, 2023; Bryant & Sanctorum, 2021; Denver et al., 2023; Phongpiyawit, 2022.) Firstly, regarding animal welfare, 90% of meat is produced from factory farms that treat animals poorly and cruelly in small cages (Bryant & Sanctorum, 2021.) So, shifting from consuming animal products to plant-based food products will help to decrease cruelty on animals. Secondly, regarding the environmental aspect, the farming industry significantly increases deforestation for more farming spaces and animal food (Bryant & Sanctorum, 2021.) Moreover, meat production process is one of the reasons that cause greenhouse gas emission that causes global warming (Aschemann-Witzel & Schulze, 2023; Denver et al., 2023.) Therefore, consuming less animal products and more plant-based food will slow down the greenhouse effect and global warming. Thirdly, regarding the human health aspect, as confirmed by EAT Lancet Commission, plant-based food is



believed to be healthier than animal products (Afshin et al., 2019, as cited in Perez-Cueto et al., 2022; Willett et al., 2019, as cited in Denver et al., 2023.) Moreover, among omnivore consumers, Phongpiyawit (2022) & Sheen, Lim & Forde (2023) found that health consciousness plays the most vital role in omnivores' motivation to consume plant-based food.

Omnivores' barrier for plant-based food consumption

Although some vegans and vegetarians who used to be omnivores faced some obstacles to consuming more plant-based food at the beginning, they have conquered those barriers and turned themselves into frequent plant-based food consumers. Conversely, omnivores who have not planned to be vegans or vegetarians seem to have several concerns to consume more plant-based food including attachment to meat's deliciousness and sensations (Giacalone, Clausen & Jaegeret, 2022; Perez-Cueto et al., 2022), fear of insufficient nutrients, perceived behavioral control in terms of convenience (i.e., limited market availability of plant-based food choices) (Perez-Cueto et al., 2022.), subjective norms (i.e., family members and friends who are omnivores might not include them in social activities) (Daly, 2020 & Mylan, 2018, as cited in White, Ballantine & Ozanne, 2022) & financial concern (i.e., more expensive cost of plant-based food compared to general omnivore's food) (Denver et al., 2023; Feher, Gazdecki, Veha, Szakaly & Szakaly, 2020; Ho, 2021, as cited in The Vegan Society, 2024.)

Alternative meat-like food

As some omnivores are addicted to real meat's deliciousness and sensations which makes it hard for them to consume plant-based food more often, meat-like food that is produced from plant might help to increase their plant-based food consumption if it is tasty, convenient and affordable in terms of price (Bryant & Sanctorum, 2021; Denver et al., 2023; Giacalone et al., 2022.)

Linkage between organic food and plant-based food consumption

Interestingly, Denver et al. (2023) found that omnivores who consume organic food tend to consume less meat and more plant-based food than omnivores who are not associated with organic food. This represents that omnivores who are conscious about their healthy lifestyles, environment or animal welfare tend to carefully choose organic and plant-based food more than omnivores who are not conscious about them. Also, the more they consume organic food, the more cheerful outlook towards plant-based food (Denver et al., 2023.)

Thai people who consume plant-based food

According to World Population Review (2024), only 3.6% of Thai people are vegans or vegetarians. Although the country seems to have small group of frequent plant-based food consumers, there is an annual festival called "Vegetarian Festival" that significantly



raises the number of Thai plant-based food consumers during every October (Thailand Now, 2024.) Therefore, Thai omnivores who sometimes or often consume plant-based food have the potential to uplift the quantity of plant-based food consumption in this country.

Materials and Methods

Design and Setting

Consumer attitude or behavior towards plant-based food is a reality that can always be changed and affected by external factors. As this is a socially constructed thing, this study follows constructionism (Bell et al., 2019.) In congruent with constructionism (Bell et al., 2019), this study intends to investigate and understand more about consumer insights including motivation and barrier towards plant-based food consumption. So, this study utilizes qualitative research methods. Additionally, in-depth interviews are utilized because this study has the main purpose to understand consumers' motivation and barrier deeply by allowing them to explain about their experiences and feelings without being motivated or disturbed by others (McDaniel & Gates, 2018.) The discussion guide for semi-structured interviews is prepared by the researcher, who is also the interviewer, for interviewing each participant in congruent with the main research questions of this study. Non-probability sampling is the method for participant recruitment including 3 sampling techniques. Firstly, Purposive Sampling, participants are specifically chosen based on their dietary habits, which are omnivores who consume plant-based food often or sometimes. Secondly, Convenience Sampling, the researcher of this study, asks her colleagues and students for their dietary habits and willingness to participate in this study. Thirdly, Snowball Sampling, some participants are asked to recommend other suitable participants to join this study. However, before selecting each participant, s/he is asked by screening questions as listed below:

- A. Do you consume plant-based food at least 9 days per year? How often?
- B. What are the occasions that you consume plant-based food?
- C. How old are you?
- D. May I ask about your educational background?
- E. (If s/he is a target participant) Are you willing to be my research participant for plant-based food motivation and barrier study?

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form are shared for participant's perusal to sign before joining an in-depth interview of this study.

Data Collection

The target participants are Thai omnivores who consume plant-based food at least 9 days per year but not more than 150 days per year. They are selected as research



participants because they can indicate major barriers of plant-based food's frequent consumption in Thailand, although they have some motives to consume it sometimes or often. Their age ranges are from 20 to 55 years old (Generation Z, Y and X). Their educational backgrounds are from a current bachelor's degree student to a person with doctoral graduation. The reason why these age ranges and educational background are chosen is because they are expected to be able to explain their thoughts well with some reasons supported. There are 10 participants included in this study for in-depth interviews, including 5 consumers who consume plant-based food during the Vegetarian Festival or meditation retreat camp and another 5 consumers who consume plant-based food on the day that they choose to consume by themselves e.g., on every Monday and Tuesday or on every Buddhist Holy day. Each participant is being interviewed about 30 minutes by the researcher. In addition, as this study collects data directly from participants, the researcher follows the guidelines of Bangkok University's Ethics Committee to protect participants from any negative effect caused by this study, which is reviewed and approved.

Table1: Participant Synopsis

Participant	Plant-based food consumption's occasion	Approx. days per year of plant-based food consumption	Birth Gender	Age	Educational Background
1	Fixed 3 days per week and during Vegetarian Festival	150 days	Female	48	Master's degree
2	4 days per month (on every Buddhist Holy day) and during Vegetarian Festival	55 days	Female	46	Doctoral Degree
3	A fixed day per week and during Vegetarian Festival	55 days	Female	35	Master's degree
4	5 days per month chosen by herself	60 days	Female	20	Current bachelor's degree Student
5	1 day per month chosen by himself	12 days	Male	43	Master's degree



Participant	Plant-based food consumption's occasion	Approx. days per year of plant-based food consumption	Birth Gender	Age	Educational Background
6	During Meditation Retreat Camp	30 days	Female	55	Doctoral Degree
7	During Vegetarian Festival	9 days	Female	52	Bachelor's degree
8	During Vegetarian Festival	9 days	Female	21	Current bachelor's degree Student
9	During Vegetarian Festival	9 days	Male	37	Master's degree
10	During Vegetarian Festival	14 days	Male	20	Current bachelor's degree Student

Data Analysis

10 in-depth interviews are recorded and then transcribed. Subsequently, the researcher utilizes “Thematic Analysis” to indicate, analyze and categorize the most mentioned points from interviews into the different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Castleberry & Nolen, 2018.) However, the themes are not only generated by selecting the most popular points mentioned in the interviews but also produced by choosing the data's considerable meaning (Lochmiller, 2021) contributed to the research objectives.

Results

By applying Thematic Analysis, there are 4 themes found from 10 in-depth interviews of Thai omnivores who often or sometimes consume plant-based food as listed below:

Findings of Theme 1: The top motives of Thai omnivores who often or sometimes consume plant-based food seem to be significantly related to religion's belief and subjective norms. While health consciousness is the third popular motive for plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores.

Most Thai omnivores who consume plant-based food during Vegetarian Festival start from following their family's belief and practice. This represents the strong effect of subjective norms on plant-based food consumption. This might be because Thai culture



is collectivism (The Culture Factor Group, 2025) that people tend to follow what their tribes, families or social circles do.

“I consume plant-based food during Vegetarian Festival since I was a child. This is because my family does it every year. So, I feel like it is a cultural heritage to execute.”

While the others who consume plant-based food in other occasions like Meditation Retreat Camp, every Buddhist Holy day or a fixed day per week have mentioned about “making merit,” which is linked to Buddhist’s religion belief. This might be because Thai people have grown up with Buddhist teaching since their childhood that has taught them to do good things and refrain from doing dreadful things (BBC, 2025.) Moreover, there is also a belief about karma that can affect each person’s fate (The Buddhist Centre, 2025.) So, to consume plant-based food instead of animal products sometimes make them feel like they have done good things (i.e., by not eating/ supporting food producers to kill animals for food) that will consequently make their own lives better because of good karma.

“I choose to consume plant-based food a day per week because I want to uplift my fate. It began since the year that the fortune teller told me that this year would not be so good. So, I find the way to do good thing to uplift my fate.”

Only a few of respondents have mentioned animal welfare or the environment. While health consciousness is the third popular motive among Thai omnivores who consume plant-based food as they mention about “body detox” when stop consuming animal products temporarily.

“It is a good chance to do body detox when I sometimes consume plant-based food.”

Findings of Theme 2: While subjective norms play a vital role as one of the top motives for plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores, it also plays a role as a barrier to consume it more often. Perceived behavioral control (i.e., market availability and convenience) also plays significant role as the major barrier for more frequent plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores.

It is obvious that subjective norms affect consumer behavior on food selection significantly, especially among people in collectivist country like Thailand. Thai omnivores consume plant-based food during Vegetarian Festival because their families have done so. Additionally, some respondents who consume plant-based food every week start to do so because they are influenced by their friends who do it and convince them to do so.

“I consume plant-based food on every Thursday, which is my birthday. The beginning is that I have heard from my friend that she does it. So, I want to try too.”



On the other hand, in other occasions, it is hard for Thai omnivores to consume plant-based food because they are fear of social rejection. It is hard for them to have a meal with families and friends if they are the only person in the group who consumes plant-based food, while the others consume animal products.

“I try not to go out with my social circle on the day that I intend to consume plant-based food because it is hard to have a meal with them when the others consume animal products.”

“I try not to consume plant-based food on weekend because it is a family day that I need to have meals with them, and it is hard for me to consume plant-based food when all my family members consume animal products.”

In addition, perceived behavioral control is also one of major barriers among Thai omnivores to consume more plant-based food because there are limited choices of plant-based food available in general restaurants and fresh markets, which make their lives harder if they consume plant-based food more often.

“In my workplace’s food center, there is no plant-based food available. Also, there is no plant-based food available in the fresh market too. The only place that is convenient for me to buy plant-based food’s meal is a convenience store, but those few choices are all frozen foods that are not appetizing.”

Findings of Theme 3: Meat-like food is rejected by Thai omnivores. Although they often or sometimes consume plant-based food, they choose real plant ingredients over meat-like food because they do not like its taste and appearance.

When asking about meat-like food, most participants show an obvious negative attitude towards it because they do not like its taste and appearance. They think that consuming meat-like foods feels like eating flour” and they do not see any benefit for consuming this artificial meat instead of real meat.

Findings of Theme 4: Organic food seems not to be much related to plant-based food choices among Thai omnivores. This might be because environmental and animal welfare are not the prime motives here. In addition, organic food seems not to be much popular among Thai omnivores because of higher price compared to general food. Conversely, organic food sounds like a more premium food among upper-middle class and upper-class people.

There is no relationship between plant-based and organic food selection found in this study. Respondents perceive organic food as a premium food based on its higher price. Although organic food seems not to be related to plant-based food’s selection, it is related to socioeconomic status because respondents who do not choose organic food



have mentioned about their concern of its higher price. Therefore, organic food is better captured the target consumers in upper-middle class and upper-class; SES B+ and A.

“I choose normal food products over organic food products because organic food is more expensive. I might buy organic food if it is on sale.”

Conclusions and Discussion

This study explores Thai omnivores who frequently or occasionally consumes plant-based food through 10 in-depth interviews. The data are analyzed using Thematic Analysis, resulting in four key themes: motivations and barriers to plant-based food consumption, attitudes toward meat-like alternatives, and the relationship between plant-based and organic food choices.

One significant finding highlights the role of cultural and religious influences, particularly Buddhism, in shaping motivations for plant-based food consumption. Given this strong cultural connection, marketing strategies could leverage Buddhist values to encourage greater consumption of plant-based food beyond the annual Vegetarian Festival. For instance, plant-based food producers and restaurants could promote consumption on Buddhist holy days—approximately four times per month—by emphasizing the spiritual benefits of temporarily abstaining from consuming animal products.

Additionally, subjective norms play a crucial role in influencing consumer behavior, particularly in Thailand’s collectivist society. To harness this, marketing campaigns could incorporate both online and offline word-of-mouth strategies. An example includes social media contests where consumers share their motivations and favorite plant-based dishes, with rewards provided by plant-based food businesses. This approach could enhance awareness, foster engagement, and increase the adoption of plant-based diets among Thai omnivores.

In terms of barriers towards plant-based food consumption among Thai omnivores, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control play the most important roles. As there are not many choices for plant-based food dishes in normal restaurants in Thailand. It is a market opportunity for the restaurants that have offered both animal products and plant-based food within the same places. This can be a marketing promotion/communication that this restaurant offers not only animal products, but also vegan and vegetarian dishes. This helps to conquer the top 2 barriers of Thai omnivores who prefer to consume plant-based food. Firstly, they can find the food to consume easier (i.e., to conquer perceived behavioral control as a barrier to consuming plant-based food.) Secondly, groups of friends and families who have various preferences in food (i.e., animal



products and plant-based food products) can have a fun time together within the same restaurants (i.e., conquer subjective norms as a barrier to consuming plant-based food.)

For market opportunity of meat-like food among Thai omnivores, it seems like Thai omnivores are not the target consumers of meat-like food. This is because they can choose between meat-like food and real meat that is tastier and cheaper. The future study might ask the same questions to Thai vegans or Thai vegetarians, who are not able to consume real meat according to their dietary groups, about their opinions and attitude towards meat-like food, which might be different to Thai omnivores.

Lastly, this study finds that there is no relationship between plant-based food and organic food's selection among Thai omnivores. This might be because the similar unique selling points of the 2 types of food are animal welfare, environmental concern, and health consciousness, but they are not perceived as important motives among Thai omnivores. Therefore, it is better to study about organic food's motives among Thai consumers separately to have a clearer picture of organic food in Thai consumer's eyes.

Recommendation for future research

To do quantitative research among Thai omnivores with the comparable questions to this study.

This study has done only qualitative research to deeply understand Thai omnivores' motivation and barrier towards plant-based and meat-like food. However, the number of participants who have been interviewed is only 10. Therefore, it will be beneficial if the future study will do qualitative with the comparable topics to this study to confirm the opinions of Thai omnivores who often or sometimes consume plant-based food towards the vegan food.

To study Thai vegans and Thai vegetarians' motivation and attitude towards plant-based food and meat-like food.

This study about plant-based food in Thailand has focused on Thai omnivores who often or sometimes consume plant-based food because the researcher believes that the barriers of plant-based food consumption would be clearly identified among this group who do not consume plant-based food every day. On the other hand, to study Thai vegans or Thai vegetarians might not much help to stress on major barriers of plant-based food consumption because they can conquer them to frequently consume plant-based food. However, it will be beneficial for plant-based food knowledge in Thai market if the future research will study Thai vegans and Thai vegetarians' motivation and attitude towards plant-based food and meat-like food. Although the number of Thai vegans and Thai vegetarians are smaller than Thai omnivores who sometimes or often consume plant-based food, their frequent plant-based food consumption might help to contribute to Thai



plant-based food market. In addition, while Thai omnivores have found to mostly reject meat-like food and absolutely prefer real meat to meat-like food, it might be a different attitude of Thai vegans and Thai vegetarians who cannot choose to consume real meat according to their dietary groups.

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