

**An Examination of the Consumer Decision Making Process Amongst
Adult Irish Consumers of Plant-Based Restaurant Dining**

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ABSTRACT

An Examination of the Consumer Decision Making Process Amongst Adult Irish Consumers of Plant-based Restaurant Dining

The number of individuals adopting a plant-based diet and recognizing themselves as vegans, vegetarians, or flexitarians is increasing continuously worldwide (Delloite, 2019; Vegan Society, 2019; Bord Bia, 2021), and it has reflected in a solid growth of the plant-based market (Research and Markets, 2019; Plant Based Food Association, 2018; Wunsch, 2020). The understanding of how this audience behaves and the motivations involved in their decision-making process regarding plant-based restaurant choice is fundamental for those who already own a plant-based restaurant or wants to become an entrepreneur in this market.

This dissertation pursues to investigate in depth the elements, aspects, and attributes that work as motivations that influence Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians' plant-based restaurant choice through empirical qualitative research. A mono method was the chosen one for this study as it was more in line with the objectives of the research. Additionally, the data was collected based on semi-structured individual interviews of a small sample size of Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians, which permitted the use of an inductive method that supported the drawn analyses and discussion of the findings.

The gaps in the literature regarding restaurant choice focused on specific types of restaurants, such as plant-based, as well as the motivations of its target customers on their plant-based restaurant choice are tackled in this study.

The analyses of the findings showed that although Irish vegans usually present more concerns regarding the way the food is prepared, the decision-making process and the motivations involved in Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians' plant-based restaurant choice do not differ from what is presented in the literature regarding restaurant choice in general.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

The acknowledgement of the elements that motivate a certain audience in their decision-making process is fundamental for any business that aims to succeed, and restaurants are no exceptions. In order to meet consumers' needs and wants, it is fundamental to understand consumer behaviour and the motivations that influence it, such as culture, situation, and personal characteristics (Kotler et al., 2009). An individual diet is an example of a factor that can influence the consumer decision-making process regarding food and restaurant choice, for instance.

The popularity of plant-based diets has been growing in a continuous way, and it has reflected in a positive impact in the plant-based market due to the uninterrupted rise in the number of people including more plant-based products into their diets worldwide. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the number of vegans has quadrupled from 2014 to 2019 (Wunsch, 2020). Nevertheless, those who recognise themselves as flexitarians are the ones who are driving the changes and contributing significantly to the growth of the plant-based market. The continuous growth in this market has been reflecting on promising opportunities for those who want to invest in the development of plant-based products and/or launch a plant-based business, such as a restaurant (Lawo et al., 2020).

The motivations that are driving more people towards a plant-based diet are numerous. The environment, animal welfare, and personal health are some of them, being this last one and nutrition the main factors pointed by flexitarians and omnivores (Bryant, 2019). Although personal health has also been an important factor that influences Irish diet and food choice, as revealed by a study from Kearney et al. (2000), food quality is the attribute that most influences personal decision-making process in terms of restaurant choice.

1.2. Gaps in the Literature

The uppermost gap present in the literature is the lack of more focused research that aims to understand the consumer decision making process on restaurant choice of

a specific audience, such as people who follow a plant-based diet. The studies available in the literature (Auty, 1992; Parsa et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2015; Contini et al., 2017, Liu and Tse, 2018; Chua, 2020; Wang et al., 2021) focus on restaurant choice itself, and not in the consumer behaviour and motivations of a particular group, such as Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians, as proposed in this research.

Likewise, the pieces of research available on restaurant choice do not approach a specific restaurant segment, such as plant-based restaurants. The same authors mentioned previously base their studies regarding restaurants choice on restaurants in general, in other words, the type of restaurant is not taken into consideration. An exception is found in the research conducted by Parsa et al. (2012) that touches this topic when discussing that the attributes most valued by consumers vary according to the type of restaurant that consumers are motivated to choose, and it gives fast-food chains and luxurious restaurants as examples. Nevertheless, it is done very briefly and does not associate the type of restaurant with its target consumer.

1.3. Academic Justification

As mentioned in the previous section, there are gaps in the literature regarding restaurant choice matter in terms of studies focused on specific types of restaurants, such as plant-based, and also the target customers that are connected to such a type of restaurant.

Distinct scholars and market research highlight the progressive growth of the plant-based market worldwide, and despite this fact, it is not found in the literature studies on restaurant choice that are focused on a particular type of restaurant, for example, plant-based one. In Ireland, for example, 30% of the adult population aged 18+ is either vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian, and also 55% is associated with one of these types of diets/lifestyles at some level (Bord Bia, 2021). In addition, Dublin has been acknowledged as the city with the most plant-based options worldwide (McCarthy, 2019). Despite all that, there is still no academic work published regarding the Irish plant-based market, plant-based restaurants in Ireland, and Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians' restaurant choice.

This present research expects to contribute to the fulfilment of such gaps, the generation of academic findings concerning the Irish plant-based population and their plant-based restaurant choice, and also the promotion of insights for those who are owners of plant-based restaurants, especially in Ireland, or wish to become an entrepreneur in this market.

1.4. Research Aims

This study aims to understand the motivations that drive Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians' plant-based restaurant choice. Considering the Five-Stage Consumer Decision Making Process model as the framework to be used in this study, this research pursues to identify the elements, aspects, and attributes that influence the decision-making process of this group in that regard through the investigation of the needs involved in their decision on eating in a plant-based restaurant, the identification of the sources used to collect information regarding this type of restaurant, the recognition of the features of this type of restaurant that are considered the most important ones for this group, the investigation of the motivations that influence their decision choice on plant-based restaurant choice, and ultimately the identification of the attributes that build and avoid customer loyalty.

1.5. Research Questions

Considering the background previously presented, which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter, the proposal of this research is to investigate the following questions in light of the perception of Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians that live in Dublin, and already are, or could potentially become, customers of plant-based restaurants:

1. What are the needs and/or reasons influencing the Irish plant-based population dining in a plant-based restaurant?
2. What sources are used by this population to collect information regarding the plant-based restaurant options available?

3. What are the most important features, aspects, and/or attributes of a plant-based restaurant for this population?
4. What are the motivations driving the plant-based restaurant decision choice of this population?
5. What are the features, aspects, and/or attributes that contribute to building or avoiding customer loyalty in terms of a plant-based restaurant?

These research questions are the essence of the research objectives presented in chapter 3.

1.6. Methods and Scope

Considering that this research aims to investigate the motivations involved in the decision-making process regarding plant-based restaurant choice, the qualitative method was the one utilised as it was perceived to be the most suitable one to achieve the objectives of this study. Rather than a mixed method, a mono method presented a better fit to the research.

In terms of the population sample, since the study is used a qualitative method, the sample was limited. A total of 6 Irish individuals, equally divided into 3 groups, vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians, was considered in this research.

In regard to data, the research was developed based on primary data, which was collected through semi-structured interviews based on the Five-Stage Consumer Decision Making Process model. All six participants were interviewed individually, and the interviews were administered online due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

1.7. Dissertation Structure

Chapter 1: Introduction

A brief synopsis of the background of the research topic motivations of Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians on their plant-based restaurant choice, as well as a brief discussion of the aims of the study, the methodology scope, and how the research is structured.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

An extensive review of the academic literature that is in accordance with the objectives of this study and the research questions is presented in this chapter. Based on recent literature, the chapter approaches five main topics, motivation, consumer behaviour, plant-based diets, plant-based market, and consumer restaurant choice.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The chosen research methods, the objectives of the study, and the primary data collection techniques applied are presented in this chapter, which also includes the discussion on the philosophy and approach adopted, as well as information regarding the population sample and how the data was collected.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Discussion

The research findings based on the data collected are critically analysed and discussed in this chapter. The Five-Stage Consumer Decision Making Process model was used in order to meet the objectives of the research.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions regarding the research questions and objectives of the study are presented in this chapter, as well as recommendations for future research and also practitioners.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Motivation

Numerous psychologists and scholars have their own assumptions regarding a definition of motivation; however, what they all have in common is the idea that motivation is linked to desires and aspirations that drive people to offer their best (Khurana et al., 2017).

Mitchell (1982) defines motivation as “the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviours.” While for Baumeister (2016) motivation is desiring. The author explains that motivation is considered a state of an individual that embraces conscious and/or unconscious subjective sense of wanting, some self-change, and/or some change in the environment. Summed in a sentence, motivation is wanting, and it is sustained by liking.

For scholars such as Rotter, Seligman, Bandura, Vroom, and Locke & Latham, there is no more than one type of motivation, as for them every behaviour commences based on a decision and is directed by a standard, and the only variable feature involved in this process is the intensity of motivation (Deci, 1992). The main limitation of those scholars' approach is that motivation is conceived in a simplistic way, disregarding all the complexity involved in a human being's behaviour.

In contrast, Baumeister (2016) recognises that there are distinct types of motivation, and they can be sorted by their purpose, being the most basic ones connected to survival and reproduction. Moreover, the author explains that the motivation of humans goes beyond reproduction and survival, it can also embrace comfort, flourishing, and self-actualisation, for instance. Although the author introduces a more comprehensive concept, it is still limited to a psychological viewpoint. Considering the physiological aspects of motivation, for instance, findings show that motivation is intimately joined to the dopaminergic reward system and its neurotransmitter (Rybnicek et al., 2019).

2.1.1. Sources of Motivation

Whilst Baumeister (2016) suggests that the origin of motivation is connected to the wants that an individual needs to maintain their own life, many other philosophers believe that psychological states, such as beliefs, desires, or the combination of both, are considered to be sources of motivation (Pearson, 2015).

Pearson (2015) discusses that for Scanlon the desire itself is not a source of motivation but taking some beneficial characteristic of action to count on the side of acting, for example, a desire to drink something is not purely about the feeling to do it but includes acknowledging drink as desirable, because it will promote some pleasure. Additionally, the author presents that for Jonathan Dancy and Maria Alvarez, motivating reasons are sources of motivation, and since motivating reasons are facts, facts are sources of motivation. Thus, not only are psychological states sources of motivation, but also the contents of cognitive states. Furthermore, Baumeister (2016) states that the pre-eminence of motivation highlights that the existence of cognition, agency, emotion, and distinct psychological processes is to be servants of motivation.

2.1.2. Factors that Influence Motivation

Motivation is affected by and responds to the present time and local opportunity structure. Some impulses such as sexual, aggressive, and food-related, amongst others, can be provoked by specific situations and conditions, particularly those that reveal an opportunity to result in a sort of satisfaction (Baumeister, 2016). Aligned with this viewpoint, Rai (2004) proposes that motivation is connected to the idea of reward or reinforcement, thus it can be affected by internal and external factors. Baumeister (2016) agrees that impulses are not purely dependent on external conditions, but they also reflect an individual's internal conditions. As an example, the author suggests that nutrients may be determined only by internal factors, however, the desire for certain foods may be shaped by external matters; and mouth-watering food might not be appealing to someone who has just eaten and feels satisfied.

Culture can be considered an example of an extrinsic agent that also plays a very important part in influencing motivation. Guay (2016) explains that values and beliefs are some of the components of a culture system that can influence and shape someone's

motivation. In this context, the author suggests that culture does not work as a moderator for motivation, but as an additive.

Emotion is another key element to be discussed.

While some scholars argue that emotion is a response to motivation, in other words, motivation is primary and so the one that evokes emotional reactions, other authors, including Silvan Tomkins, defend the primacy of emotion (Reeve, 2016). Reeve (2016) ponders and argues in favour of both sides. The author suggests that for some aspects of motivation, emotion comes first, and for some aspects of emotion, motivation is first in importance.

Amongst other aspects, the environment can equally influence motivation. According to Rai (2004), people hardly ever accept passively their conditions. Instead, they usually tend to use situations to chase their objectives and goals. By stating that, the environment is an important aspect that influences motivation, nonetheless, it can also vary over situation and time (Rai, 2004).

2.1.3. Theories of Motivation

The basic search of motivation studies is to understand why people behave in the way they do (Rai, 2004). Since individuals are unique because of their own needs, values, attitudes, and goals, motivation has been conceived as a personal experience, and the principal theories of motivation acknowledge this uniqueness to be expressed (Mitchell, 1982). However, it is relevant to stress that each theory embraces different aspects of motivation, and as critically argued by Conradi et al. (2014), it is unrealistic to believe that one theory can comprehend all of those aspects.

According to Mitchell (1982), theories of motivation have as a purpose the prediction of behaviours. The author explains that motivation is interested in scrutinising actions and internal and external factors that influence an individual's choice of action. Despite proposing different reasons, most theories agree that motivation is connected to the behaviour analysis of intentional, individual choices (Mitchell, 1982).

There are numerous theories of motivation, and they can be classified into two main categories, theories of choice, which comprises equity theory, expectancy theory, goal setting, and operant conditioning, and theories of arousal, which includes some of

the most recognised theories of motivation, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Mitchell, 1982).

Abraham Maslow developed the theory of hierarchy of needs in which he argues that people are motivated in order to satisfy five distinct levels of need, physiological, security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation (Griffin, 2011).

Griffin (2011) defines the five needs as following:

Physiological needs are the primary ones. They are connected to survival and biological function, such as sex and food.

Security needs are the ones related to emotional and physical ones, such as the desire for clothing, housing, and not worry about job security and money, for instance.

Belongingness needs are connected to social processes, in other words, the need for being accepted, affection, and establishing relationships with friends and family, for example.

Esteem needs are related to the need of being recognised and respected by others, and also self-respect and self-image.

Self-actualisation is at the top of the hierarchy and considered strenuous to be achieved. These needs involve the potential for continuous growth and development.

Baumeister (2016) explains that although some motivations can be extinguished, the ones connected to reproduction and survival cannot. Nevertheless, those motivations can be adaptive, such as the desire for food. The author states that the extinguishment of the desire for food altogether is very unlikely to occur, however, some specific types of food might be extinguished, as it is commonly reported that individuals who follow a restrictive diet have their desire for certain foods that they have not eaten for a long time diminished.

2.2. Motivation and Consumer Behaviour

2.2.1. Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is considered to be an individual or a group process that has as a role the satisfaction of needs and desires of someone through experiences, services, products, purchases, etc. (Solomon, 2016), and can be connected to cultural factors, such

as values and standards that determine at a certain level the behaviour accepted, and social factors, such as status dimensions and lifestyle (Garai-Fodor, 2019).

In order to know the reasons why a consumer prefers a specific offer instead of others, why he or she takes part in a particular activity, or even why a method of promotion results in better outcomes than other, it is crucial to study and understand the consumers' motivations involved in the act of buying and consuming something (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2020).

A critical acknowledgment by Solomon (2016) states that even though products and services help consumers to play their numerous roles, a primordial proposition of consumer behaviour is that consumers usually buy goods or services for the meaning they have, not for what they do. The author explains that the main function of a product has a very important role in this process, nevertheless, the profound meaning it carries might contribute to making the product extends from others that are similar to it.

2.2.2. The Relation Between Motivation and Consumer Behaviour

Many are the factors that influence consumer behaviour and decision. Cultural affiliation, beliefs, values, continuous changes in the environment, attitudes, and personal motivations are just some of them (Borgardt, 2017).

According to Gherasim and Gherasim (2020), motivation is considered to be a cyclical process, as it starts with the manifestation of the need for consumption, ceased when the need is covered and reappears at a certain time. As well as motivation, consumption is also cyclical.

The motivations that someone has to consume something are diverse and not simple, and the recognition of these motives is an essential step to guarantee that the consumer will have their needs satisfied (Solomon, 2016).

For Gherasim and Gherasim (2020), the pressure of a certain need is the ignite of an individual's behaviour, who acts to remove the state of tension that was caused by the pressure of the need, resulting in a person committed to searching, buying, and consuming goods or services in order to attend that specific need. The authors explain that the motivation involved in this process can be classified into distinct groups, such as cognitive or affective, intrinsic or extrinsic, and positive or negative.

A study on uniqueness motivation conducted by Irmak et al. (2010) presents a different perspective regarding the connection between motivation and consumer behaviour. According to this study, an aspect that works as a motivator and drives consumers preference towards a specific new product is the consumers' need for uniqueness (CNFU). The higher the CNFU, the stronger the preferences for the product.

Hoek et al. (2021) argue that consumer behaviour, consumption, and food choice, for instance, are broadly recognised to be typically dependent on elements linked to the context, the goods or services, and the person. Food choice, for example, is widely granted to be associated with social-psychological factors, cognitive and non-cognitive, such as beliefs, knowledge, values, habits, and emotions (Hoek et al., 2021). Another example is the choice of sustainable products and the purchase decision, that are intrinsically connected to personal values (Bangsa and Schlegelmilch, 2020). Pandey et al. (2021) highlight that the rise of awareness and concerns regarding sustainability, health, and the environment have been influencing consumer behaviour and motivating consumers to take them into consideration in their decision-making process.

Consumer behaviour can also be influenced by emotion since emotion and motivation have a connection with each other that is present even in etymology, as both words have the same etymological root (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2020). Back in ancient Greece, Plato considered emotion and motivation as elements that compose the essence of the human being, which was divided into three levels, *epithumia* – basic desires, such as reproduction and food, *noos* – rational part, such as reason and intellect, and *thumos* – emotion, that was associate with personality, mood, and motivation, for instance (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2020). More recently, studies on the role of emotions in the decision-making process show that emotions can affect judgments, attitudes, decisions, and thus consumer behaviour (Gutnik et al., 2006).

The need for fun or exploration are hedonic motives that perform a fundamental role in several decisions regarding purchases, and for this reason, they should also be elements of attention of consumer behaviour studies (Solomon, 2016).

2.2.3. Consumer Behaviour Models

There is a selection of models that are used in the analysis and understanding of consumer behaviour. Borgardt (2017) suggests that the ones that are mostly known amongst all are the psychological model, the economic considerations-based model, the Freudian psychoanalytic model, the behavioural science-based model, the Howard-Sheth's model, and the Engel, Kollat and Blackwell's model. For the author, despite having its focus on the individual decision-making process, Howard-Sheth's model is considered to be a more complete model when compared to the others, as it integrates more dimensions, such as social, psychological, and marketing influences on buyer choice. Moreover, Borgardt (2017) states that Engel, Kollat and Blackwell's model, which further received contributions of Miniard, is also considered a comprehensive model, even more than the one from Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, because it includes individual and environmental variables as behaviour influencers, such as culture, situation, values, and motivation. Aligned with that, Garai-Fodor (2019) points out that some models have evidenced that food choices and nutrition decisions are examples that have consumer behaviour influenced by the value system and lifestyle. Furthermore, the author states that a similar characteristic amongst these models is that they begin from the abstract values of goods and services and then get to the particular feature of a specific food, service, or product.

The motivational aspect is an element that has been approached by several models in some way. However, none of them presents a solid definition of this term and a clear explanation of how it influences consumer behaviour, as stated by Borgardt (2016). This is an important piece of evidence that all models have some limitations in understanding consumer behaviour and that they are only able to predict the outcomes to some degree, as proved by the same author.

2.3. Types of Plant-Based Diets

There is a straight connection between dietary choices, human health, and environmental sustainability. Hicks et al. (2018) present that the dietary choice of an individual is usually based on factors related to the products (nutrients, availability, etc.),

the consumer (motives, hunger, metabolism, etc.), and/or the environment (culture, economic, etc.).

Several are the types of diets existing, and in this section, some of the categories within plant-based diets are introduced and discussed.

2.3.1. Plant-Based Diet

A plant-based diet is defined as a diet that is predominantly based on plants, which includes legumes, vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, seeds, oils, and beans but is not necessarily limited to it (McManus, 2018). This type of diet is acknowledged as sustainable because it focuses on the consumption of plants and restricts animal-based foods (Fresán et al., 2020).

The sense of purpose brought with the valuation of a pro-environmental lifestyle can facilitate a successful adherence and maintenance of a plant-based diet (Krizanova, 2021). However, from a critical point of view, the pursuance of a healthier lifestyle, which has become a trend lately, can be spotlighted as a stronger facilitator for the adoption of this type of diet. In addition, multiple studies have confirmed the health benefits promoted by plant-based diets.

More than a crucial determinant of the serious rise of greenhouse gas emissions, a diet rich in meat, sugar, and fat is also a factor of global incidences of cancer, coronary heart disease, and type II diabetes (Tilman and Clark, 2014). Kontogianni et al. (2008) highlight that the consumption of meat can increase the likelihood of acute coronary events, such as heart attack, by up to 60%. In addition, not only does a plant-based diet decrease the likelihood of development of non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) and any type of cancer, but also promotes a lower body mass index (BMI), and a decrease of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), as well as total cholesterol (TC) (Radnitz et al., 2019). In essence, when compared with omnivores, individuals who follow a plant-based diet tend to present fewer cardiovascular risk factors, lower hypertension rates, lower values of blood pressure, as well as total cholesterol and LDL (Wozniak et al., 2020).

Flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan are some examples of plant-based diets that are further discussed.

2.3.2. Flexitarian Diet

Flexitarians are defined as the ones who have a predominantly vegetarian diet, and despite the intention to decrease their consumption, they still consume animal products and meat occasionally (Deloitte, 2019; Derbyshire, 2017). They are in between vegetarians and omnivores since they are characterised by the occasional consumption of meat (Forestell, 2018,), and because it is not as strict as vegetarianism, the flexitarian diet has become an alternative to the vegetarian diet and it is increasing its popularity (Dakin et al., 2021). The moderate consumption of meat and the intention to reduce this consumption is what differentiates flexitarians from omnivores.

Omnivores are the ones who follow a diet that comprehend both plant-based products and all types of meat. Unlike flexitarians, omnivores consume meat on a regular basis and do not have the intention to reduce their consumption (Forestell, 2018). In other words, an omnivorous diet includes all groups of food (Tilman and Clark, 2014).

A flexitarian diet is a practical compromise for those who opt for it, as this diet can result in meaningful environmental sustainability and personal health benefits (Forestell, 2018). Bryant (2019) states that health is one of the main justifications cited by flexitarians in response to the adoption of a more plant-based diet and reduction of meat consumption.

2.3.3. Vegetarian Diet

The practice of a diet based on the abstention of meat consumption is not a recent trend. Historical records show that vegetarianism has been a practice since back in ancient Greece (Ruby, 2012).

A vegetarian diet is defined as the one that does not incorporate the consumption of food that contains any type of meat (Forestell, 2018). However, critically approaching, this is a very simplistic definition that does not include all the restrictions imposed by this type of diet. The Vegetarian Society (2021) provides a more complete definition, which states that a vegetarian diet does not include meat, fish, poultry, seafood, insects, animal rennet, gelatine, stock, or animals' fat.

Pressure from family and peers, as well as the enjoyment of eating meat, are major barriers to individuals who try to follow a vegetarian diet, whilst ethical factors and

personal health are the prime motivators of vegetarians in Western populations (Ruby, 2012).

2.3.4. Vegan Diet

The term veganism is defined as a lifestyle and a philosophy that “seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms, it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals (The Vegan Society, 2021).” Although veganism, particularly the vegan diet, is not a modern trend, it has become considerably more widespread lately.

According to Russel (2020), the primary reasons that motivate an individual to adopt a vegan diet are culture, religion, health, concerns regarding food security and environment, and also compassion for animals, being this last one the foundation of the vegan lifestyle. In accordance with that, Bryant (2019) separates some of those reasons into three groups, ethical reasons, which comprehends animal welfare; environmental reasons, which include reduction of carbon footprint; and health reasons, such as reduction of the probability of some illnesses.

Despite existing many reasonable motives to adhere to a vegan diet, some factors are strong obstacles to that. Bryant (2019) considers that three negative beliefs are the main barriers to the adoption of a vegetarian or vegan diet: they are not enjoyable, they are difficult to maintain, and they are costly.

Amongst the plant-based diets here presented, veganism and vegetarianism go particularly beyond the diet sphere. They can also be considered as a lifestyle that has deeper roots and generates distinct impacts on consumer behaviour.

Ploll et al. (2020) argue that both vegetarianism and veganism have trespassed the boundaries of changes in consumption and are currently pushing for a transformation of the food system. The authors believe that more than diets, vegetarianism and veganism can be considered social movements, which means achieving a specific goal through collective actions. Additionally, the authors emphasise that not only can the

choice of adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet be connected to nutritional choices, but also to the perception that consumers have of the food industry structure. These individuals can be considered politicised consumers that highlight social problems through their diet choices, and these findings can be a game-changer for food producers, supermarkets, and restaurants in terms of learning more about the concerns, needs, and motivations of these consumers (Ploll et al., 2020).

2.4. Plant-Based Market

2.4.1. Market Demographics

Research conducted by Research and Markets (2019) indicates that the rise in the consumption of plant-based food has been driven by the millennials aged between 20 and 35 years. This young generation is characterised by being more health-conscious and more engaged in physical activities, which justifies their preferences for a plant-based diet.

In terms of gender, women are considered to be the responsible ones for the significant change in the plant-based market (Jones, 2020). Findings in a study conducted by Kearney et al. (2000) on what influences the food choice of Irish adults reveal that gender plays an important part in the food decision-making process, as well as educational level. According to this study, high-level educated women are more likely to base their food choice decision on the health aspect, and thus consuming more plant-based products. Additionally, individuals that have achieved higher educational levels present more willingness to pay for vegan products (Marangon et al., 2016). In terms of educational level, evidence confirms that the opposite is also true. According to Marangon et al. (2016), individuals with a lower educational level tend to present less interest in plant-based products.

Data regarding the Irish plant-based market demonstrates that the demographic profile of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians in Ireland is in accordance with the demographics found around the world.

The disparity between genders concerning the adherence to a vegan diet in Ireland is indicated in the Dietary Lifestyle Report by Bord Bia (2021). The report shows that in Ireland, the majority of 75% who declared to follow a vegan diet are female. In terms of

age, young adults aged from 18 to 34 years account for 52% of those who identify themselves as vegans. The vegan population in Ireland is associated with middle incomes and, compared to the report from 2018, is more evenly spread over rural and urban areas.

Accounting for 62%, women are also the majority following a vegetarian diet in Ireland, however, the age range with more adepts is slightly different from vegans. 45% of the Irish vegetarian population is concentrated between 25 to 44 years old, and they are more likely to be urban residents with high incomes (Bord Bia, 2021).

Compared to vegans and vegetarians, the Irish flexitarian population is the most well-balanced in terms of gender, with 54% of women and 46% of men. As well as vegetarians, the age range with the greatest concentration of flexitarians, 42%, is between 25 to 44. Likewise, they are more likely to live in urban areas and have high incomes (Bord Bia, 2021).

2.4.2. Market Trends

Studies indicate that the food choice of Irish adults is mostly influenced by quality and freshness, taste, and healthy eating, respectively (Kearney et al, 2000). In other words, Irish adults value foods that are fresh, tasty, and healthy, which correlates to plant-based food.

Research conducted by Research and Market (2019) reinforces the importance of health as a factor that influences the food choice of those who aims to increase their consumption of plant-based foods. According to this research, the increase of the adherence to a vegan diet in Europe and North America has been driven by the growth rate of some health disorders, the rise of more health-conscious consumers, and customer target with higher disposable income.

In short, amongst all the possible trends in the plant-based market, the one that seems to be more in evidence and growing is the search for a healthier lifestyle.

2.4.3. Market Growth

Between 2014 and 2019, the vegan community quadruplicated in the UK, coming to a total of 600,000 (Vegan Society, 2019). However, despite the significant growth in the number of individuals adopting a vegan diet, veganism is not the prime factor contributing to the growth of the plant-based market. Although flexitarians still consuming

animal products and meat sporadically, they have the intention to reduce their consumption of those products and increase more plant-based in their plates, and the increase of people who recognise themselves as flexitarians is the major reason for the growth of the plant-based market (Deloitte, 2019).

The USA is an example of the increase in the plant-based market. The sales growth of vegan food there raised by 20% in 2017 and reached \$3.3 billion (Plant Based Food Association, 2018). In 2019, the European plant-based food and beverage market, the third biggest market when compared to North America, Asia Pacific, and the rest of the world, was valued at \$7.36 billion. In the same year, North America ranked first place with its plant-based market valued at \$14.08 billion (Wunsch, 2020).

The positive impact in the plant-based market is a global phenomenon with continuous and expressive growth in the last few years, and with promising predictions. According to Research and Markets (2019), the global vegan market extent was valued at \$14.2 billion in 2018 and is expected to grow to \$31.4 billion by 2026 with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.5% from 2019 to 2026.

Although there is no specific data available regarding the growth of the plant-based market in Ireland, such as the market value, its CAGR, and expected growth percentage, the Dietary Lifestyle Report, from Bord Bia (2021) provides some relevant insights on this matter. According to this report, the number of adults (all aged 18+) in Ireland that has an association with vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian diet/lifestyle has significantly increased from 2018 to 2020, likewise the number of people that adhered to one of those types of diets/lifestyles in terms of food consumption behaviour. For those who reported having an association with the vegan diet, the percentage boosted from 5% in 2018 to 13% in 2020, whilst the adherence to this type of diet increased from 0.4% to 2%. For vegetarians, the association raised from 8% to 14% in the same period, while the adherence went from 6% to 8%. Flexitarians are the ones who present the highest percentage, with association reaching 19% in 2020, while it was 11% in 2018, and the adherence leaping from 10% to 16%. The increase in the numbers of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians in Ireland indicates that the plant-based market has possibly expanded in the country, and the COVID-19 pandemic can be indicated as one of the reasons.

The COVID-19 pandemic has positively impacted the plant-based market and contributed to accelerating its growth globally. Research from Bord Bia (2021) presents an increase of 8.0% of meat substitute consumption in 2020, which surpassed the forecasts pre-pandemic. Moreover, the research reveals that ingredients that are sourced sustainably and ethically became more important to 47% of global consumers than they were before the pandemic.

2.5. Consumer Restaurant Choice

Restaurant choice does not occur by basing the attributes of a restaurant on a rank order method, but it is usually a complex process that considers all prime attributes dynamically and simultaneously (Parsa et al., 2012). Additionally, consumer decision-making process does not consider that restaurant attributes are equally important, as earlier conclusions demonstrate. In fact, the type of the restaurant directly impacts the variability of the importance that restaurant attributes will have in consumer restaurant choice (Auty, 1992), and this suggestion was reinforced and confirmed by more recent findings.

Despite the importance of discussing the attributes that motivates consumer restaurant choice, it is primarily important to understand how the decision process occurs.

2.5.1. Five-Stage Consumer Decision Making Process

Venugopal (2010) suggests that the decision on purchasing a product and/or service is commonly based on the satisfaction of specific needs. The understanding of the decision-making process of customers is essential to fulfil their expectations and deliver what they need. In this way, psychological processes are fundamental in the provision of more accurate insights and in the understanding of such a process (Kotler et al., 2009).

Marketing intellectuals created the five-stage consumer decision making model to explain how this process occurs, which suggests that the buyer commonly passes through five stages that comprise the process before and after the actual decision (Kotler et al., 2009). The five stages include problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, the decision choice, and post-decision behaviour (Kotler et al., 2009;

Venugopal, 2010). Although the model suggests that customers pass through all five stages to make their decision, when the decision is regarding a routine purchase, regular brand product or restaurant, buyers skip some of the stages, generally going from the need to the purchase decision (Kotler et al., 2009; Panwar et al., 2019).

Stankevich (2009) describe each of the five stages as the following:

Need Recognition: Consumer realization of needing something, which can be a basic impulse (internal stimulus), or an outside influence (external stimulus).

Information Search: Checking the alternatives available that could satisfy the need. The search can also be either internal, by the utilisation of information from past experiences, or external, by friends or family experiences, blogs, and/or reviews.

Evaluation of Alternatives: The final decision choice based on the most important feature or on the rejection method (quality, freshness, price, etc.).

Purchase Decision: It is the buying process, the implementation of the decision itself, which can demand additional decisions, such as when, where, and how to buy.

Post-Purchase Behaviour: Consumer’s evaluation and review, which can influence potential buyers to acquire the same product/service or avoid it.

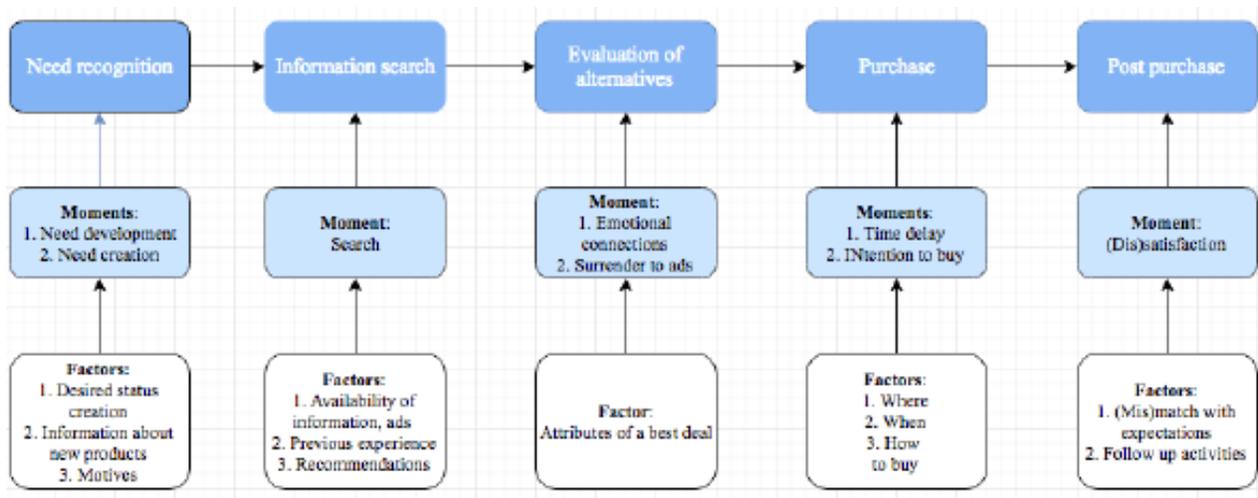


Figure 1: Framework of Factors and Moments that Influence Decision-Making (Stankevich, 2009).

Considering the decision-making process regarding restaurant choice, numerous are the reasons and attributes presented in studies that motivate different individuals to choose a particular restaurant amongst many others. Atmosphere, food quality, service, all of them have their importance. Nevertheless, food quality has been acknowledged by distinct authors from different periods as one of the most important attributes that influence restaurant choice.

2.5.2. Food Quality

Parsa et al. (2012) state that the factors that most commonly affect the restaurant choice of guests are the overall restaurant environment, service quality, and food quality. Food quality, which comprises healthiness and tastiness amongst other elements, was also highlighted by other scholars as a key factor of restaurant choice that stands out from others (Auty, 1992; Jung et al., 2015; Contini et al., 2017). This suggestion is strengthened by Jung et al. (2015), whose findings point out that customers are unlikely to trade-off food quality for other attributes, including low price and/or high service quality. In addition, this same research indicates that good food quality increases the likelihood of a restaurant being selected, as well as poor food quality decreases the possibility of restaurant selection. Nevertheless, despite being an important attribute that influences customer decision-making, service quality does not present the same correlation as food quality. This same study shows that poor service quality decreases the likelihood of restaurant selection, whilst good service does not generate a considerable impact on a restaurant choice.

Contini et al. (2017) reveal that the origin of the products used in a restaurant can also be an aspect regarding food quality that influences consumer's restaurant choice. According to the authors, there is a market segment, which represents 28% of the whole market, that base their restaurant choice on the sources of the products. In addition, this market segment expresses the willingness to pay more for foods made with locally grown products, as they are associated with more quality and freshness.

Certifications that ensure that the products were sourced locally can increase the perception of quality by consumers, especially when combined with assertive communication (Contini et al., 2017).

2.5.3. Atmosphere and Style

Although food quality and food type are mostly classified as prime factors that influence individuals' restaurant choice, once the decision on these variables is set and the restaurant segment is chosen, the deciding factor becomes atmosphere and style (Auty, 1992).

The environment atmosphere is considered a relevant aspect for consumers that can influence their decision-making on restaurants, as ambience is often recognised as a trustworthiness indicator (Parsa et al., 2012), and also as a reflection of the quality of a restaurant (Liu and Tse, 2018). Therefore, since they are factors that are intrinsically connected to the style and atmosphere of a restaurant, decorations and interior design are elements that can make a restaurant stand out from its competitors and be the one chosen by a specific customer (Liu and Tse, 2018).

2.5.4. Situational and Other Factors

Studies indicate that the selection criteria considered on customer restaurant choice are strongly influenced by situational factors. The ambience and staff responsiveness, for instance, are considered a priority for date motive, while for celebrations, hospitality service was proved to have a greater impact (Chua et al., 2020). In an upscale restaurant, food quality is considered more important than ambience and service, whilst in a quick-service restaurant, such as fast-food chains, the service speed is more relevant than food quality and ambience (Parsa et al., 2012). Research from Liu and Tse (2018) suggests that location convenience is not considered as a crucial concern for customers, however, findings from Chua et al. (2020) ensures that this attribute becomes an important factor for consumers when they want convenience and/or quick meals.

Despite the occasion and situation, cleanliness appears to be a common important attribute for consumers decision-making related to restaurant choice, and additionally, whenever restaurants within a specific segment provide similar products and/or services, customers tend to base their restaurant choice on the price (Chua et al., 2020).

An important element that consumers value is the alignment of restaurants to the segment they are part of. Customers tend to be more willing to spend more in restaurants

that focus their resources on attributes that are more suitable to the segment they are within (Parsa et al., 2012).

Although some studies approach aspects that can influence consumer restaurant choice according to the market segment, they do not mention the plant-based segment, neither treat the correlation between restaurant choice and restaurant segmentation in depth.

2.5.5. COVID-19 Pandemic

Contemporary consumers are demanding better advantages in the correlation between their money and the value provided by restaurants (Liu and Tse, 2018). Lighting, prompt service, accurate guest check, and overall value of the dining experience are just some of the regular attributes considered important for consumers satisfaction which are commonly neglected by restaurateurs (Liu and Tse, 2018), which can lead to loss of customers. Additionally, new crucial urges that influence consumers restaurant choice have emerged due to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an environmental factor that has increased the avoidance of contact with others, as this has become a synonym of a possible threat (Kim and Lee, 2020). The psychological effects caused by this pandemic are causing changes in the customer decision-making process regarding restaurant choice, amongst other things. One of the outcomes from these changes, for example, is the reduction of customers attending restaurants due to the perception that they can be exposed to high health risks. To overcome this issue and increase the number of consumers opting to go to a restaurant, restaurants must diminish possible risks and create a safe environment, which includes environmental and food safety, for instance (Wang et al., 2021).

A safe environment has currently become even more important for consumers, as they are behaving more cautiously due to the pandemic. Therefore, safety is being considered a determining attribute of consumer restaurant choice (Wang et al., 2021).

Customers' satisfaction is highly connected to their willingness to return to a restaurant, and for this reason is essential to ensure customers satisfaction through caring about them, listening to their complaints and needs, providing outstanding service

(Parsa et al., 2012), and the most important at this moment in time, making them feel that they are in a safe place.

2.6. Influences of Literature on Methodology Instrumentation

Considering that motivation is a personal and subjective matter that plays an important role in influencing consumer behaviour, and therefore, their decision-making process, in pursuance of identifying and understanding the motivations involved in this process it is fundamental to frame the research on a previously validated model/theory that enables the information to emerge, such as the five-stages of consumer decision-making process model.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) propose that research can be defined as a process that has a clear purpose to find things out through the collection and interpretation of the data in a systematic way. The authors outline that the most important elements in this definition are the phrases ‘to find things out’ and ‘systematic way’, as the first one suggests a variety of possible purposes, and the last one indicates that besides beliefs, research is rooted in logical relationships.

From an academic perspective, there are three prime purposes of conducting a piece of research: to increase the knowledge of what is already known; to expand the knowledge of aspects of the world that is barely known or not known whatsoever; and to better comprehend the world (Adams, Khan, and Reaside, 2014).

The methods chosen to be applied in this present research are in accordance with the methodological components of the ‘research onion’ proposed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019).

3.2. Research Aims and Objectives

Since distinct types of research can have different aims to be achieved (Adams, Khan, and Raeside, 2014), the research methodology has the important role of directing the research to reach these goals.

The following research pursues to identify the motivations that influence the decision-making of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarian consumers regarding plant-based restaurant choice, and therefore generates insights to existent and potential entrepreneurs in the plant-based restaurant market in Dublin through the collection and analysis of relevant data.

Considering that the motivations that influence a plant-based restaurant choice are distinct and varied, this present research investigates these motivations through the fulfilment of the following objectives.

Table 1.: Research Objectives

Research Objective 1	To investigate the needs/reasons of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians regarding eating in a plant-based restaurant.
Research Objective 2	To identify the sources used by this population to collect information about plant-based restaurant options.
Research Objective 3	To recognise the most important features of a plant-based restaurant for this population.
Research Objective 4	To investigate the motivations behind the plant-based restaurant decision choice of this population.
Research Objective 5	To identify the attributes that build and avoid restaurant loyalty.

3.3. Proposed Research Methodology

There are distinct research methods that give guidance to structure a research project. The four frameworks and the research onion are just two examples amongst several other options. A framework is essential, as it provides a structure model to the research and guides the researcher in terms of structuring the research (Quinlan, 2011).

This present research is structured according to the research onion model proposed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), which is divided into six parts, or layers (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019; 15writers, 2021):

Philosophy: that is about a system of beliefs and principles regarding the perspective the research is guided.

Approach to theory development: this layer refers to the design of the research, how it will be approached.

Methodological choice: that is regarding the method to be used in the research.

Strategy: which is related to a plan to have the research questions answered.

Time horizon: that is the research time frame.

Techniques and procedures: which refers to the way of how data will be collected and analysed.

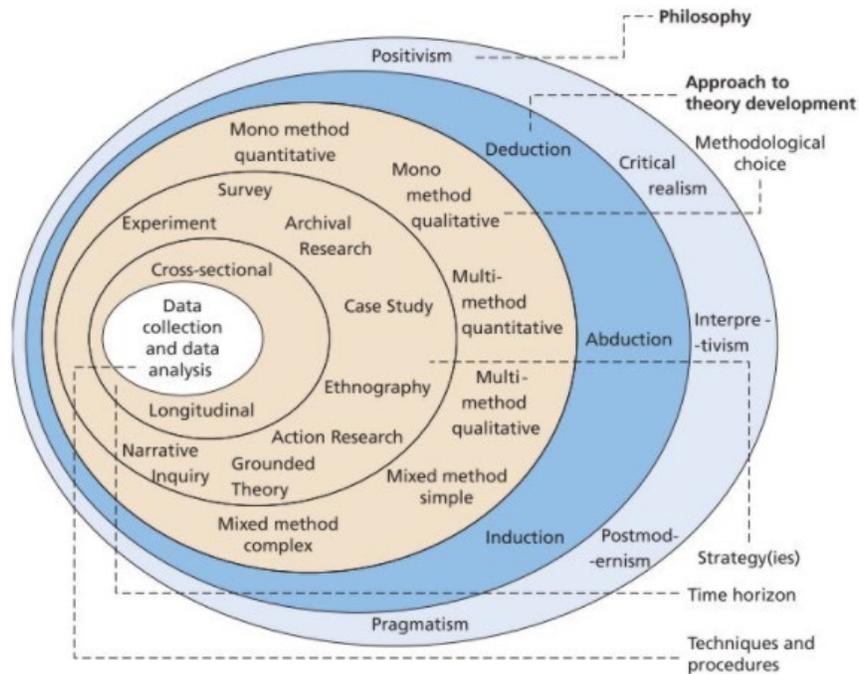


Figure 2: Saunders Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.4. Research Philosophy

Saunders et al. (2019) define research philosophy as “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge”, that can be influenced by some aspects, such as personal beliefs and assumptions regarding acceptable and desirable knowledge, and the nature of the world. The authors highlight three principal assumptions, ontology, epistemology, and axiology, and four central philosophies, positivism, realism, pragmatism, and interpretivism as the most relevant to research design and research philosophies in business and management research (Saunders et al., 2007).

3.4.1. Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology Assumptions

Assumptions concerning the nature of reality are approached by ontology (Quinlan, 2011). In the business and management world, ontology affects the way this world is perceived, which includes elements such as events, management, and organisations, for instance, and consequently what to be researched (Saunders et al., 2019).

Axiology calls attention to ethics and values roles, how to deal with personal values, and those of research participants. This assumption model acknowledges and recognises that personal values can help to determine what is ethically appropriated and also to clarify the decisions made (Saunders et al., 2019).

Assumptions regarding knowledge, the creation, acceptance, validity, and legitimacy of knowledge, are referred to by epistemology (Quinlan, 2011; Saunders et al., 2019). It can be described as how individuals perceive the world and how they make sense of it (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Epistemology comprises distinct types of knowledge, such as narratives, textual data, numerical data, opinions, and facts for instance. Since there is a range of epistemologies, the possibilities of research methods are large (Saunders et al., 2019). This is the assumption that is better aligned to this research, as the perceptions of the participants are recognised as trustworthy information, and therefore, valid, and legitimate knowledge.

3.4.2. Positivism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Interpretivism

The positivism philosophy does not work with speculations, but with direct experiences, a perceptible social reality, in order to create generalisations (Saunders et al., 2019; Al-Ababneh, 2020). In addition, this philosophy also suggests that reality is singular, in other words, there is only one objective reality (Quinlan, 2011). Although it would be possible to apply positivism in this research, since the focus is not to produce law-like generalisations, an observable approach would restrict the research and preclude it from reaching its objectives.

In the realism philosophy, the reality is revealed through the senses, in different words, what the senses experience is the world precisely, thus, the reality is independent of the mind (Saunders et al., 2009). This philosophy could also be applied in this research, however, since the research aims to understand motivations, an approach that limits the reality only to what the senses experience would not allow the research to achieve its aims.

Pragmatism is a philosophy that considers different theories, hypotheses, ideas, concepts, and research findings in a concrete form, which means that knowledge is valuable when enables actions that solve problems. As this present research is not

focused on solving problems, but on understanding motivations in order to propose theories, pragmatism would not be the most suitable approach.

In interpretivism, all knowledge is considered a subject of interpretation (Quinlan, 2011). Focused on social phenomena and subjective meanings motivating actions, this philosophy considers that human beings create meanings and because of the complexity involved in this process, they and their social worlds would be lost if they were researched likewise physical phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2019; Al-Ababneh, 2020). The aims of interpretivism are to develop more substantial understandings and interpretations of different contexts and social worlds, and because business situations are complex and unique, this philosophy is highly suitable for business research (Saunders et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, the assumption and philosophy that better suit this present research is epistemology and interpretivism.

3.5. Research Approach

Al-Ababneh (2020) outlines that there are two distinct approaches that the research can be classified into the deductive approach or the inductive approach.

The deductive approach works with hypotheses and aims to explain causal relationships between variables and concepts (Saunders et al., 2019). It usually collects quantitative data to test its proposition and is broadly associated with the positivism philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019). Since the philosophy adopted in this research is the opposite of the one that is more aligned to the deductive approach, and no hypotheses were proposed to be tested, this approach is not suitable for this research.

The inductive approach is focused on understanding the nature of a problem through the collection of data, usually qualitative, that will result in the suggestion of a theory based on the findings of the data analysis (Saunders et al., 2019; Al-Ababneh, 2020). This approach is the one adopted and applied in this research, as it is better aligned with interpretivism, and also because the objective of the research is to understand motivations, identify patterns based on the data collected and then propose a framework (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.6. Research Strategy

A research strategy comprises methodological choices, such as if the research will follow quantitative, qualitative, or even mixed methods, and if the nature of the research will be descriptive or exploratory, for instance (Saunders et al., 2019). The choices made in the previous layers of the research onion determine the best option to be chosen in the following layers.

3.6.1. Descriptive versus Exploratory Models

A descriptive study aims to describe an event or situation in a very accurate manner. Considering that descriptive research does not comprise analyses and discussions, this type of study is generally used as a piece of explanatory research (Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, a descriptive study would limit and not fulfil the aims of this present research, even if combined with an explanatory study.

The exploratory model was the one chosen to be applied in this research, as this model searches for clarifications and understandings of the nature of a problem or phenomena through the literature, interviews of experts, and/or focus group interviews, and in addition, it is a model that is more flexible and adaptable to changes (Saunders et al., 2009).

3.6.2. Quantitative versus Qualitative Research Methods

Quantitative research is acknowledged as a method that collects and analyses numerical data, and it is usually associated with positivism philosophy and deduction approach (Saunders et al., 2009; Saunders et al., 2019). Considering this definition, it is possible to conclude that the quantitative method is not appropriate for this research, as the philosophy, approach, and type of data collected in this research are the opposite of the components considered suitable for such a method.

Considering that the most beneficial for this research was a mono method, the one chosen and considered more appropriate for this research was the qualitative method. Because this method emphasises observation and interpretation, it is often associated with interpretivism philosophy and the inductive approach, which are the philosophy and approach guiding this research (Park and Park, 2016). Qualitative research is generally

characterised by extracting the meanings to be studied from images and/or words, not having respondents, but participants, and collecting data through unstructured or semi-structured methods (Saunders et al., 2019). In addition, Park and Park (2016) outline that the purpose of using a qualitative research method is to acquire understandings of fundamental reasons and motivations in order to provide insights and promote ideas and/or hypotheses. Based on the aims of this research that were introduced previously, and on the definitions and explanations regarding the qualitative research method presented in this section, the method that best meets the objectives of this study is qualitative.

In a summarised way, the approach chosen for this research was qualitative, conducted through 30-minute individual semi-structured interviews, with the participation of six interviewees who were in line with the purpose of this research and could provide valid information to fulfil the aims and objectives of this study.

3.7. Qualitative Primary Data Collection

Business and management research is highly connected to the understanding of how things are, why things happen, and what the intentions are, hence, talking to people is essential to collect data (Adams et al., 2014).

Many are the possibilities of qualitative primary data collection. Observation, focus groups, and interviews are some examples of methods available for such type of research. As mentioned in the previous subsection, the data collection method chosen for this research was interviewing.

A research interview is described as a meaningful conversation in which the interviewer asks clear and objective questions and listens carefully to the answers of the interviewee, as it is through these answers that the interviewer can clarify points of interest and confirm meanings (Saunders et al., 2019). This method is often associated with interpretivism, the philosophy guiding this research, which recognises that reality is composed of multiple realities and is socially constructed by individual interpretations (Quinlan, 2011). Interviews are generally administered in a more tailored and detailed

way, and as the questions are usually open-ended, it is more likely to acquire candid responses (Walle, 2015).

There are several types of interviews that can be applied to a qualitative study for those who want to use an interview method. Saunders et al. (2019) highlight that it is crucial that the type of interview chosen is in line with the purpose of the research and the research strategy in order to fulfil the research objectives.

Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that interviews can be classified into three types: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured interviews are conducted using a pre-existent already validated questionnaire generally with pre-coded answers and are usually associated with quantitative research. Unstructured interviews are usually informal and utterly emergent and exploratory, which means that the interviewer does not conduct the interview based on predetermined questions, but instead has just a general idea about the topic to be explored with the participants. Semi-structured interviews are commonly guided by some basic questions regarding the theme to be investigated, and the way those questions are used depends on the research philosophy adopted.

Considering the assumption, philosophy and approach directing this research, the data collection method chosen was semi-structured interviews, since this method suggests a structure that is not highly restricted, but is not too loose either, allowing a more flexible approach regarding the questions to be asked and the theme to be explored (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and recorded to support the accuracy of the data analysis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were administered online in order to ensure the health safety of the participants.

All the data collected during the interviews are analysed and discussed in the next chapter of this study.

3.8. Population Sample

According to Adams et al. (2014), it is important that the population sample represents those who will have inferences made about them in the research. In line with that, the population sample of this research, named interviewees in this work, was

composed of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians in proportional numbers, since the point of view of these groups was fundamental to provide understandings regarding the research topic proposed in this study.

It is known that the sample size can be a concern in qualitative research that utilises interviews to collect data. Nevertheless, in the interview method, the sample used is usually small, not chosen randomly (Walle, 2015), and although the findings' representativeness may be questioned, this method promotes the obtention of in-depth information (Adams et al., 2014). Thus, the sample was composed of six participants, with a total of two from each group previously mentioned. Regarding gender, 33% were male and 67% female, the age range varies from 22 to 41, and all six participants are from Ireland, and live in Dublin. Such type of data is presented and discussed in the next chapter, however, more personal information that could be used to identify the interviewees was removed in order to protect their identity and privacy.

3.9. Analysing Qualitative Data

The process of data collection and data analysis were performed by the researcher, who was the one responsible for conducting the six semi-structured interviews individually, recording the interviews, collecting data, exporting the transcription of the interview, ensuring the transcript errors were corrected and carrying out the analyses in order to fulfil the aims and objectives of this research.

The interviews were administered by video call on Microsoft Teams, and the interviewees gave consent for the interviews to be recorded and had the option of maintaining their cameras turned off. This tool, Microsoft Teams, was chosen considering the familiarity of the researcher with it and because the system automatically creates the transcripts of the recordings, demanding only some corrections and promoting more accuracy of the data collected and analysed.

In terms of the qualitative analysis method, sometimes just one analysis method is not enough to conduct the data analysis, and the use of more than one method is necessary. Saunders et al. (2019) enhance the importance of the data analysis being in line with the research philosophy and strategy. For the authors, in the use of an

interpretivist philosophy, as in this present research, it is fundamental to allow the participants' voices to arise through the analysis, and possibly include quotations.

Considering the several possibilities of qualitative data analysis that could be suitable for this research, the one that appears to be more complied with the research philosophy, approach, and strategy is the thematic narrative analysis. This type of data analysis is focused on the content of the narratives/interviews, can be used to analyse multiple narratives that have a common focus, allows comparison and contrast across the findings, and incorporates the identification of themes (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.10. Ethical Issues

The term ethics can be defined as “the moral principles governing the conduct of an individual, a group or an organisation (Quinlan, 2011).”

Quinlan (2011) states that all research and every stage of its processes are subjected to ethical concerns. In addition, Saunders et al. (2019) enhance that research that requires the involvement of human participants tends to have the most considerable ethical issues.

Prior to engaging in this research, the author submitted a full ethical review application form to the National College of Ireland, indicating how the research would be conducted in order to secure an ethical treatment to all the participants involved.

Previous to the interview, the participants were contacted by e-mail with an introductory message regarding the purpose of the research and their personal participation, and a consent term regarding having the interview recorded and the data collected utilised to draw analyses, conclusions, and recommendations in this research. Additionally, they were informed they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time.

In terms of data protection and anonymity, all participants received a copy of their own interview recording, and the data collected was stored in a password-secured folder that was deleted for good after the release of the research outcomes. In addition, personal information that could lead to the identification of the participants was completely discarded from this study.

3.11. Limitations to the Research

The research was conducted with a total of six interviewees. This small sample size hindered the possibility of generalisation based on the data collected and analysed. Moreover, the subjectivity involved and the presence of bias all through the interviews are aspects that could impact the reliability of the results, making them not thoroughly conclusive.

The period of time granted to the development of the research is also considered a limitation. Taking into account a more extensive time span, a larger sample size could have been considered and more interviews could have been conducted, which would positively impact directly in the trustworthiness of the results.

Considering that some of the interview questions were regarding dining habits, the interviewees had to revisit their memories to remember how they used to behave before COVID-19 pandemic, which means roughly 2 years ago, since restaurants, cafes, and pubs remained closed during most of this period due to the restrictions imposed to control the pandemic. Because some questions had to be based on past habits that were forced to be changed, it might have impacted the accuracy of the outcomes.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

The plant-based market has been growing continuously as discussed in chapter 2 of this present research, and the motivations behind the search for a plant-based diet are diverse. In order to understand the motivations of Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians on their plant-based restaurant decision choice, and also to reach the research objectives, the interviews to collect the data needed for this research was based on the Five-Stage Consumer Decision Making Process model, previously scrutinised in chapter 2.

The findings of this study are presented, discussed, and correlated with recent literature in the next section.

4.2. Qualitative Research Findings

The present research counted with a total of 6 interviewees, 2 vegans, 2 vegetarians, and 2 flexitarians, all Irish living in Dublin. The group of vegans was composed of 1 female and 1 male, 24 and 25 years old, respectively. The vegetarians were both females, age 22 and 34. And the flexitarians were 1 female and 1 male, age 31 and 41, respectively. The sample used in this research is predominantly in accordance with the data presented in the Dietary Lifestyle Report by Bord Bia (2021), which shows that vegans in Ireland are mostly young adults from 18 to 34 years old, vegetarians are concentrated between 25 to 44 years old, likewise flexitarians.

It is indispensable to highlight that the interview questions were related to a plant-based restaurant, and all interviewees were reminded to keep a plant-based restaurant in mind while answering the questions.

4.2.1. Awareness of the Need

This subsection aims to achieve and discuss research objective number 1, “To investigate the needs/reasons of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians regarding eating in a plant-based restaurant.”

4.2.1.1. Frequency of Dining

The restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the last couple of years is a factor that has impacted the recurrence of dining in society as a whole. For this reason, the interviewees were asked to consider their pre-pandemic dining habits when discussing frequency.

The dining frequency is distinct in all three groups, which vary from twice a month to around eighteen times a month. Some interviewees declared that their dining frequency has plummeted during the lockdown phase of the pandemic, however, it has also skyrocketed when the restrictions were eased and dining was something possible once again, as mentioned by interviewee number 1 (vegan), *“I’m nowhere else spending on, because I’ve been locked indoors all the time. So, why not head to nice restaurants and just enjoy yourself?”*.

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic suggested by Wang et al. (2021) was the customer perception of being exposed to high health risks in restaurants. This apprehension might have been progressively diminishing due to the advancement of the vaccination rollout and more restrictions being eased, which with the addition of this feeling of having an enjoyable and pleasant time after a hard period, as mentioned by interviewee number 1, could lead to a good performance of the restaurant market, and even significant growth in the near future.

4.2.1.2. Occasions that Motivate Dining

The occasions and situations mostly cited by all the interviewees as the ones that motivate them to eat in a restaurant were celebrations, like birthdays, graduation, or anniversary, and meeting up with friends. Apart from that, interviewees number 3 (flexitarian) and number 4 (vegetarian) also expressed their necessity of having lunch in restaurants a few times a week due to their jobs.

The common point in all answers is the social aspect involved in dining as a pleasant way to spend time and get together with friends and family, which was reinforced by interviewee number 5 (vegan), *“I like to eat out every day. Every day is an occasion. Every day is a day to celebrate. So, I like to eat at any time with my friends. It’s a social thing, I think, especially now that a lot of things have meant open.”*.

Once again, the post effects of the pandemic, such as the desire for gathering with friends and family and spending some quality time with them, plus the gradual reopening of offices, shops, gyms, etc., may boost the search for restaurants.

4.2.2. Information Collection of Distinct Alternatives

This subsection pursues to discuss research objective number 2, “To identify the sources used by these populations to collect information about plant-based restaurant options.”

4.2.2.1. How Restaurants’ Information is Searched

Amongst the groups of vegetarians and flexitarians, the most common answers regarding the way they search for restaurants were word of mouth, friends’ recommendations, online reviews, and Google Maps, whilst in the vegan group, other sources were mentioned. It is suggested that the vegan group has an additional concern to ensure that the meal that will be served is indeed vegan. In order to guarantee that vegan meals will be available, the search for information is done through more specific channels, such as a proper website/app for vegan restaurants called The Happy Cow, and/or vegan accounts on Instagram. Whenever the search is done on more common sources, such as Google, a second source, such as a phone call, is used to ensure the veracity of the information, as declared by interviewee number 1 (vegan), *“You find yourself bringing up restaurants and making sure that everything is 100% ok before you actually make the endeavour of going ahead.”*

4.2.2.2. Important Characteristics in a Restaurant

When asked what the interviewees look for when choosing a restaurant, the characteristic most mentioned by all three groups was the quality of food, which according to their answers, comprises flavour/taste and freshness, being this last one usually associated with a healthy aspect, as pointed out by interviewee number 4 (vegetarian), *“I look for, you know, places that have clearly... obviously use fresh foods on their menus, and don’t... Yeah, just kind of have healthy stuff.”*

Distinct scholars indicate the quality of food as a key aspect of restaurant choice. As an example, research conducted by Jung et al. (2015) indicates that the probability of a restaurant being chosen is significantly higher when it provides good food quality.

Other aspects that are also considered by the interviewees when choosing a restaurant to go to are cleanliness, price, staff/service, and atmosphere. Although staff/service is an important feature, it is not considered as the primary characteristic, as explained by interviewee number 3 (flexitarian), *“I mean, lots of people rate service highly, but for me if the price and the quality of the food is good, the service won’t disturb me too much. It would obviously assist, but it wouldn’t be the most important at all for me.”* This finding is in accordance with the research conducted by Jung et al. (2015) mentioned previously, which shows that poor service quality reduces the probability of a restaurant be chosen, but good service does not have a great influence on restaurant choice.

4.2.2.3. The Importance of the Type of Food Provided

Despite having their preferences, the type of food or cuisine provided by a restaurant is not considered an important factor for the interviewees. Nevertheless, two principal aspects were cited by them. The first one is the importance of bringing variety and novelty through different cuisines and/or a mix of different flavours. The second aspect, that is connected to the first one at some level, is that the food provided is not easy to be reproduced at home, as revealed by interviewee number 2 (flexitarian), *“I suppose in terms of when I’m going out, I like to go to restaurants that make food I can’t make as well, maybe at home.”*, and interviewee number 5 (vegan), *“I like eating out when it’s vegan junk food, because, I just don’t agree on paying for a home-cooked meal when you can make that yourself and you can never make like a really greasy food as nice as a restaurant can.”*

The finding suggests that a specific cuisine does not play an important role for this audience is searching for a restaurant, what really matters is firstly the taste and secondly how rare or difficult it is to be prepared at home.

4.2.3. The Evaluation of Restaurant Options

In this subsection, objective research 3 is the one to be analysed and discussed, *“To recognise the most important features of a plant-based restaurant for this population.”*

4.2.3.1. Essential Features a Restaurant Must Have

The characteristics of a restaurant considered essential that were mentioned the most by the interviewees were food quality (taste/flavour), variety and cleanliness. An aspect regarding food quality that was considered by the vegetarian group was the origin of the products used in the restaurant, in other words, their sources/suppliers. This group highlighted that the use of locally grown, and ethically sourced products are a fundamental element in a restaurant for them, as indicated by interviewee number 6 (vegetarian) *“I like restaurants that, you know, would use free-range eggs or, like, local products, as opposed to, you know, importing foodstuffs.”*, and interviewee number 4 (vegetarian) *“I supposed to fresh food type aspect, preferably organic and, yeah.”*

The importance of the origin of the products used in a restaurant is stated by Contini et al. (2017). For the authors, products that are locally grown are linked to aspects such as freshness and quality, which are elements that increase the inclination of consumers to pay more for foods made with this type of product.

4.2.3.2. Restaurant Differentiation

In terms of what makes a restaurant differs from others, a novelty, in general, was the aspect primarily considered by the interviewees. Considering distinct types of novelty, the one highly mentioned was the décor/atmosphere, as explained by interviewee number 5 (vegan) *“Maybe, like, how much colour they use. How quirky, artsy, I love just, like, when it's just really thought out, like, you don't want to walk by a bland restaurant where it's just like dull colours, or... I feel like the aesthetic makes a big difference.”* Such a point of view is aligned with findings in the literature.

According to Liu and Tse (2018), elements connected to the atmosphere and style of a restaurant, for instance, interior design and décor, are the ones that can differentiate a restaurant from others and influence consumers' decision choices.

4.2.3.3. Features that Make a Restaurant Becomes an Option

When asked about the features, characteristics, and elements that a restaurant must have in order to become an option for them, the most common answers were regarding food taste and quality, the variety available, and friendly staff and good service.

Amongst the elements considered by the interviewees, the variety is the only one not found in the literature. Since none of the studies on restaurant choice available are focused on people who follow a plant-based diet, the variety aspect might be suggested as a concern deriving of this audience.

An interesting and important consideration raised by interviewee number 3 (flexitarian) regarding this topic, was that the characteristics considered may change according to the place and situation, which could be summarised in value for money, *“I mean, if we go into cheap and cheerful place, you know, I'm expecting to get a big portion of the ‘not so amazing food’, but then if you go into more expensive restaurants, then things change, you know, it's more about the quality, and the service, and the cleanliness, some and everything else.”* This concept was revealed in other studies previously, as presented by Chua et al. (2020). The authors explain that situational factors influence consumers' selection criteria and, as an example, they present that while in a fast-food restaurant the service speed is more pertinent, in a prime restaurant the food quality is more relevant.

4.2.4. Restaurant Decision Choice

This subsection approaches and debates the research objective 4, “To investigate the motivations behind the plant-based restaurant decision choice of this population.”

4.2.4.1. Features that Make a Choice Be Made Amongst Similar Restaurants

According to Chua et al. (2020), whenever restaurants provide similar products and/or services, the restaurant decision choice is usually based on the price. However, this research reveals that the aspect most considered by the interviewees when they have to choose between very similar restaurants are reviews/recommendations, in other words, word of mouth, as stated by interviewee number 6 (vegetarian), *“I would probably take that into consideration and maybe try the restaurant that they recommend. Yeah, definitely other people's recommendations, I think, would help me pick between two.”*

Other interesting elements proposed by some interviewees in this matter include the preference for small independent restaurants rather than big chains, which may be related to sustainable awareness and appreciation. Additionally, once again décor/atmosphere was mentioned as the attribute that they considered in order to choose

between similar restaurants. Such aspects are supported by Liu and Tse (2018) as the ones that can be a tiebreaker on a restaurant decision choice.

4.2.4.2. Features that Make a Restaurant Not Be Considered as an Option

In terms of features, characteristics, and aspects, or lack of them, that make a restaurant not be considered an option, most of the interviewees highlighted poor food quality, lack of variety, lack of cleanliness, and bad service as the main factors that make them not take into consideration a particular restaurant. Jung et al. (2015) state that lack of food quality minimises the likelihood of a restaurant being selected, and that, despite good service does not raise the probability of restaurant selection, poor service quality reduces the possibility of a restaurant being chosen.

Another aspect considered by interviewee number 1 (vegan), that can also be considered as a way to ensure the existence or lack of the attributes presented above that were mentioned by other interviewees, is low rating. For interviewee number 1, *“If they (restaurants) are below a certain rating, I won't be acknowledged them (...). The rating counts as being sufficient as well, you know, a restaurant has 10 reviews, and 5 were bad, or something like that, and the rest were amazing, I might consider it, but if it's kind of overwhelmingly, I understood that this restaurant is persistently bad.”*

4.2.5. Post-Experience Evaluation

This subsection tackles research objective 5, “To identify the attributes that build and avoid restaurant loyalty.”

4.2.5.1. Aspects that Build Loyalty

In order to identify and understand what factors contribute to building restaurant loyalty, the interviewees were asked about the elements, aspects, and features that make them return to a restaurant. All interviewees from all three groups mentioned food quality (taste/flavour) as an element that makes them return to a restaurant, and the majority also cited the atmosphere. These two aspects are highlighted by Parsa et al. (2012) as two of the three main characteristics that generally influence restaurant choice.

In terms of food quality, apart from taste, a particular aspect considered by interviewee number 1 (vegan) that restaurants should be aware of is the after effect

caused by the food served, which can either contribute to build loyalty or avoid it, *“I guess another factor might actually be that kind of, I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but some takeaways you get, or some restaurant to go to kind of bad after effect. The food taste great at the time, and then you can get home, or you finish eating, and you're like ‘oh ok, I wish I didn't eat that’”*.

For some interviewees, the feeling of being welcomed and comfortable are included in the effects of a restaurant atmosphere. Liu and Tse (2018) explain that the atmosphere is recognised as an important attribute of a restaurant due to be perceived as an indication of the quality of a restaurant.

Having a positive experience could be a summed-up version of the feature set cited in this question by different interviewees, as suggested by interviewee number 6 (vegetarian).

4.2.5.2. Elements that Avoid Loyalty Building

Although service was cited by only three interviewees as an element that would make them return to a restaurant, this aspect was mentioned by five interviewees as an element that would make them not return to a restaurant. Such outcome is completely in line with the findings of Jung et al. (2015) that were already presented previously in this research.

All interviewees also considered poor food quality as a factor that would make them avoid returning to a restaurant. The correlation between food quality and the likelihood of a restaurant being selected is also discussed by Jung et al. (2015). For the authors, the poorest the quality, the least the possibility of selection.

A bad experience was the term used by interviewee number 6 to outline the attributes that make her not return to a restaurant, which includes the food quality and service. Another summarised version was given by interviewee number 3 (flexitarian), who defined sloppiness as the main attribute that makes him avoid returning to a restaurant, *“Sloppy is like, it could refer to the, to the lack of cleanliness, the lack of attention to detail, just not caring, from either the manager or the waiting staff, or, of course, from the chef. A lack of attention to detail. Sloppiness, this is an important word. That would prevent me from going back”*.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

Considering the gaps presented in chapter 1, this research was able to fulfil those gaps partially by contributing to the generation of academic findings regarding the decision-making process of a specific type of restaurant, plant-based restaurant, based on the target customers of such type of restaurant in a particular market, Irish plant-based restaurant market.

Further conclusions concerning the motivations of Irish people who follow a plant-based diet regarding eating in a plant-based restaurant, and how the decision-making process occurs are discussed hereafter.

5.1.1. Motivations for Dining and Sources of Information about Plant-Based Restaurants

Lunch hunger was mentioned for a couple of the interviewees as one of the motivations that lead them to eat in a restaurant. This motivation is associated with a physiological need, which is the first level of Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (Griffin, 2011). The other motivations cited by all interviewees are related to socialisation, such as meeting up with friends or family, and special occasions, such as graduation and anniversary, for instance. These motivations would be connected to the third and fourth levels of Maslow's theory respectively. The third is about belongingness needs, in other words, the feeling of being accepted and part of a group, whilst the fourth is related to esteem needs, which means being recognised and respected by others (Griffin, 2011). Although these motivations are only one part of the restaurant decision-making process of this population, they can play a very important role. Considering that motivation is the level of engagement that a person decides to engage in a specific behaviour (Mitchell, 1982), the level of engagement of this population in dining in a plant-based restaurant may rise exponentially due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions being eased.

The search for restaurant options is the next step of the decision-making process. Despite the fact that there are websites and apps exclusive for plant-based restaurants options, word of mouth and reviews/ratings are the most used forms of searching for this

type of restaurant. These are powerful sources of information that can influence the decision-making process of Irish people who follow a plant-based diet.

Strategic positioning of a plant-based restaurant focused on a welcoming place where people can have a great time with their loved ones and fulfil the needs of a good meal, belongingness, and esteem, could attract the target customers, and thus increase word of mouth and even good reviews.

5.1.2. Attributes that Influence the Decision-Making Process

Although price can influence the restaurant choice of Irish people who follow a plant-based diet, it is not among the fundamental elements that influence the decision choice of this audience. The most important attributes considered not negotiable for this group are generally food quality, the atmosphere of the restaurant, and cleanliness. Such elements are essential for the target customers in order to be considered a plant-based restaurant option for them. The literature on restaurant choice acknowledges these features as the ones most valued by customers, especially food quality (Auty, 1992; Parsa et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2015; Contini et al., 2017). For Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians, food quality means tasteful fresh food, which is also connected to the importance of supporting local producers. The quality of food and the way it is sourced, locally and ethically, increase the willingness of this population to pay more for a meal, mostly when these attributes are combined with a good atmosphere.

In a summarised way, the combination of such attributes can increase the likelihood of a good experience for the customers, and this boosts the probability of building loyalty, whereas the lack of one or more of these features promotes a bad experience, that may result in the avoidance of a particular restaurant.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. Recommendations for Future Research

In order to have a broader comprehension of the Irish plant-based restaurant market, as well as the motivations involved in the decision-making process of Irish vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians regarding their plant-based restaurant choice, it is suggested that future research increases its population sample size. A more extensive

piece of research would also demand more time invested in it and, perhaps, more people involved in the collection of data would facilitate this process.

5.2.2. Recommendations for Practitioners

Plant-based restaurant owners, as well as those who want to become restaurateur in this market, could take advantage of the findings of this research to establish a better connection with its target customers and also to have a positioning in line with the needs of this audience.

The variety of dishes full of flavour, made with fresh and ethically sourced products, served by attentive and caring staff, in a very clean and welcoming place with a good atmosphere could be the reasons driving a customer to choose a particular restaurant instead of others. Good branding and assertive communication are also appreciated by Irish people who follow a plant-based diet. The combination of all these attributes could lead a particular plant-based restaurant to the right path of having a successful business.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Date:

Age:

Gender:

Nationality:

() Vegan () Vegetarian () Flexitarian

The questions are focused on a plant-based restaurant option.

1. Need recognition & Problem awareness

1.1. How often do you usually eat out?

1.2. What are the occasions/situations which make you eat in a restaurant?

2. Information Search

2.1. How do you search for restaurants?

2.2. What do you look for when choosing a restaurant to go to?

2.3. What type of food/cuisine do you usually look for when eating in a restaurant?

3. Evaluation of Alternatives

3.1. What features are essential for you in a restaurant?

3.2. In your opinion, what makes a restaurant stand out from others?

3.3. What are the 3 main features that a restaurant must have in order to be considered an option for you?

4. Purchase Decision

4.1. Considering similar restaurants with similar characteristics, what feature becomes the most important one for you on your decision?

4.2. What elements, aspects, and/or characteristics, or lack of them, make you do not consider a restaurant as an option?

5. Post-purchase Behaviour

5.1. What elements, aspects, and/or features make you return to a restaurant?

5.2. What elements, aspects, and/or features make you not return to a restaurant?