

REWRITING

~~Rewriting~~ the
Language of Meat
and Vegetables

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“While they [vegetarians] think that all that is necessary to make converts to vegetarianism is to point out the numerous problems meat eating causes,... in a meat-eating culture none of this really matters.”

CAROL J. ADAMS

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INTRODUCTION

The first UK national lockdown played a pivotal role in embarking my gradual journey towards a vegan¹ diet. Being restricted from dining out whilst living with my sister who has been a fully-committed vegan for the past three years, it was almost an organic process for myself to also follow vegan recipes as we took turns cooking for each other - three meals a day for an extended period of time. During these months, my sister became my mentor, guiding me through the art of vegan living. Yet, despite having learnt the consequences of eating animal products for our environment, the unethical treatment of animals in factory farms, and the many benefits of eating plant-based, I still found myself indulging in tubs of dairy-filled ice cream and occasional cheese-coated twists. As I reflected on my own hypocritical behaviour, I was prompted with the question: What is it about animal products that makes it so appealing?

Feminist-vegan advocate, Carol J. Adams asserts that simply “point[ing] out the numerous problems meat eating causes” (2010, p.27) is not enough for an omnivorous individual to transition to a plant-based diet. While there are multitudes of potential determinants to this course of action - or rather inaction - Adams (2010) proposes that the language surrounding meat (versus vegetables) is one of the significant factors in creating a narrative that justifies, as well as makes favorable, the act of eating meat. There is indeed a multitude of potential determinants to this course of action - or rather inaction. Yet, Adams (2010) proposes that the language surrounding meat (versus vegetables)² is a significant factor which contributes to creating a narrative that justifies and makes favourable the act of eating meat. This dissertation henceforth is twofold. It first aims to deconstruct the semantics of meat and vegetables through a linguistic lens, in order to better understand our deep-rooted attachment to meat-eating. Subsequently, it seeks to ideate alternative approaches to promote a plant-based diet.

Therefore, introducing plant-based advocacy as a case study, this paper addresses the research question: What role does language play in nudging individuals towards ethical dietary choices? The literature review explicates the fundamental reasonings for examining the above question specifically through a linguistic lens. It then attempts to decipher

the language around meat and vegetables to better comprehend its semantics. In the methodology, I outline the procedures undertaken to investigate the efficacies of language in encouraging a plant-based diet. Lastly, the evaluation and conclusion respectively, presents key research findings and introduces alternative approaches to facilitating a successful transition to a vegan diet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, Thought, and Behaviour

Prior to examining the language particular to meat and vegetables to decipher its semantics, it is crucial to understand the reasonings behind utilising language as the primary scope of this discourse. Language does not strictly 'dictate' one's cognition, as there are myriads of intertwined variables contributing to the formation of one's mental programme. However, various studies in the field of linguistic anthropology have revealed strong evidence of language being one of many significant factors that 'impacts' one's worldview. Most notably, American linguist and proponent of linguistic relativity, Benjamin Lee Whorf, claims that "language influences unconscious habitual thought" (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996, p.22). Acknowledging this causal relationship between language and thought, it is valid for one to suggest that the language around meat and vegetables also possesses capabilities to shape individual cognition. Moreover in the context of this paper, this cognition then encourages a majority of the population to gravitate towards consuming animal products.

Although plant-based eating is increasingly and globally receiving greater attention in recent years, the general consensus still regards meat-eating as the norm (The Vegan Society, 2020). Further, language has been perpetuating this normalisation, as will be elaborated in the proceeding section. When considering language as a reinforcing agent as such, Adams' statement on the inefficiency of solely explaining the repercussions of meat-eating makes clearer sense. Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede echoes this difficulty of changing already established norms through illustrating the multi-layered process of the development of norms whilst quoting, "norms change rarely through direct adoption of outside values" (2001, p.12) (see Appendix A). Speculative designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Rabby, additionally express support to this claim by explaining the importance of the bottom-up approach. As they claim, individual "values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours" (2013, p.2) must be identified and adjusted first to tackle the large-scale challenges we face today.

Thus far, the thesis has argued that language greatly influences our thought and consequently, our behaviour. The following section will be observing the condoning, and furthermore the favouring of meat-eating across centuries, through examining the ways in which meat and vegetables are represented in language. Whilst acknowledging that this representation varies depending on the corresponding language, this paper will primarily focus on unpacking its English vocabularies and phrases.

Language of Meat and Vegetables

a. Meat:Vegetables = Dominant:Submissive

Upon careful inspection of particular examples, it becomes apparent that the semantics of meat and vegetable polarises one another. This is evident firstly in the word 'meat' itself. While it is generally understood as "the flesh of an animal when...used for food", it can also be defined as "important, valuable, or interesting ideas or information" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). To provide further background context, it appears in phrases such as 'to get to the meat of the topic' and 'a meaty discussion'. Meat is implemented in language as a metaphor to describe a matter that is of substantive, if not the most substantive, value. The idiom 'to beef up', synonymous to the verb 'improve', is another example in which meat is used symbolically in the English language (Adams, 2010, p.60). The adoption of the word 'beef' in this phrase depicts the meat as the key element to better a given mediocre condition - that without the beef, one cannot achieve an upgrade. On the other hand, vegetables depict a contrasting picture of inadequacy and non-achievement. For instance, the term 'vegetate', sharing the same prefix as vegetable, is defined as requiring no mental or physical activity (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Additionally, when the word 'potato' is used to refer to a person, it illustrates a sedentary, dull, and unpolished individual. In both examples, vegetables are euphemistically introduced to portray the lifeless characteristic of a living being.

The antithetical connotation of meat and vegetable can also be found in the Japanese language. An appropriate example of this would be the term *nikushoku-kei-danshi/joshi*, translated into English as 'carnivorous man/woman', and *soushoku-kei-danshi/joshi*, translated as 'herbivorous

man/woman'. While it may seem odd to observe humans being described in such ways, these are common expressions used widely in the Japanese media and amongst the general public. One would identify an individual as a *nikushokukei*, if they have a confident demeanor and the tendency to actively pursue their love interest (Japan Today, 2012). On the contrary, *soushokukei-danshi/joshi* are often perceived as being "passive...and shy about relationships" (ibid.).

As can be understood through these examples, meat is often employed in language to allude to a dominant characteristic, whereas vegetables take on that of submissive. From historical groundings to nutritional purposes, there are multifarious reasons as to why one may participate in the consuming of meat. Nonetheless, decoding the symbolic representation of meat versus vegetable in language hereby suggests another subconscious reason as to why an individual may favour meat-eating and be reluctant in removing meat from their diet.

b. Animal Products > Plant-based Product

Similar to the section above, section b will also introduce linguistic examples in which animal products are deemed greater in value compared to plant-based products in the hierarchy of food. This can first be exemplified by plant-based products being labeled as 'alternatives' to their animal product counterparts across online grocery shopping websites (see Appendix B). For example, marketing Alpro's soy-based yoghurt as a 'yoghurt alternative' continues to ingrain the notion that all yoghurts must include dairy. The essence of a yoghurt lies in its process of fermenting milk with the addition of bacteria, alongside its unique slightly sour flavour and consistency (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Yet, the market seems to be directing greater focus on the ingredient - whether or not it contains 'cow's' milk - while simultaneously indicating plant-based variations as the non-mainstream.

Another recurring vocabulary observed to refer to plant-based products is 'fake' or 'faux'. An article published by Time Out (2019) which recommends vegan dishes at specific restaurants resembling the taste, texture, and appearance of animal meat was titled "The best restaurants in London to eat fake meat". Similarly, an article by Fox News (2020) advertised the launch of a vegan meat shop in an article titled "Vegan butcher opens slicing fake meat in London". The very use of the adjective

'fake' to address plant-based meat devalues its existence. Further, it potentially repulses consumers from purchasing plant-based options, when in fact, there is no doubt of its higher value in ethicality from both animal welfare and environmental lenses.

The paradox lies in these animal products, often perceived as 'better', using specific terminologies to curate this quality facade. Seldom does one question why bacon is not more accurately named 'dead pig' or why beef is not called 'dead cow flesh'. (Animal Aid, 2019). In attaching gastronomic names which are less transparent of its nature in these ways, one can suggest that it masks, moreover sanitises, the unethicities of animal agricultural practices and the consuming of animal products (Adams, p.66).

As the House of Lords highlights in their letter to Agriculture minister, Robert Goodwill MP, considerable effort must be exerted to encourage consumers to shift to a plant-based diet - now more than ever because of the climate emergency (Animal Aid, 2019). That being said, the above case studies propose that there seems to be a need for careful reconsideration of plant-based product names to realise this collective goal. To that end, the later half of this paper will be examining the efficacies of modifying language to close the hierarchical gap between meat and vegetables, in order to achieve the wider agenda of promoting plant-based diet.

METHODOLOGY

SWAP, a web platform, was designed and built as a research tool to examine the following question: What role does language play in nudging individuals towards ethical dietary choices? However, before introducing SWAP, this section will provide a brief outline of the market research and user research findings that facilitated the process of ideating the final deliverable.

Market Research

In the early concept development stages, market research was carried out to confirm the relevance of exploring the broader subject of veganism for this thesis. As market demands greatly differ depending on the country, this preliminary research directed its primary focus on the UK market, through reviewing the annual food and beverage reports published by three British grocery brands: Waitrose, Sainsbury's, and Morrisons.

The general trend across all three brands was an increase in sales of plant-based products. Waitrose documents that their vegan and vegetarian range grew by 60% in the 2018-2019 financial year, with 55% of its research subjects making this shift for animal welfare concerns (Waitrose & Partners, 2019, p.6). Similarly, Sainsbury's observed a 65% increase in vegan product sales and a 24% increase in customers searching for vegan products on their online shopping platform (Sainsbury's, 2019, p.2). From their research on top customer values where "ensuring animal welfare" scored 4th, Morrisons also identified an expanding awareness of the benefits of plant-based eating amongst the general public (Morrisons, 2019, p.6). To summarise, the change in consumer behaviours identified through these sources reveal an upwards trend in the demand for plant-based products, thus leading to a parallel growth in supply for these items.

User Research

To further examine the growing demand for the vegan market as evidenced in the market research, a survey was disseminated to 177 international respondents (see Appendix C). While there were many

discoveries through the collected answers, Figure A displays a concise table of qualitative and quantitative data that were most relevant to the purpose of this research.

As exhibited in the table below, a substantive percentage of survey participants had considered veganism at one point in their lives. However, taking into account that only a handful transitioned and continued to maintain a plant-based diet, there seems to be several hurdles in becoming vegan. The most common challenges experienced by the respondents, regardless of their current dietary preference, was ‘giving up the taste of animal products’, closely followed by the ‘lack of vegan options available’ within their living environment. In addition, the third most prevalent challenge was ‘negative body reaction to a vegan diet’ for UK residents, alongside ‘having to cater to the diet of other’s’ for non-UK residents. On the contrary, the top three most helpful sources were ‘online resources and apps’, ‘guidance from others’, and ‘the abundance of vegan options available’ for both UK and non-UK residents.

Figure A: User Research Survey Results

	UK Residents (84 respondents)	Non-UK Residents (93 respondents)
Percentage of respondents who have considered switching to a vegan diet	67.90%	45.16%
Percentage of respondents who are currently follow a vegan diet	11.90%	9.68%
Percentage of respondents who completed the full transition to a vegan diet	17.54%	21.43%

Top 3 difficulties of becoming vegan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I can't give up the taste of animal products or started missing them 2. There aren't many vegan options available 3. My body reacted negatively to a vegan diet 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I can't give up the taste of animal products or started missing them 2. There aren't many vegan options available 3. I have to cater to the diet of other's
Top 3 helpful sources in becoming vegan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online resources and apps 2. Guidance from others 3. There are many vegan options available 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online resources and apps 2. Guidance from others 3. There are many vegan options available

SWAP

Upon acquiring an adequate understanding of the target audience's needs and wants through the market and user research, I began to develop SWAP, a web platform facilitating users with their plant-based cooking. Having undertaken an iterative ideation process, the unique selling point of this final deliverable was narrowed down to specifically and only sharing recipes that traditionally use animal products. This decision was primarily derived in response to the most common opinion expressed in the user research: 'not being able to give up the taste of animal products'.

To reiterate the purpose of SWAP in relation to the research question, this platform was designed and built in order to explore the redefining of language around meat and vegetables as an alternative tactic in encouraging a plant-based diet. The control variables of the websites were the visual interface and introduced recipes. However, version A³ employed language that maintains the hierarchical gap between meat and vegetables, whereas version B⁴ attempted to eliminate this disparity. To elaborate on the differences, the table in the next page presents a full list of words and phrases that were different between the two versions.

Figure B: Difference in Language Between Version A and B of SWAP

Version A	Version B
faux cheese	plant-based cheese
mock mince meat	soy mince
mock meat	plant-based meat
milk alternative	plant-based milk
banana blossom as fish substitute	banana blossom
watermelon as tuna substitute	watermelon
king oyster mushroom as squid substitute	king oyster mushroom
flax seed as egg replacement	flax seed

Subsequently, an A/B testing followed by a survey was conducted with a group of participants who were selected by non-probability convenience sampling. The survey consisted of both Likert scale type and open-ended questions to best assess the user responses. They were instructed to cook one of the dishes introduced in the website; alternatively, to freely explore the website if the cooking is not possible. A survey comprising questions regarding usability and experience, in addition to demographics and dietary preferences, was also sent as a complementary task (see Appendix D).

EVALUATION

Assessing the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the A/B testing resulted in two predominant discoveries pertinent to the trajectory of this discourse - 'the inadequacies of language alteration' and 'the effects of visual and content design on emotion'. Through careful analysis of these findings, this section will then discuss potential approaches that may be impactful in facilitating individuals towards a plant-based diet.

Inadequacies of Language Altercation

The attempt to rewrite the language around meat and vegetables alone seems to have minimal influence on the user's decision whether to shift to a plant-based diet or not. This verdict is apparent through the answers provided in response to the question: How likely would you start a fully vegan diet after using SWAP? As shown in Figure C, the responses varied greatly in both version A and B, implying that language had no particular impact. While research in the literature review regarding the linguistic semantics of meat and vegetables forecasted that subjects accessing version B of SWAP would be more inclined to adapt a plant-based diet, this expectation resulted in being inaccurate.

When participants were asked - How would you describe the language used across SWAP in one adjective? Is there a reason for it? - the answers loosely divided into two. Firstly, the majority of users mentioned the simplicity and conciseness of the recipe instructions (refer to Figure D); thus, there seemed to be no direct commentary on SWAP's use of language around plant-based products. On the other hand, several users responded with adjectives such as 'friendly', 'positive', 'inoffensive', and 'accessible' to name a few (refer again to Figure D), connoting that the language used across SWAP was inviting, even to individuals who may be unfamiliar with vegan cooking. However, it is crucial to note here that these responses existed across both versions, indicating that language around meat and vegetables may not necessarily be the most significant factor in shifting perceptions. Nonetheless, this implication does reinforce the aforementioned theory on linguistic relativity - to reiterate, that language has great influence on, but does not dictate, one's cognition.

These results may also contribute to the discussion surrounding the long-debated EU policy regarding the banning of specific terminologies to market vegan products. Proponents of this policy argue that vegan product names are currently highly misleading, as it includes words such as 'yoghurt' and 'cream' in their label (The Vegan Society, 2020). Despite the full label being 'vegan' yoghurt or 'vegan' cheese, explicitly indicating its plant-based origins, the supporting party claims that entirely new words must be invented to address these products (ibid.). The consistency in opinions expressed by user testers of both versions A and B demonstrated that individuals are marginally affected by the specific wording of vegan products, thereby one can suggest that this long-winded dispute may not be the most pressing of matters and requires less attention than presently given.

The Effects of Visual and Content Design on Emotion

Another observable trend across both versions was the website's user interface and overall content, being described with words such as 'approachable', 'friendly', 'joyful', 'cute', and 'feminine' to name a few (as shown in Figure D). Further, full responses included comments such as "[The] design is quite feminine and inoffensive", "the illustrative interface is very cute...", as well as, "I really like the friendly tone...". One may voice that this 'softness' of the visual design - in particular the colors, typography, and illustrations - can be a factor diminishing the legitimacy of this weighty subject matter (The Guardian, 2016). However, evoking 'positive' emotions and leaving users with impressions as such may counterintuitively be the core strength and originality of SWAP. Many of the existing online resources advocating vegan living relies greatly on providing statistical data and factual information as a tactic to provoke feelings such as, but not limited to, sympathy, urgency to act, and at times, guilt. However, Don Norman (2004, p.19), psychologist and founder of the term 'user experience design', proposes the significance of instigating 'good feelings' to "broaden one's thought process" through meticulous consideration of the visceral design. Norman (ibid.) additionally asserts that by inducing positive emotions through attractive aesthetics, designers have the ability to generate a more seamless interaction between the users and the product. That is to say, aesthetics facilitates users to creatively and efficiently ideate alternative solutions when encountering problems, thus creating an overall positive experience. While nice aesthetics may not be the

ultimate strategy in encouraging individuals to transition to a plant-based diet, the survey result has certainly illuminated it as a significant factor to take into account.

Figure C: How likely would you start a fully vegan diet after using SWAP?

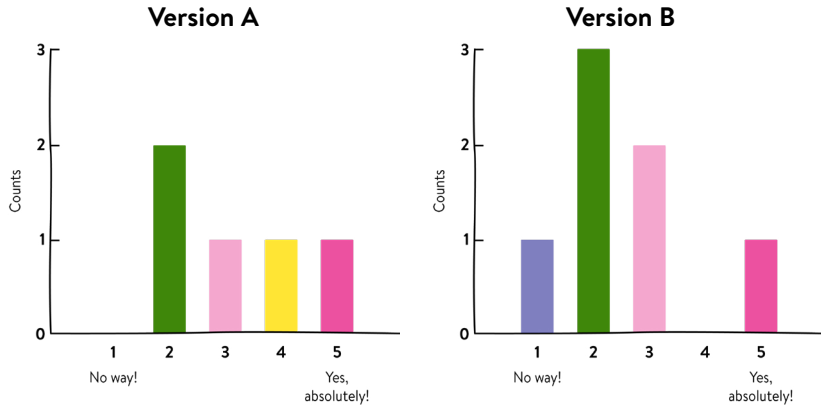


Figure D: Table of Questions and Answers from the A/B Testing Survey

	Version A	Version B
What do you think of SWAP's approach in promoting plant-based diet?	<p>"There's nothing negative to it, which is rare to see from movements promoting veganism."</p> <p>"Love the style of it. I think it's really approachable..."</p> <p>"I think the cute animal emojis make it harder to consider eating them!"</p>	<p>"It's easy to follow."</p> <p>"Really easy concept..."</p> <p>"Nice way of showing alternatives to meat/dairy dishes."</p> <p>"Really natural, not forceful."</p> <p>"Makes it more easy and accessible."</p>

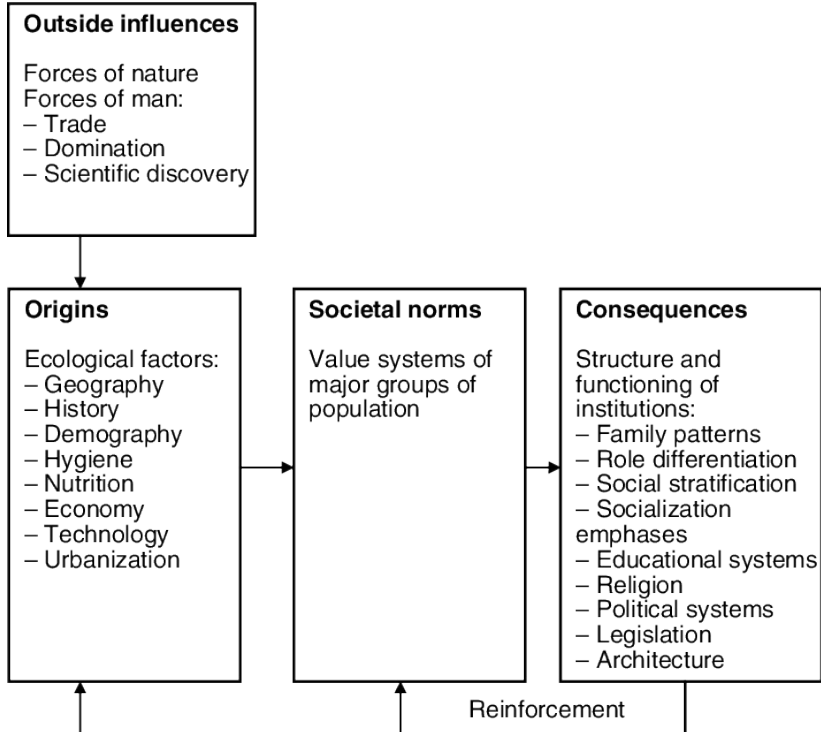
<p>How would you describe the language used across SWAP in one adjective? Is there a reason for it?</p>	<p>“Simple and concise. Straight to the point.”</p> <p>“Frank”</p> <p>“Interesting concept”</p> <p>“Kind - Design is quite feminine and inoffensive.”</p> <p>“Chill - It’s a no-pressure kind of app.”</p>	<p>“Simple”</p> <p>“Exciting!”</p> <p>“I really liked the friendly tone of voice!”</p> <p>“Clear”</p> <p>“Simple”</p> <p>“Accessible”</p> <p>“Friendly, positive, neutral”</p>
<p>What is an emotion that you felt while using SWAP? Is there a reason for it?</p>	<p>“The illustrative interface is very cute and friendly!”</p> <p>“Intrigued”</p> <p>“Excited”</p> <p>“Curios - I always look forward to new vegan recipes.”</p>	<p>“To be more sustainable”</p> <p>“Inspired”</p> <p>“Cute, curious and a little tiny bit confused!”</p> <p>“Joyful and happy emotions”</p> <p>“Impressed. It is an ingenuitive idea.”</p> <p>“The recipes felt do-able, easy and not over complicated.”</p>

CONCLUSION

The investigation on the semantics of meat and vegetables propounds the view that there exists a close link between language and our perception on dietary preferences. Nonetheless, results from the research demonstrates that simply rewriting the language around meat and vegetables has limits to the extent in which it can redefine our deep-rooted subconscious relationship with food. The analysis also communicates that another path in encouraging individuals towards a more plant-based diet is through the product's visual interface. The implications of this research affirms the need to simultaneously experiment with both text-based language and visuals in order to further develop the potency of SWAP, as a compelling resource providing an alternative approach to promote vegan living. Furthermore, I aim to extend the investigation beyond this thesis paper through iteratively continuing to redesign SWAP, to increase the accessibility of the much needed global transition towards a more ethical, sustainable future.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: The Emergence and Stabilization of Culture Patterns



Source: Hofstede (2001)

Appendix B: Vegan Products Labeled as ‘Alternatives’ on Online Grocery Shopping Sites



Oatly Long Life Organic Oat Milk Alternative



Alpro Yogurt Alternative, Natural 500g



Free From Violife Sliced Cheese Alternative 200g

Source: Morrisons (2020), Sainsbury's (2020), Tesco (2020)

Appendix C: Full List of Questions in the User Research Survey

What is your age?

Which country do you currently live in?

Which countries have you lived in the past?

How often do you go grocery shopping?

How often do you cook at home?

What is your dietary preference?

What is the reason behind your dietary preference?

Have you considered shifting to a vegan diet?

If you answered “Yes”, what is your reason for considering a vegan diet?

What do you find difficult about shifting to a vegan diet? For those who are already vegan, what did you find difficult?

What do you find helpful in the process of shifting to a vegan diet? For those who are already vegan, what did you find helpful?

If there's anything else you would like to share, please do so below.

If it's alright for me to potentially contact you for more details in regards to your eating habits, please leave your email address below.

*[Full list of answers](#) can be accessed here.

Appendix D: Full List of Questions in the A/B Testing Survey

What is your age?

Which country do you currently live in?

Who do you usually cook for?

What is your current dietary preference?

Which recipe on SWAP did you cook?

Why did you decide to cook this recipe?

How did you find the experience of following a recipe on SWAP?

How likely would you recommend SWAP to others around you?

How likely would you start a fully vegan diet AFTER using SWAP?

What do you think of SWAP's approach in promoting plant-based diet?

How would you describe the language used across SWAP in one adjective? Is there a reason to it?

What is an emotion that you felt while using SWAP? Is there a reason to it?

If there's anything else you would like to share, please do so below.

*[Full list of answers](#) can be accessed here.

ENDNOTE

1 The terms “vegan” and “plant-based” will be employed interchangeably in this thesis.

2 Throughout the course of this thesis, the word “meat” is used as an umbrella term for all animal products, while “vegetables” is used to refer to all plant-based products.

3 Link to Version A of SWAP is <http://annatsuda.com/SWAP-IT>

4 Linked to Version B of SWAP is <http://annatsuda.com/SWAP>

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