



VEGAN VERSUS PLANT-BASED

Executive Summary

2025



'Plant-based' is a phrase that's emerged in common usage in recent years to describe products, people and lifestyles. Often, this phrase is used synonymously with 'vegan' and while it often appears alongside the word vegan on product packaging, it's not uncommon to see plant-based replacing the word vegan entirely. At The Vegan Society we have been asking: is the rise of the phrase 'plant-based' helping or hindering the vegan movement? To help us

answer this question, we've collaborated on this research project with Dr Jack Waverley at the University of Manchester.

To date, we have produced an initial written report on the topic, conducted a survey to understand consumer opinion, and published a final report bringing together the findings of a set of interviews with brand managers and an online sentiment analysis.

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KEY FINDINGS

1

Plant-based is ill-defined and potentially confusing to consumers. However, the phrase 'plant-based' does not necessarily come at the expense of the word 'vegan' and may be encouraging more people to make positive behavioural changes

2

'Plant-based' is associated with being more accessible while 'vegan' is considered a more accurate and less ambiguous label

3

When considering which label to use, **brands are making decisions based on working assumptions and are open to changing their decision if more evidence is presented**

4

Most brands seem to agree that while both phrases have their drawbacks, **using 'plant-based' and 'vegan' to describe their product is the best approach**

PLANT-BASED OR VEGAN?

Throughout this project, the dividing line between products labelled as plant-based or vegan has been clear; the meaning of plant-based is contested and up for interpretation, but can be considered the more accessible term, while vegan is clearly defined and well understood by the consumer, but is less neutral.

Our first report, *What's in a Name? An Analysis of Plant-based and Vegan Labelling*, found that there is no commonly understood definition of 'plant-based'. This ambiguity has led to brands using the 'plant-based' label to describe vegan and non-vegan products alike, which

is a problem when consumers are looking for vegan products and assume the two phrases are synonymous.

When we put this to the public we found that most people think products which contain animal ingredients should not be able to use the phrase 'plant-based' on their packaging.

Further supporting the claim that vegan is the more straightforward phrase, we found that 69% of consumers were totally confident that the product would contain no animal products if labelled 'vegan' compared to just 32% if labelled 'plant-based'.



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WHAT DO THE BRANDS THINK?

We worked with Dr Jack Waverley at The University of Manchester to take this research to the next stage and speak with brands to better understand why they label their products as 'plant-based' or 'vegan' or both. We wanted to learn about the decision-making process and what they think of this issue.

Most brands assume, or worry, that the word 'vegan' can be off-putting. Thus, they ask themselves whether they should use this label or 'plant-based'. Some brands argue that both terms can be used in combination, with vegan and plant-based working well when used carefully together. In this sense, plant-based labelling does not necessarily come at the expense of vegan labels.

This is based on a number of working assumptions, which brands acknowledge could benefit from further research to support or challenge.

Some brands argue that plant-based is also a problematic or potentially problematic term, and therefore look for alternative labels (or alternatives to using labels at all). However, these approaches also have their limitations. Taken collectively, brands seemed to have a general sense that a 'plant-based-plus-vegan' labelling system was best, but they also felt that this rested on many assumptions and only a small amount of data or evidence.

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DOES 'PLANT-BASED' HELP OR HINDER THE VEGAN MOVEMENT?

Answering this question is not straightforward. The 'plant-based' label has an appeal to brands, but there is an opportunity for 'vegan' to be reclaimed as a label and its benefits more widely promoted. Much of the concern around this term being polarising, risky, or identity-based is a working assumption and not necessarily based in solid evidence. Perhaps the best way to transform the meaning of the vegan label is to work through the current complexities

and concerns, rather than try to work around them by using another term like plant-based. An important thing, particularly for brands to remember, is that if their product is vegan, then they should say vegan. Plant-based labels may still have a role to play, particularly if the result is that more people are reducing their animal product consumption, but vegan should always be used to describe vegan products to provide much needed clarity for consumers.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRANDS:

1

Clarify for your consumer: If your product is vegan, say it's vegan. If consumers can be clear that your offering has no animal derived ingredients and that animals are not exploited at any stage, then this will allow them to make informed decisions that fit their needs and values

2

Choose for your brand: choose purposefully – based on strategic alignment to your brand and by collecting as much evidence as possible – and to regularly return to that decision as your brand evolves or evidence changes. You can use more than one label, but each brand should ask whether using two (or more) terms adds additional value, or simply runs the risk of confusing the consumer

3

Still deliberating? Collaborate!: Brands collaborating across different product lines, industries, or consumer segments can help one another to make important decisions (like vegan or plant-based labelling) without competing directly. Brands can also benefit from the work of The Vegan Society to better understand their consumers and market trends and evaluate whether their own production processes, supply chains and brand positioning aligns to vegan definitions or vegan criteria

The full results from our Plant-based Versus Vegan project
can be found on our website. Please go to:
vegansociety.com/get-involved/research/publications



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