Ethical Considerations When Using Nudges to Reduce Meat Consumption: an Analysis Through the FORGOOD Ethics Framework *Lades & Nova 2023*

Context

Nudges are increasingly being used to reduce meat consumption in response to health, environmental, and animal welfare concerns. However, critics argue that such interventions are unethical, as they may undermine individual autonomy and may be manipulative.

This paper summarises arguments on nudges aimed to reduce people's meat consumpton using the FORGOOD framework.

How are nudges being used to reduce meat consumption?

Below is a summary of some of the typical nudges that aim to reduce meat consumption

Default options

Pre-setting options for individuals can be effective in reducing meat consumption. Since many individuals choose not to opt out due to the effort involved and defaults are often interpreted as a better choice.

Positioning of vegetarian options

Placing vegetarian options first, at eye level or near checkouts can increase sales as these options may benefit from increased attention and a primacy effect.

Behaviourally informed sustainability labels

Psychologically informed labels, such as eco-labels, colour codes and labelling foods as "vegetarian" or "vegan" can influence food choices.

Communicating social norms

Since people's behaviour is often infuenced by their beliefs about others. Dynamic social norms can be used to inform people that more people are choosing not to eat meat.

The next page provides an overview of the key arguments in favour and against nudging people to reduce their meat consumption in relation to each dimension of the FORGOOD framework.

Lades, L., Nova, F. Ethical Considerations When Using Nudges to Reduce Meat Consumption: an Analysis Through the FORGOOD Ethics Framework. *J Consum Policy 47*, 1–19 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-023-09558-3

FORGOOD analysis

FAIRNESS
It is important to consider the **effect of reducing meat consumption on vulnerable groups** (given meat is a source of nutrition), those with dietary needs and those who enjoy eating meat. The **impact of eating more meat, is typically felt by people living in less developed countries** and future generations so one could argue that nudging people in the developed world causes little inconvenience. Finally, it's **important to consider the economic impact on farmers who produce meat.**

OPENNESS
One argument is that **nudges are manipulative when they lack transparency** and people's preferences aren't respected or considered. However, **when people can notice and observe the nudge, particularly before they make a decision, it is more ethically acceptable.**

RESPECT
Nudges may be disrespectful in three main ways: they **may override people's genuine food preferences** (though identifying "true" preferences is complex since they can be context-dependent and biased), they may **undermine people's rational decision-making** capacity **by relying on automatic psychological processes** rather than deliberation, and they **may reduce freedom of choice by making certain options too difficult** to select, though most nudges preserve the ability to opt out.

GOALS
Meat reduction nudges may be implemented for **selfish reasons (profit), individual benefits (health improvements or helping people meet their own chosen goals), or social goals (reducing harm to the environment and improving animal welfare). Ethical justification is often strongest for social goals;** however the other ethical dimensions need to be considered too.

OPINIONS
While public approval isn't a perfect ethical guide, since people's opinions often change post implementation, **surveys can reveal whether people support both the goals and methods of nudging as well as help to identify potentially controversial nudges.** Often pro-social nudges are seen as less desirable than those aimed at improving individual welfare.

OPTIONS
It should be **considered whether nudges are the most appropriate tool for meat reduction**, or whether **system-level policies such as taxes or bans might be more effective.** There are other behavioural policy tools that could be useful such as **regulating "dark nudges"** used by the private sector for private gain or **"nudge plus" by providing further encouragment of information following the nudge.** In some cases, nudges may be the only or best tool to use due to their cost-effectiveness and preservation of freedom of choice.

DELEGATION
Individuals designing nudges should **reflect on the legitimacy of their role in influencing others' choices,** consider **potential conflicts of interest,** acknowledge the **responsibility they carry for the outcomes**, and **assess their competence in designing nudges** that avoid unintended consequences.

Lades, L., Nova, F. Ethical Considerations When Using Nudges to Reduce Meat Consumption: an Analysis Through the FORGOOD Ethics Framework. *J Consum Policy 47*, 1–19 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-023-09558-3