



Gender, Masculinity, and the Perception of Vegetarians and Vegans: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

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Abstract

Research shows that women and men have different attitudes toward food and eating habits, which may stem from societal gender roles. In most societies, eating meat is associated with masculinity, and choosing healthy and smaller meals is perceived as feminine. These stereotypes may affect eating behaviors, which may have an impact on health and well-being as well as on the environment and economy. We conducted two studies that focused on the perceptions and experiences of vegans and vegetarians (veg*ns) using a gender lens. The first study ($N=1048$) used a quantitative design to investigate the association of a vegan/vegetarian diet with gender stereotypes and the quality of personal relationships. The second study used a qualitative design with six 6-person focus groups ($N=36$) to examine the experience of vegetarians with stereotypes associated with their diet and the possible links to gender roles. Results suggest that men following a vegan diet are not perceived as masculine, and vegans/vegetarians themselves experience gender stereotypes related to diminished masculinity. Our research confirms that the interplay of diet, the role of meat in society, and gender stereotypes have consequences both for the social perception of people who follow a vegan/vegetarian diet and for the experiences of the vegan/vegetarian community.

Keywords Vegetarianism · Veganism · Gender stereotypes · Gender roles · Masculinity · Eating habits · Quantitative · Qualitative

There has been a longstanding interest in the connection between gender and health, and consequently, gender, food, and eating behavior (Beardsworth et al., 2002). Since eating is a social activity (Delormier et al., 2009), when we make decisions about what (not) to eat, we act in a social context. Research confirms that women and men have vastly different approaches to eating. First, women value healthy meals more, and are more likely to follow expert dietary advice (Fagerli & Wandel, 1999; Rappoport et al., 1993). However, women report experiencing a range of negative experiences related to food and their body image (Cline, 1990). Apart from specific eating behaviors rooted in gender roles, a perception of an individual in the eyes of others also depends

on what he or she eats, which can reveal further gender differences (Bock & Kanarek, 1995). Scholarship in this area has presented a picture of women caring about their health, paying attention to what they eat, and being perceived as more feminine when they choose smaller meals, and people in general who eat ‘healthy’ foods and smaller portions are perceived as more feminine (Vartanian et al., 2007). In contrast, people who eat ‘unhealthy’ foods or larger meals are perceived as more masculine (Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Vartanian et al., 2007). In most societies, eating meat is an additional component of being perceived as more masculine and manly (Adams, 2010; Rozin et al., 2012).

Meat, Masculinity, and Gender

Of all foods, meat has the strongest association with masculinity and identity. This association seems to be independent of cultural setting and has been described in many contexts (Cavazza et al., 2015; Mooney & Lorenz, 1997; Rothgerber, 2013). Anthropological works point out that this connection

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is because meat was primarily reserved for social elites, dominated by men, linking meat consumption to the gender-based distribution of power (Modlinska et al., 2020). Thus, meat, and in particular red meat, is a type of food associated with manhood and a metaphor for masculinity (Rogers, 2008; Rozin et al., 2012; White & Dahl, 2006). In feminist literature, meat has also been analysed as a symbol of patriarchy. Carol J. Adams, in her book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), proposes an approach that describes animals in the meat-eating process as absent referents; absent in a literal way (killed to produce meat) but also metaphorically through the language and images used to describe animals. Adams describes the similarities between cultural images of sexual violence against women and images of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption of animals. In the language used in the Western world, we can see the interconnectedness of the oppression of animals and women: “in a patriarchal, meat-eating world animals are feminized and sexualized; women are animalized” (Adams, 2010). Adams (1990) also argues that meat is linked to masculinity because meat ‘elevates’ male power and reinforces female submissiveness. Thus, studies conducted to date show a connection between meat and masculinity through masculinity’s link to status, prestige, power, and respect (Rothgerber, 2013; Rozin et al., 2012; Sobal, 2005).

The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is another tool with which to explore how gender roles are perpetuated in the domain of food. This concept refers to an ‘exalted’ and idealized form of masculinity that encapsulates what it means to be a ‘real man’ in a given spatial and temporal context (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Men who reject meat appear to be rejecting hegemonic masculine gender norms at the same time, and their refusal to conform undermines the importance of gender in the social space, weakening its power to sustain inequality (Risman, 2009), while often endangering those who seek to subvert it. It is unclear whether people who choose to limit or give up eating meat do so consciously as a sign of objection to the patriarchal and oppressive system linking meat to masculinity, and whether they are aware of this connection. However, studies confirm that there is an influence of dietary preferences on perceptions of masculinity and femininity, showing that individuals who prefer meat-based diets are perceived as more masculine than those who prefer vegetable-based diets (Rozin et al., 2012). Preference for plant-based diets is also associated with a higher degree of femininity. This association between meat and men and between vegetables and women has been observed as early as pre-school-age (Graziani et al., 2021). While meat has a status associated with power and dominance, the rejection of meat, or vegetarianism, appears to be a dietary ideology

that makes the predominance of a meat-eating culture even more apparent (Twigg, 1983).

Dietary Stereotypes and Meatless Diets

Dietary Stereotypes and Impression Management

Anthropological and sociological studies indicate that in many cultures the importance of food goes well beyond mere nutrition to determine status (Tierney & Ohnuki-Tierney, 2012) and gender roles (Counihan, 2018). However, food is also important for identity expression, communication, and social interaction. Opinions about a person are often formed based on a single piece of information about what the person eats or what kind of meal he or she chooses to eat in each situation (Vartanian et al., 2007) – “you are what you eat.” Nemeroff and Rozin (1989) demonstrated that subjects reading a description of a community that eats animals judge the members of that community according to the characteristics of the animals they eat (turtles = slow, elephants = well-built). In everyday life, people who eat ‘good’ food (low-calorie, low-fat) are judged to be more moral, intelligent, peaceful, and likeable than people who eat ‘bad’ (fatty) food (Steim & Nemeroff, 1995). Opinions about vegetarians and vegans (hereafter referred to collectively as veg*ns unless a distinction is necessary) are often formed based on limited information about what a person eats or what meal they choose to eat in a situation. Veg*ns are described as more judgmental (Corrin & Papadopoulos, 2017), and their diet is perceived as less healthy and nutritious (Bryant, 2019). Through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that veg*ns are treated as an outgroup in most societies where meat-eating is the norm. It is widely recognized that people prefer their own groups over outgroups, perceive their own group as different from outside groups, and usually perceive it more positively. This bias often results in the formation of prejudice against the outgroup and favoritism toward the ingroup (Brewer, 1979), and, in this case, prejudice against veg*ns.

Gendered Stereotypes About Veg*ns

The stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007) assumes that people categorize outgroups along two main dimensions: warmth (likeability) and competence (status, power). Typically, group stereotypes score high on one dimension and low on the other, and the interaction of these dimensions determines the type of stereotype and the emotions felt towards this group. MacInnis and Hodson (2017) applied the SCM model to perceptions of vegetarians and

vegans in society. Their study showed that both vegetarians and vegans were perceived as higher on the competence dimension than the warmth dimension, and thus, according to the SCM, arouse feelings of envy toward them. Vegans were rated more negatively than vegetarians, while both groups were viewed similarly or in some cases worse than other commonly stigmatized groups. However, similar studies on a Polish sample (Adameczyk & Maison, 2023) suggest that for perceptions of vegans, it is not only diet that matters but also gender. Specifically, men vegans who, by virtue of their non-meat eating diet, have stepped outside their gender role are perceived as less competent than those who were not vegan. Such differences were not observed for women. Those results may be interpreted in light of several studies showing a consistent association of femininity and masculinity with the type of food that individuals eat (e.g., Cavazza et al., 2015; Chaiken and Pliner, 1987; O'Doherty Jensen and Holm, 1999). For example, smaller portion sizes are associated with femininity (Cavazza et al., 2015) and women are expected to choose vegetables, white meat, fish or dairy more often than men (Rozin et al., 2012; Steim & Nemeroff, 1995).

Based on past research, it is possible that there may be different consequences for women or men who follow a veg*n diet. Studies show that men who choose a vegetarian diet tend to experience a discrepancy between their preferences and gender norms and may abandon their intention to exclude meat from their diet to comply with their prescribed gender role (Rosenfeld, 2020). Vegetarian men are also more likely than vegetarian women to encounter hostility within social groups. A study conducted by Torti (2017) showed that men on a vegetarian diet were often mocked, and their masculinity and sexual orientation were questioned because of their diet; and White and Dahl (2006) demonstrated a strong need for men to present themselves according to a stereotypical image of their own group. Specifically, they found that men were strongly motivated to avoid food items that were associated with women, and this effect was particularly strong when the meals were to be eaten in public.

Veg*n Stereotypes and Intimate Relationships

The decision to exclude meat from one's diet is not just a dietary choice, but it also affects how a person is perceived by society. One activity that is particularly rich in behavioural scripts is the search for a permanent partner. Eating a meal together is one of the well-scripted dating activities categorized under courtship behaviours (e.g., Amiraian and Sobal, 2009; Bartoli and Clark, 2006). People usually want to present themselves before others in a positive light, and the image they build in the eyes of others translates into how they are treated by them. The potential for using one's

nutritional habits to create a particular impression on others is based on certain stereotypes (Vartanian, 2015). For example, a study in Italy found that women prefer omnivorous men and perceive them as more attractive than men following plant-based diets (Timeo & Suitner, 2018). However, this effect may be specific to that country's culture. Cross-cultural studies on attitudes toward vegetarians show that, for example, American and Brazilian women showed some admiration for men who are vegetarians (Ruby et al., 2016). However, it is not clear whether the admiration pertains to following this type of diet and adhering to its demanding rules (cf. Ruby and Heine, 2011) or whether it has more to do with the attractiveness of a potential partner.

Current Study

There are gaps in the literature on the connection between diet and social perception, especially with respect to the perception of people on a veg*n diet as masculine and feminine. In the current study, we examine gender-specific stereotypes of people following a veg*n diet and whether these stereotypes influence their well-being and willingness to establish and follow their specific diet. We expected that these stereotypical assumptions may be rooted in a strong association of eating meat with masculinity (Adams, 2010; Rozin et al., 2012). Specifically, we examine the veg*n stereotype and its association with masculinity from the perspective of both the source and the target.

First, in a quantitative study, we examined the prevalence of the association of the vegan diet with stereotypical gender characteristics in Polish society. The analysis was strengthened by an investigation of the role of this type of diet in romantic relationships. We also tested whether veg*n stereotypes translate into a willingness to enter a relationship with a person following a veg*n diet. The main hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Veg*ns will be perceived as less masculine than omnivorous eaters.

H2: Adopting a veg*n diet will be negatively associated with relationship quality, and this effect will be more pronounced in men.

Second, in a qualitative study, we examined the experience of veg*ns with stereotypes and prejudice related to their dietary behavior and how this affects their social life and relationships. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted a quantitative study with an online Polish research panel (Ariadna) specializing in social studies with over 150,000 registered users. The sociodemographic characteristics of Ariadna panel members align with those of typical Polish Internet users, and recruitment to the panel is carried out continuously. The panel currently holds a valid Interviewer Quality Control Programme (PKJPA) certificate which attests to the exceptional quality of the research services the panel offers. This certification is granted through an independent annual audit conducted by the Polish Association of Public Opinion and Marketing Research Firms. Participation in the research is voluntary and is rewarded with points in the Ariadna panel's loyalty program.

A total of 1048 people participated in this study. The sample was representative of the Polish population in terms of sex, age, education, and place of residence. Women accounted for 52% of the sample ($n=549$) and men were 48% ($n=499$). The participants in the study varied in age from 18 to 84 years old, with mean age of 44 years old ($SD=15.66$). A total of 37% of participants ($n=394$) lived in villages, 13% ($n=135$) in small cities (up to 20,000 citizens), 20% ($n=205$) in medium cities (from 20,000 to 99,000 citizens), and 30% ($n=314$) in big or large cities (more than 100,000 citizens). Most of the sample (68%, $n=717$) had vocational or secondary education, followed by higher education (27%, $n=282$), and primary education (5%, $n=49$). For the type of diet, 3.4% ($n=29$) reported following a vegetarian diet and 1.3% ($n=14$) a vegan diet. The percentage of veg*ans in the sample is similar to other surveys conducted in Poland with representative samples (e.g., 8% of veg*ns in a study by Sosin et al., 2019). Vegetarians were predominantly women (21 women and 8 men), but there was no gender difference among vegans (7 women and 7 men), $\chi^2(4, 1050)=12.82, p=.012$.

To examine to what extent gender stereotypes were associated with a veg*n diet in Poland, we asked the participants a series of questions about people on different meatless diets. As the perception of vegans versus vegetarians across and within societies is different (Rosenfeld, 2019), we asked about these groups separately. Half of the participants (selected at random) were asked to respond to different statements describing vegans (defined in the survey as “people who do not eat meat or any other animal-based products,” and the other half about vegetarians (“people who do not eat meat”).

Measures

Gendered Attitudes Toward Meatless Diets and Followers of Meatless Diets

Participants completed four items that were created for the purpose of this study to assess the gender stereotypes associated with vegetarian and vegan diets and its followers. The items were derived from the findings of a qualitative study exploring attitudes toward vegan men (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018). The statements were as follows based on the version assigned to the participant: (1) *Vegetarians/vegans are more empathetic than others*; (2) *Vegetarians/vegans are gentle and sensitive people*; (3) *People on a vegetarian/vegan diet are not able to perform hard work*; (4) *On a vegetarian/vegan diet it is impossible to achieve a strong and muscular figure*. The respondents were then asked to assess the truthfulness of the statements about vegans or vegetarians (depending on the version assigned). Items were rated on 4-point scale ranging from 1 = ‘definitely false’ to 4 = ‘definitely true’. The items were analysed separately, and greater agreement with an individual item reflects greater belief in that gender stereotype associated with a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Attitude Toward Partner's Eating Habits in Romantic Relationships

To test the participants' attitudes toward vegetarianism in romantic relationships, we asked them to imagine a hypothetical situation where their partner (man or woman) was switching to a vegetarian diet. The question was developed following a study investigating stereotypes of people following a gluten-free diet and their effects on impressions and interest in a potential romantic partner (Aloni et al., 2019). The respondents were then asked to describe their reaction to this new situation. The answers were given in the form of an opinion to six statements: (1) *I would be very happy about it*; (2) *It would not matter to me*; (3) *This is an independent decision of the other person*; (4) *I would be dissatisfied*; (5) *It would make my life difficult*; (6) *It would lower the attractiveness of my partner*; (7) *It would lower the quality of our relationship*. The participants were asked to assess whether individual statements applied to them by selecting either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for each statement.

Results

Since the variables under study are categorical in nature, a chi-squared test was used to analyse the results. The relationships between variables were considered significant at

p -values $\leq .05$. Before analysing the data, the results were encoded in such a way that the ‘rather true’ and ‘definitely true’ responses were treated together as a ‘true’ response, while the ‘rather not true’ and ‘definitely not true’ responses were treated together as a ‘not true’ response.

Gendered Attitudes Toward Meatless Diets and Followers of Meatless Diets

Regarding the items that stated an association between a meat-based diet and men and between a vegetarian diet and women, 59% of participants believed that a vegetarian diet is not suitable for men, and 69% believed that it is easier for women to give up eating meat than it is for men. There were also differences in the perceptions of people following vegetarian and vegan diets. Approximately one-third (31%) of participants believed that it was not possible to build a strong and muscular body on a vegetarian diet. In the case of vegan diets, this view was expressed by 52% of participants. Similar results were obtained for the question of whether people on a meat-free diet can do hard, physical work. More people believe that such work cannot be done when following a vegan diet (39%) compared to vegetarian diet (20%). Vegans are also considered more empathetic than vegetarians (38% vs. 31%, respectively).

Attitude Toward Partners’ Eating Habits in Intimate Relationships

The analyses we conducted showed that, compared with men, women are significantly more open to their partner switching to a vegetarian diet (Table 1). More men than women believe that they would be unhappy if their partner became a vegetarian (35.3% of men vs. 27.5% of women).

Table 1 Differences in the participants’ level of acceptance of their partner’s change of diet, broken down by the respondent’s sex

		Yes	No	χ^2
It would make my life difficult	All	37.9%	62.1%	0.07; $p = .423$
	Female	38.3%	61.7%	
	Male	37.5%	62.5%	
I would be dissatisfied	All	31.2%	68.8%	7.34; $p = .004$
	Female	27.5%	72.5%	
	Male	35.3%	64.7%	
It would not matter to me. This is an independent decision of the other person	All	69.4%	30.6%	1.20; $p = .152$
	Female	70.9%	29.1%	
	Male	67.7%	32.3%	
I would be very happy about it	All	28.8%	71.2%	15.46; $p < .001$
	Female	34.1%	65.9%	
	Male	23.0%	77.0%	
It would lower the quality of our relationship	All	19.5%	80.5%	10.63; $p = .001$
	Female	15.7%	84.3%	
	Male	23.6%	76.4%	
It would lower the attractiveness of my partner	All	17.4%	82.6%	14.52; $p < .001$
	Female	13.1%	86.9%	
	Male	22.0%	78.0%	

In contrast, women were more likely than men to say they would be satisfied with such a change in their partner (34.1% of women vs. 23.0% of men). Men were more likely than women to believe that it would decrease the quality of their relationship (23.6% of men vs. 15.7% of women) and the attractiveness of their partner (22.0% of men vs. 13.1% of women).

Discussion

The analysis of the results has confirmed that gender stereotypes about veg*n diets are present in Polish society. Most study participants agreed with the statement that a veg*n diet is unsuitable for men, providing support for H1. Significant differences between gender groups were observed for items assessing reactions to their partners’ hypothetical change of diet. Whereas many more women than men declared that they would welcome their partner’s decision to become a vegetarian, many more men than women stated that such a change would decrease relationship satisfaction and the attractiveness of their partner, supporting H2.

Study 2

The aim of the qualitative study was to investigate the awareness of veg*n-related stereotypes among veg*ns themselves and their experience with these stereotypes and related prejudice. While there are studies that discuss how veg*ns are perceived by meat-eaters (e.g., MacInnis and Hodson, 2017), there are few studies that include the perspective of vegetarians and vegans themselves who potentially experience these stereotypes and prejudice. Although

the percentage of vegetarians and vegans in Poland is about 8% (Sosin et al., 2019), the country has a strong meat-eating tradition, where per capita meat consumption is stable and the supply of meat to the domestic market is increasing (Statistics Poland, 2018). Understanding how veg*ns in Poland experience their diet in a social context can have implications for understanding how people on a veg*n diet function in countries where meat is an important aspect of the economy and culture. We had two main research questions:

- R1: Are veg*ns aware of stereotypes about veg*ns? What do they think the stereotypical image of a vegan is?
- R2: Do veg*ns experience any social problems associated with their chosen diet? If so, what kinds of problems do they experience?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Thirty-six people took part in the study, with six people in each focus group, for a total of six focus group interviews conducted in November 2019. All interviews were conducted at a focus group facility in Warsaw, dedicated to conducting qualitative research, allowing the study to be conducted on neutral ground, and additionally having adequate technical facilities for conducting and recording interviews. A detailed profile of the study participants is presented in Table 2. All participants were over 18 years of age and had followed a vegan or vegetarian diet for more than six months. Although it was not a selection criterion, all participants were in a romantic relationship at the time of the study.

Due to the presence of gender stereotypes about veg*ns in Polish society, as demonstrated in Study 1, male and female respondents were interviewed separately. Due to the numerous studies confirming differences in the perception and experiences of vegetarians and vegans (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2019), the focus groups with vegetarians and vegans were conducted separately. In addition, the vegetarian focus groups were separated further into two groups: those who were vegetarian for ethical reasons and those who were vegetarian for health reasons. Before taking part in the study, participants were informed about the general theme of the study (how veg*ns are perceived in society), the procedure, and the fact that participation in the project was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that their statements would be recorded and transcribed, only the audio recording would be used in

the analysis, the data would be analysed collectively, any identifying information would be removed at the stage of transcription, the data would be used for scientific purposes only, and that fragments of their statements could be used in the preparation of a scientific publication without identifying information. The respondents received financial remuneration for participating in the study.

The interviews were conducted by two female research assistants with experience in moderating qualitative interviews (the first and the third author of the paper), both holding a degree in psychology. Each moderator facilitated three focus groups conducting semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to learn the respondents' opinions on topics relevant to the research objectives. The interview script was divided into two parts: (1) a focus on the motivation to follow a veg*n diet and the importance of the motivation to the respondent's identity, and (2) a focus on the perception of veg*ns and the veg*n diet. In this article, we present only the result of the second part of the interviews. All focus group interviews were audio and video recorded. The video recording was created to facilitate transcription in order to be able to determine which statement was said by which participants when it was not possible to determine from the audio recording alone. The video recordings were not used for any other purpose, were not analysed, and were deleted after the transcription was prepared.

Analysis

We conducted focus group interviews to better understand aspects of the social context relevant to perceptions of veg*ns (Vaughn et al., 1996). In focus group interviews, the presence of others may facilitate discussion and emergence of new topics (Maison, 2018). In the initial phase, all the interviews were transcribed in Polish manually (by listening to audio) by one of the moderators (first author). Around 30 pages of text were generated per focus group meeting. The whole analysis was conducted on the material in Polish (the native language of the study authors and respondents) using the MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) qualitative analysis software. We used constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which is a method of developing qualitative data consisting of identification, analysis, and description of thematic areas (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Both individual and group data were used in the analysis. As a first step, one moderator (first author) responsible for the analysis reviewed the transcripts of the interviews to familiarize themselves with the data. Each transcript was subsequently coded manually using a semantic technique (although some latent codes were also identified in this part). One hundred and thirty-five portions of the text were coded. Then, the codes were once again reviewed, some

Table 2 Profile of study participants

Focus Group	No.	Age	Education	Length of time as veg*n
FGI 1 Women	1	33	Higher*	20 years
Vegetarian-Ethical	2	23	Secondary**	5,5 years
	3	47	Higher	10 years
	4	40	Higher	1 year
	5	40	Higher	20 years
	6	39	Higher	20 years
	7	24	Higher	1,5 years
FGI 2 Women	8	30	Higher	8 months
Vegetarian-Health	9	44	Higher	1 year
	10	35	Higher	2,5 years
	11	24	Secondary	3 years
FGI 3 Women	12	38	Higher	1 year
	13	37	Secondary	16 years
Vegan	14	34	Higher	1 year
	15	45	Higher	1 year
	16	26	Secondary	2 years
	17	32	Higher	1 year
	18	24	Secondary	6 months
	13	38	Higher	11 years
FGI 4 Men Vegetarian-Ethical	14	25	Higher	1,5 years
	15	20	Secondary	8 months
	16	29	Higher	2 years
	17	28	Higher	10 months
	18	33	Secondary	10 years
FGI 5	13	34	Higher	2 years
	14	38	Higher	7 years
Men Vegetarian-Health	15	22	Secondary	1 year
	16	38	Higher	5 years
	17	29	Higher	6 months
	18	21	Secondary	1 year
	13	40	Higher	1 year
	14	28	Higher	8 months
FGI 6	15	22	Secondary	6 months
	16	42	Secondary	7,5 years
	17	23	Secondary	6 months
	18	27	Higher	1 year

Note. * Holding bachelor's or master's degree. ** Graduated technical or general secondary school.

were merged, and a coding tree consisting of 15 codes was created. Subsequently, initial interpretations were formulated by generating themes that captured the essence of the previously identified codes, generating three main themes: veg*n stereotypes, friends' and family's attitude toward a veg*n diet, and dating as a veg*n.

Results

Theme 1: Stereotypes About Veg*n's

Urban Leftie

Part of the negative perceptions of veg*n's that participants observed in their social surroundings was that their diet was not taken seriously. Some participants expressed being

seen as following current trends and being fashionable as opposed to following specific values:

Once it was weird, you know, it was like 'why don't you eat meat' and so on, and now it's not like that anymore, it's very fashionable now. People's reaction is more like – I noticed this, not with regard to myself, but to other people – 'Ah, you don't eat meat because it is fashionable now'. (Man, Vegetarian—Health)

These associations go even further. People following a veg*n diet are perceived as urban hipsters and people with left-wing views. It is this association with "lefties" that, according to the participants, makes veg*n's poorly received by Polish society:

We live in a country where there are huge political divides, and when people share one belief, it often happens that they start sharing other views of the same political inclination. So when someone does not like left-wing people, they don't like... And it is often left-wing people that you associate with not eating meat, riding a bike and so on. (Man, Vegetarian—Ethical)

Crazy Vegeterrorist

Participants stated that society believed that veg*ns are often described as “crazy,” “vegeterrorists,” and “lefties.” For example, veg*ns are perceived as “a weirdo, something like that...a bit of a nut...yeah. A bit of a freak, to put it like this” (Men, Vegetarian for Ethical Reasons group). These terms were usually associated with the ‘extreme’ vegetarians or vegans, which means people who are extremely involved in their diet, often fighting against the meat-eating majority. The participants were aware of the negative social perception of veg*ns and agreed with them. However, they did not agree that the stereotypical traits apply to them personally, but only to a certain extreme minority that they are not part of, but because this minority is the most active and undertakes the most pro-animal activities, the entire group is perceived in a negative light.

...vegans are now simply associated with aggressive (...) people who impose their own views on others – people post videos of vegans occupying some burger or steak joint and beating up some guy entering such a place. (Man, Vegan)

Weak, Unmanly, and Gay

The participants described a separate group of stereotypes about veg*ns that were only associated with men: “I am familiar with the macho world. Not eating meat would be treated the same way as refusing to drink vodka in company” (Man, Vegetarian). Veg*ns think that male veg*ns are perceived by society to be “weaker, homosexual, and unmanly,” and hearing the saying “vegan today, gay tomorrow” was mentioned by male participants across all focus groups. These beliefs were assessed by male veg*ns as hurtful and by female veg*ns as partially true. Some women in the study explained that men need to ingest more protein and more food in general to be masculine, and in the opinion of female veg*ns, those are biological demands that cannot be satisfied by following a veg*n diet. However, some traced the origins of this stereotype to cultural and historical

beliefs that are no longer valid (e.g., man as a hunter, woman as a gatherer).

Also, I've noticed that eating meat is somehow linked to masculinity and that it is unmanly not to eat meat. Which maybe has some connection with some ancient times, when men used to get meat and so on. Well, at the same time now there are no more primeval times, so it is not justified at the moment. So one can prove why one thinks this way, whereas now there are no more reasons in my opinion. (Man, Vegetarian—Ethical)

The female participants expressed surprise at their own stereotypical beliefs about veg*n men. For example:

I really am pro-vegetarian, and it was a surprise even to myself when I realised what my beliefs were – how is it possible to climb high mountains, for a vegetarian to be a climber. I went to this meeting where a dietician talked about her boyfriend who had become a vegetarian thanks to her and climbed Mount Everest. It really surprised me that I still had that conviction in my mind that meat was necessary to give you physical strength. (Woman, Vegetarian—Ethical)

However, in the case of men, there were attempts to compensate for the existence of the veg*n stereotype by displaying other stereotypically masculine behaviours (e.g., aggression, physical strength). Male participants expressed the need to show others that they are masculine despite what one might think of them based on their diet. For example:

If someone says to me: what's wrong with you, you don't eat meat? What's the matter with you? Then you are able to prove to him who is more manly, as he will lie down on the ground. You can show him how wrong he is. (Man, Vegan).

Theme 2: Friends and Family Attitudes

Since Polish cuisine is traditionally heavily based on meat, the respondents often experienced a lack of acceptance of their diet from family and friends, ranging from concerns about the negative health consequences of such a diet to attempts to humiliate the person for following a veg*n diet. The respondents attached importance to the reaction of their family and friends to the news that they were switching to a vegetarian or vegan diet. It is worth noting that some of the respondents encountered positive responses, but everyone was able to recall at least one unpleasant situation they faced because they followed a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Displays of apparent worry and concern, especially about health, were prevalent among the reactions enumerated by the respondents. For example: “[...] my family think that any medical condition I may have, literally any illness, will be no doubt due to vegetarianism. Even though my test results are good, I get tested fairly regularly” (Woman, Vegetarian—Ethical). The participants invoked situations in which their loved ones (most often close family members, parents) approached them with concerns about their health, anaemia, and poor blood results, which could supposedly result from the plant-based diet. These comments, albeit driven by concern, made them nervous; participants perceived these comments as an expression of a lack of trust, undermining the decisions made by the participants. This problem, therefore, was coupled with another issue that the respondents talked about—the lack of understanding and acceptance. Some respondents managed to get their relatives to accept the new diet, whereas others still struggle with the problem of not being understood: “The most depressing thing may be the lack of acceptance among the closest family, [them] imposing their views on what I should and shouldn’t eat” (Woman, Vegan).

There were several types of behaviours by family and friends related to their diet that participants described as hurtful. One behavior described by participants was when people are invasively ‘looking into the plate’ in subtle and less subtle ways. A second behavior was when relatives try to put pressure on the participants to eat meat and influence their emotions. One man from the vegetarian-ethical group recalled a situation that happens frequently when he visits his family, “Yeah, ok, you are [a vegetarian], but come on, eat this, I’ve already made your favourite salad [with meat], so... It was like this: your favourite dishes [with meat], you haven’t been home for such a long time, you must miss them...”. Some relatives went so far as to lie to the subjects by alleging that there was no meat in a dish that contained meat. Such behaviours brought about strong negative reactions in some subjects (e.g., vomiting) and resulted in a loss of trust. A woman from the vegetarian-ethical group said: “(...) my aunts added meat to my meals. I’m eating, and I see some ham. They ‘smuggled’ it – this was the worst part. So I started checking when my mum was preparing something to eat.” Relatedly, participants described tricks played on them, such as preparing a vegetarian dish and adding meat to it without the vegetarian’s knowledge. One participant (Man, Vegetarian group) recalled the experience of his vegetarian flatmate:

They played a trick on him that they finally cooked a special soup, because she was cooking some part of it. And this soup was cooked on meat, and they only told

him after he’d eaten it. It was a joke. And what is... Yeah, to humiliate him, generally.

A lack of understanding by family and friends also manifested itself in verbal aggression. The participants mentioned being ridiculed because of their veg*n diet, recalling seemingly innocent jokes, of which the most common was making comments about participants “eating grass/being grass-eaters/rabbits” or those referring to physical weakness, such as saying “be careful because you’re about to fall over.” Although most participants encountered such behaviours, it is significant that they were experienced more often by men, as all the participants from men groups encountered them or heard them directed at other men.

To summarize, all respondents experienced negative social consequences associated with their diet. In some cases, the respondents were met with some understanding. However, the respondents themselves talked about this problem with great empathy, acknowledging the environment in which their family and friends had been raised, the meat-eating cultural context, and their relatives’ older age as explanations for their behavior. A woman from the vegetarian—health group tried to justify her family’s attempts to trick her into thinking that dishes prepared for Christmas were vegetarian:

For a whole year we have practically no time for each other, well during this time we sit here and try to make up for the whole year. Well, it is so a little illusory and sad, but it is just hard, completely, to find something else. And here I am a little worried that precisely this older generation will not understand (my vegetarianism). Just like grandma, she’ll prepare everything and expect all food to disappear, well the problem will be that she won’t be able to understand it (my vegetarianism) in some way.

Overall, the respondents tended to justify these behaviours or tried to explain them, even when they were hurtful to them.

Theme 3: Dating as a Veg*n

The respondents did not indicate any relationship problems because of being veg*n.

Very often when one person in a relationship is (becomes) a vegetarian, the other person gradually changes their eating habits as well. Among the focus group participants, women were more often the initiators of veg*nism, whereas among men in relationships, only one was in a relationship with a meat-eating woman, and the rest had converted to vegetarianism or veganism because of their female partners. In such

a situation, usually the partner also gradually reduced their consumption of meat. This was often due to pragmatic reasons (eliminating the need to cook different dishes), but there was also an emerging sensitivity to ethical or health-related issues under the influence of the non-meat-eating partner. In the case of men on plant-based diets, their female partners were usually the first veg*ns they encountered. Men began to pay attention to animal welfare or the health effects of meat because of the information they received from their female partners. They also changed their diet because it was simply easier when the partners lived together. However, the men emphasized that this process was never coercive – rather, their partners gave them a stimulus to think about their own dietary choices. A man from the vegetarian-health group mentioned his transition to vegetarianism that was stimulated by his girlfriend:

(My vegetarianism) didn't happen overnight, because in the beginning, when I started being in a relationship, my girlfriend was vegan. (She was vegan) quite a long time, four years. And slowly, slowly she started to show me, not convince me, but show me the lifestyle, what it looks like. I slowly started to convince myself to do it. I tried, "and then maybe I'll try this," and after a period of time I changed it and stopped (eating meat). Slowly, slowly, I ruled it out. And I say to myself, "why not try it". I tried it and it suited me. I started reading, books, interviews with various doctors (...)

For the women in the focus groups, the situation was a little different. Their male partners were unlikely to be vegetarian or vegan, but they reduced their meat consumption for the sake of convenience (it is mostly the female partners who cook, and when they are vegetarian it is easier to cook one vegetarian meal for the couple). Men sometimes added meat to their meals, but the woman's plant-based diet was not a big problem. Regardless of the respondents' gender, they did not express any difficulty in building and maintaining relationships irrespective of their partner's diet.

Discussion

Overall, the findings from the study reflected differences in the experiences of men and women who follow a veg*n diet. Some of the stereotypes encountered by participants were linked to masculinity, and these were observed by both men and women, with women describing them as affecting men on a veg*n diet and not themselves. While men veg*ns do not have difficulty forming romantic relationships due to their diet, they face several difficulties from family or

friendships who lack an understanding of veg*n diet and do not respect or value this type of diet. Most men who followed a veg*n diet became veg*n after entering a relationship with a veg*n woman.

General Discussion

This research supported the presence of a stereotypical image of veg*ans in Polish society from a two-fold perspective: that of the source and the target. Our quantitative study demonstrated an association between veg*ns and perceptions of masculinity, or rather the perceived absence thereof. Men on a vegan diet were not perceived as masculine, which is related to the stereotypical association of eating meat with power, prestige, and manhood. Our second study showed that veg*ns themselves experience stereotypes associated with their diet, and our analysis suggests that those stereotypes are largely linked to masculinity. These stereotypes translate into certain behaviors towards veg*ns, which may not involve outright aggression but more subtle forms of exclusion, disapproval, or ridicule.

Gender Stereotypes Associated with the Veg*n Diet

Our study showed that people in Poland have a different approach to the veg*n diet depending on their gender. Women more often than men agreed with the statement that people do not have to eat meat. In addition, more men than women agreed that meat dishes taste better, are healthier, and more natural for the human body, and that the decision to stop eating meat is just a whim. These results are similar to those obtained by Lea and colleagues (2006) showing that men were more likely to believe people tend to eat larger amounts of meat and that veg*n diets are not sufficiently tasty, compared to women. Some researchers have suggested these patterns stem from the fact that women demonstrate better knowledge of the principles of healthy nutrition and are more familiar with different diets (Kiefer et al., 2005). Knowledge about the health aspects of a meatless diet does not, however, explain taste preferences in relation to meatless dishes. Nevertheless, this result shows that although attitudes toward veg*ns are changing as it becomes more popular and the percentage of veg*ns is much higher than it was 15 years ago when Lea and colleagues conducted their study, there are still some differences between men's and women's perceptions of veg*ns.

The analysis of the results has confirmed that gender stereotypes about the veg*n diet are present in Polish society. Most respondents agreed with the statement that a vegetarian diet is unsuitable for men. This belief seemed to stem from a widely held and commonly observed belief that

veg*nism, in contrast to the meat-based diet, is not associated with masculinity (cf. Rogers, 2008; Sobal, 2005), which is consistent with earlier studies showing that men are particularly unwilling to reduce their meat consumption or to become vegetarians (Ruby & Heine, 2011), and that health campaigns directed at them are met with criticism and rejection (Gough & Conner, 2006). One potential factor that may be influencing men's attitudes is the stereotyped perception of a meat-based diet as suitable for men, coupled with the perception of the veg*n diet as typically feminine.

Our study also revealed differences in the perception of people following vegetarian and vegan diets. More people think that following a veg*n diet makes it impossible to do hard physical work or to build a muscular figure, which may be due to the fact that people perceive the veg*n diet as poor in essential components necessary for normal bodily functioning, thereby reducing physical fitness. If we consider the ability to perform strenuous physical work and the need to develop a muscular figure as a stereotypical cornerstone of masculinity, we can conclude that people on a veg*n diet are perceived as less masculine than people on a vegetarian diet among those who believe that only a meat-based diet can fulfil the requirements for a strong, muscular physique and performance.

Thus, our study illustrated common stereotypes of veg*ns in Polish society and how they relate to beliefs about masculinity. Moreover, we showed how people who follow a veg*n diet experience these stereotypes. From a veg*n perspective, some of the stereotypes were about more general issues (jumping on the bandwagon, having 'leftist' political views), and these apply to all vegetarians and vegans, regardless of gender. However, some stereotypes were associated specifically with masculinity, such as being physically weak or being gay. Although men were convinced that stereotypes about male veg*ns are misleading and hurtful, women tended to believe that there is a grain of truth in them. However, women veg*ns were surprised by their own stereotypical beliefs about men veg*ns. To our knowledge, this is the first study that, in addition to the men's perspective (Torti, 2017), also shows the perspective of women and the fact that they share a similar stereotyped view of men who follow veg*n diets.

Attitudes Toward Partners' Eating Habits in Romantic Relationships

Significant gender differences were observed in reaction to the participants' hypothetical change of diet (quantitative survey). Whereas many more women than men declared that they would welcome their partner's decision to become vegetarian, many more men than women stated that such a change would decrease relationship satisfaction and the

attractiveness of their partner. As our study was conducted in the form of a questionnaire, it is difficult to draw any conclusions as to the mechanisms underlying such attitudes. It is possible that men more often than women are concerned that their partner's change of diet would inevitably result in changes to their own diet as well, which means an unwanted reduction in the amount of meat consumed or a complete absence of meat in their own diet. Men may also be anxious that such a change would lead to other unwanted changes in their life and their partners' behaviour (e.g., engaging men in domestic chores, establishing contact with a new social group or involving men in other aspects of a healthy lifestyle – cf. Ruby, 2012). More research is needed to shed light on this phenomenon.

Our qualitative study showed that veg*ns, regardless of gender, did not find their diet to be an obstacle to forming romantic relationships. The difficulties they mentioned had to do with other social interactions, difficulties with families and friends, but not in romantic relationships. We noted an interesting pattern—veg*n women were in relationships with non-veg*n men, but all veg*n men were in relationships with veg*a women. In addition, men indicated that their partners were the first to give them the idea to think about the influence of diet on their health, planet, or animal welfare. Although these results need to be confirmed in a quantitative study, they allow us to make some interesting observations about how the transition to vegetarianism differs for men and women. Our study shows that there are two routes to veganism. Women get there on their own (for a variety of reasons), but for men it is through their partner – imitating the way of eating from them for reasons of convenience or after accepting and embracing their views. These findings suggest that perhaps the way to change the habits of meat-eaters is not necessarily to change their way of thinking about animals, but rather to change certain habits and behaviours, if only among those observed around them, in the social environment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our studies have several limitations, primarily related to the research methodology applied. In the first (quantitative) study, a survey was used, and the respondents were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical situation. Conclusions from this type of study should be interpreted with caution, as they are based on self-report responses, not on actual behavior. It would be valuable to see how a change in the partner's diet affects the quality of a relationship and whether people are less willing to enter into relationships with people following a different diet, juxtaposing this factor with other desirable/undesirable characteristics they consider when choosing a partner.

In addition, it is worth noting that the participants were asked about the perception of veg*ns in general, without information about whether the person consciously chose such a diet or whether it was forced by external factors (e.g., doctor's recommendations). If we treat the aversion to veg*nism as an expression of a potentially perceived threat to norms in society, then only veg*nism, which is an expression of a person's moral values, poses such a threat. As Thomas (2016) showed in his studies, it is not veg*nism itself that is associated with a lack of masculinity, but rather the decision to choose veg*nism. In further studies, it would be worth considering the differentiation between veg*ns by choice and veg*ns due to external reasons.

The second study identified some general trends, but they do not allow us to draw clear conclusions about how widespread the experience of stereotypes is among veg*ns and the exclusion of veg*ns by meat-eaters. Part of the limitations of a qualitative study is related to the survey method and recruitment process. First, the group interviewed was fairly homogeneous—the participants were mostly high-educated people from a large city. In the case of experienced social difficulties, it would have been worthwhile to also interview people who come from backgrounds where veg*nism is less common and therefore less accepted, such as smaller towns. Second, although the focus groups allow for and encourage a sharing of experiences, some participants may be less willing to share their experiences in a group setting. It is also worth noting that no recruitment criterion was introduced regarding whether a person is in a romantic relationship and what diet is followed by the person with whom they are in a relationship. When discussing the potential difficulties of finding a partner while being veg*n, it would be worthwhile in the future to interview separately those who are not in such relationships, so as to differentiate the experience of being in a relationship with a person on a different diet and the experience of staying single.

When it comes to masculinity, it is worth noting that the very perception of masculinity and thus its connection with veg*nism depends on how a person defines the concept of masculinity. There are different models of masculinity that go beyond traditional, hegemonic views and research shows that veg*ns are trying to reconstruct their own masculinity (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018). Raising the topic of masculinity specifically in future studies would provide an interesting context for understanding the results obtained.

Practice Implications

Our findings are important considering the recent attention given by governments and public health professionals to reduce meat consumption in society at large. Although in Western societies eating meat has attracted more and more

criticism due to health-related, environmental, or humanitarian concerns, many people believe that meat is a desirable element of their diet, and they derive pleasure from eating it. Studies on food attitudes and behaviour conducted on different populations show that men are even less likely to decrease meat consumption and switch to a plant-based diet than women (Ruby, 2012). The importance of social perception may add some valuable knowledge for designing more effective campaigns aimed at reducing meat consumption. Strong motivation to convey a certain social image can lead to detrimental health-related behaviors (Leary et al., 1994). Previous studies suggest that women are more likely than men to manage social perceptions based on food consumption (Vartanian et al., 2007), which may lead to the restriction of food intake. However, with respect to reducing meat consumption, it is men who are mainly affected by a fear of failing to conform to traditional gender roles (Stanley et al., 2023), and are predominantly among those who perceive negative social perceptions as a barrier to converting to vegetarianism (Lea et al., 2006). Eating certain foods is part of how masculinity is 'performed.' Campaigns promoting veg*nism aimed at men continue to reinforce a traditional model of masculinity, by using the same rhetoric as the meat industry (e.g., 'you can still be strong even without eating meat'; Johnson, 2011). Although such campaigns may appeal to some men, instead of strengthening the existing association of meat with masculinity, and thus hegemonic masculinity, they could promote other models of masculinity, allowing men to act in accordance with their own values instead of gender roles. For such campaigns to be effective, it is also necessary to change the stereotypical thinking about veg*nism, which, as our research shows, applies to many areas of social functioning.

Our studies add to the growing body of research suggesting that veg*ns may be perceived as a minority group and the targets of prejudice and discrimination. Social exclusion is not only a barrier to transition to veg*nism, but also has negative effects on the emotional and physical quality of life of those excluded (Williams & Nida, 2011). Although aversion towards veg*ns does not normally involve aggression, it would be worth monitoring whether, as the popularity of veg*nism increases, this sentiment will improve towards greater acceptance or perhaps intensify as a defence mechanism against threats to traditional values. As reducing meat consumption is an important sustainability goal, changing the perception of veg*ns seems to be particularly important. Currently, campaigns promoting veg*nism are focused on the promotion of plant-based diets or products and considering the importance of social barriers in switching to veg*nism, they should also involve reducing social stigma. Such an opportunity would be provided by promoting the positives of a veg*n diet, and presenting it as

related to acting in accordance with one's own values and compassion.

Conclusion

Meat is a specific food considered to be prototypically 'masculine' in most societies, which is why the social perception of people who decide to reduce their meat consumption is necessarily linked to gender roles. The current research confirmed that the interplay of diet, role of meat in society, and gender roles has implications both for the social perception of people on a veg*n diet, and for the experiences of members of the veg*n minority, who live in predominantly meat-eating communities. Changing the perception of veg*ns as weak and unmasculine may help to reduce the social stigma attached to veg*nism, which appears to be one important barrier for men in switching to meat-free diets.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Code Availability N/A.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw.

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