



# Towards a reduced meat diet: Mindset and motivation of young vegetarians, low, medium and high meat-eaters



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## ABSTRACT

This study provides insight into differences and similarities in the mindset and motivation of four dietary groups (young self-declared vegetarians, low, medium and high meat-eaters) to support the development of strategies for a general transition to a less meat-based diet. The paper highlights the value of the identity concept for our understanding of both vegetarians and meat eaters. The analysis involves a comparison of the four dietary groups focusing on the strength and the profile of their food-related motivation and their reasons for and against frequent meat eating. To check for the generalizability of the results, the analyses were performed in two samples of adults (aged 18–35) in the Netherlands (native Dutch,  $n = 357$ , and second generation Chinese Dutch,  $n = 350$ ). In both samples, the vegetarians had the same level of food-related motivation as the other groups, but a different motivational profile and distinctive, taste- and animal-welfare related reasons to justify their abstinence from eating meat. The low and medium meat-eaters often considered health a reason to eat meat as well as to moderate meat eating, plus they liked to vary their meals. In these aspects they were different from both the vegetarians and the high meat-eaters. The findings are relevant for (non) governmental organizations that aim to influence dietary choices, as well as for businesses that operate in the market of meat substitutes.

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## 1. Introduction

The twentieth-century nutritional transition that made livestock the chief source of protein in many countries (Grigg, 1995) is causing increasing pressures on the health of humans, animals and the planet (see Aiking, 2014; Friel et al., 2009; Westhoek et al., 2014). Experts have warned that these pressures are likely to have serious consequences for global food security and that a novel transition to a less meat-based diet is necessary (Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2016). The impacts of current meat eating practices are often compared with those of vegetarian options (Berners-Lee, Hoolohan, Cammack, & Hewitt, 2012; Tilman & Clark, 2014). The latter are, in theory, highly advantageous; for instance, focusing on the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the United Kingdom (UK), Berners-Lee et al. (2012) calculated that potential GHG savings of 22% and 26% can be

made by changing from the current UK-average diet to a vegetarian or vegan diet, respectively. In practice, however, it is not clear how the vegetarian options can be successfully promoted in Western societies; the literature sees vegetarians and omnivores as distinct social identities whose interactions may cause troublesome inconveniences (Greenebaum, 2012; Minson & Monin, 2012; Romo & Donovan-Kicken, 2016). For the development of strategies for a transition to a less meat-based diet, therefore, it is important to carefully consider the mindset and motivation of vegetarian and meat-eating consumers. This comparison should use insights on the identity concept from cognitive social psychology (Oyserman, 2009; 2014) and cognitive sociology (Brekhus, 1998; 2008), and take due account of the differences between low, medium and high meat-eaters, which are often neglected. It is also worthwhile to include a broader, multicultural perspective in the comparison because immigrants are a growing part of the population in Western countries and ethnicity is one of the main factors that play a role in food choices (Gilbert & Khokhar, 2008; Ruby, Heine, Kamble, Cheng, & Waddar, 2013; Schösler, de Boer, Boersema, & Aiking, 2015). From this strategic perspective, the present paper

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provides a comparison of (self-declared) vegetarians, low, medium and high meat-eaters, based on two samples of young adults (aged 18–35) in the Netherlands ( $n = 357$  and  $n = 350$ ), of which the second one has a multicultural (Chinese Dutch) background.

### 1.1. Identity concept

A crucial aspect of our approach is the identity concept; it has high relevance in relation to the motivation and behavior of both vegetarians and meat eaters, helps to bring out the special asymmetry between vegetarian and non-vegetarian identities, and provides a brief introduction to the research questions. An identity is an organizing principle in an individual's life, which provides a feeling of continuity but also involves many social and personal aspects that differ in importance or influence on behavior and that make an identity highly sensitive to situational cues (Oyserman, 2009). In our case, the terms 'vegetarians' and 'non-vegetarians' are used as labels of identity categories that may become relevant in the context of food-related situations (e.g. in the shop or at the table). This labeling leaves much room for individuals to personalize these categories and it should be noted that people, in describing the type of eater they are, often refer to the range of foods that are acceptable for them to eat (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). There are finer distinctions, for instance, between vegetarians (avoiding meat, poultry and fish) and vegans (additionally avoiding dairy and eggs), or between ethically oriented and health oriented vegetarians (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Hoffman, Stallings, Bessinger, & Brooks, 2013; Rozin, Markwith, & Stroess, 1997; Ruby, 2012), or Western-style and Eastern-style vegetarians (Ruby et al., 2013). For the strategic purposes of the present study, the broad categories (vegetarians and non-vegetarians) are often sufficient, but more detailed categories are reported when relevant.

The link between identity and behavior depends on (explicit or implicit) beliefs about 'people like me,' which influence whether or not a particular behavior (e.g. avoiding meat) feels congruent with important aspects of one's identity in that context (e.g. being a vegetarian), and such identity-congruence, in turn, influences mindset and resulting behavior (Oyserman, 2009). The resulting behavior may seem to resemble a habit, because a choice that has become identity-linked feels right and does not require further reflection, unless it is disturbed (Bisogni et al., 2002; Fischler, 1988; Oyserman, 2009). With regard to behavior change, identity-based motivation has particular relevance to understanding how individuals who are trying to change their behavior cope with difficulties that require action and effort. They can be either motivated or demotivated to overcome the difficulties, depending on whether the change feels identity-congruent ('for people like me') or identity-incongruent ('not for people like me') (Oyserman, 2014). For example, individuals who make the choice to eat plant protein instead of animal protein may interpret difficulties (cooking new recipes) in motivating ways if this choice feels identity-congruent. Indeed, the role of a socially based and personalized identity in the successful adoption of a vegetarian diet has been described in several qualitative studies of the process of joining (Cherry, 2015; Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998), maintaining or leaving vegetarianism (Barr & Chapman, 2002; Haverstock & Forgays, 2012; Menzies & Sheeshka, 2012). In view of the efforts made by vegetarians to manage vegetarianism (Greenebaum, 2012; Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000), it may be important to examine their food-related motivation and enjoyment of food in ways that can be compared to non-vegetarians (e.g. see Schösler, de Boer, & Boersema, 2014).

### 1.2. Asymmetry between vegetarian and non-vegetarian identities

A key aspect of comparing vegetarians and non-vegetarians is

the highly asymmetrical relationship between these identity categories (see Brekhus, 2008). Being a vegetarian is an identity category that is socially marked and evaluated as distinct from conventional behavior, whereas being a non-vegetarian is unmarked and socially taken for granted. Generally, in this type of social contrast, the marked category can be valued either highly positively (by in-group members) or negatively (by others). The asymmetry has significant consequences for the influence of identity-based motivation on mindset and behavior. A salient issue in this context is that the sheer quantity of meat consumption is not decisive for how consumers see themselves. Some studies show that self-declared vegetarians may still report meat or fish consumption on a food frequency questionnaire, which could lead to misclassifications in epidemiological studies (Gilsing et al., 2013; Vinnari, Montonen, Härkänen, & Männistö, 2009). Whether vegetarians who occasionally eat meat may have feelings of incongruence will depend on the diet rules they set for themselves and for others, which can be more strict or more flexible (Hoffman et al., 2013; Jabs et al., 2000). For instance, it has been shown that such flexible vegetarians might be considered 'vegetarian impostors' (as opposed to authentic vegetarians), especially by other vegetarians (Hornsey & Jetten, 2003). Impacts of identity-based motivation may become particularly apparent when individuals claim to be a vegetarian with ethical views on the animal origin of meat (Greenebaum, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2013; Rozin et al., 1997), such as the cruelty of meat production and the denial of the right of humans to kill animals for food (Lea & Worsley, 2004). Therefore, apart from the meat eating frequency, it is important to know the underlying reasons why vegetarians feel they have to abstain from meat.

As being a non-vegetarian is socially unmarked and largely taken for granted, the role of identity-based motivation may be less salient for non-vegetarians. In countries where meat is widely available and also relatively cheap, frequent meat eating may become a conventional meal pattern that is intricately linked to one's identity as a consumer, which feels right and does not require further reflection (e.g. Graça, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015; Lea, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006a, 2006b; Macdiarmid, Douglas, & Campbell, 2016; Pohjolainen, Vinnari, & Jokinen, 2015; Schösler et al., 2014; Vanhonaacker, Van Loo, Gellynck, & Verbeke, 2013). For non-vegetarians the influence of identity-based motivation may become salient in situations where they meet vegetarians (Rothgerber, 2014) or miss the meat (Ensaif et al., 2015; Lea et al., 2006a, 2006b). Then they may realize that vegetarianism is the opposite of meat-eating and that they themselves are not vegetarians. This may have a significant impact on their mindset and motivation, especially in combination with other aspects of their identity. For instance, traditional framings of masculinity, emphasizing that 'real men' eat meat (Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012; Schösler et al., 2015; Sobal, 2005), may give the impression that a vegetarian option is unmanly, which can make it a less appealing choice for men (Nath, 2011; Ruby & Heine, 2011).

Differences among non-vegetarians in meat consumption level and red meat appreciation have only recently drawn attention from researchers as being relevant to the study of diet and lifestyle choices (Bourdieu, 1984; Sobal, 2005; Verbeke & Vackier, 2004; de Bakker & Dagevos, 2012; de Boer, Hoogland, & Boersema, 2007). Frequent meat eaters may be distinguished from those at the lower end of the meat consumption spectrum, such as 1 day/week meat consumers, who do not claim to be vegetarians, however (Baker, Thompson, & Palmer-Barnes, 2002; Gilsing et al., 2013). The same applies to non-vegetarians with a relatively low appreciation for red meat (from mammals), who may prefer white meat (from poultry) for taste-related reasons, such as pickiness about fat and bones (Kubberød, Ueland, Rødbotten, Westad, & Risvik, 2002; de

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