



When vegetarians eat meat: Why vegetarians violate their diets and how they feel about doing so

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ABSTRACT

Many people who self-identify as vegetarian actually eat meat on occasion. Surveys documenting this phenomenon have become abundant over the past two decades, and recent studies have begun to explain why some vegetarians are more likely to violate their diets than others are. However, qualitative research detailing the experiences of vegetarians eating meat is sparse. In the current study, we surveyed 243 vegetarians, 124 (51%) of whom indicated that they have eaten meat since going vegetarian. Of these 124 participants, 108 provided written narratives about their experiences eating meat, which we analyzed. Participants were most likely to eat meat at family gatherings and on special occasions; to eat meat in order to make a social situation flow more smoothly; and to react negatively to having eaten meat. Participants' narratives suggest that vegetarianism may be best conceived as a social identity, beyond just a diet. Some vegetarians reported that they view their diets as flexible guidelines, rather than rigid rules they ought to follow without exception. This study is the first, to our knowledge, to document in detail how vegetarians reflect on their experiences eating meat.

Recently, vegan social media star Yovana “Rawvana” Mendoza made headlines when she was caught eating meat—a single food choice that sparked vehement backlash from many of her more than one million followers (Chen, 2019). Vocal social media users responded to Mendoza's dietary violation by calling her a liar and a fake vegan, saying that she has exploited veganism and damaged its reputation, and insisting that she cancel her vegan social media presence altogether (Chen, 2019). Particularly given Mendoza's image as a public face of veganism, reactions to her eating meat were intense, painting strict dietary adherence as the norm and dietary lapses as the exception among vegans. But what if Mendoza's decision to eat meat exemplifies not simply a unique single-occasion lapse among vegans and other vegetarians, but rather a normative, recurrent experience of those following a self-proclaimed meatless lifestyle?

The phenomenon whereby people self-identify as vegetarian or vegan (with these two terms referred to collectively as “vegetarian” from here on) yet still eat meat from time to time has been documented recurrently across studies (Barr & Chapman, 2002; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995; Hamilton, 2006; Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000; Kwan & Roth, 2004; National Institute of Nutrition, 1997; Stiles, 1998; White, Seymour, & Frank, 1999; Willetts, 1997). What this apparent contradiction highlights is that the decision to call oneself a vegetarian is not an absolute reflection of excluding meat from one's diet but rather

a subjectively adopted marker of social identity (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017a).

Empirical research on social identity, intragroup relations, and intergroup attitudes related to vegetarianism highlights not only the importance of dietary adherence for maintaining the legitimacy of one's identity status as a vegetarian but also the relevance of vegetarians' adherence for how omnivores view them (Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Rothgerber, 2014c). Vegetarians feel more bothered by other vegetarians who eat meat than by other vegetarians who follow their diets strictly (Hornsey & Jetten, 2003). Strictly adherent vegetarians, moreover, make omnivores feel more cognitively dissonant about eating meat than do vegetarians who violate their diets (Rothgerber, 2014b), which may explain in part why omnivores express more negative attitudes toward higher-adherence than toward low-adherence vegetarians (Hornsey & Jetten, 2003). Among vegetarians, dietary adherence has the potential to affect self-esteem, as it shapes how one is viewed by both in-group and out-group dieters. Understanding vegetarians' attitudes and behaviors surrounding their dietary violations, thus, can provide insights into how being a vegetarian influences one's social experiences and psychological states. We assert that conceiving vegetarianism as a social identity offers a useful framework for evaluating how individuals who consider themselves to be vegetarian may tolerate, or even welcome, occasional dietary lapses.

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In the current research, we were principally interested in what factors lead vegetarians to violate their diets and how vegetarians reflect on their dietary violations. Illuminating the psychological factors surrounding dietary violations among vegetarians can be useful for practice, theory, and methodology. Although evidence is strong that eating a vegetarian diet benefits health and the environment (Willett et al., 2019), many omnivores are unwilling to give up meat (Graça, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2018; Piazza et al., 2015), and even vegetarians—at an estimated rate of 84%—often quit their diets and return to eating meat (Herzog, 2014). Experienced and anticipated dietary, health, and social difficulties linked to being a vegetarian undermine the promise for widespread practice of vegetarianism for public health and environmental sustainability by making people resistant to giving up meat (Judge & Wilson, 2015; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2018). Insights gained from studying vegetarians' dietary violations can shed light on what specific experiences derail individuals from adhering to meatless diets, which can ultimately inform interventions aimed at supporting those who seek to maintain a vegetarian diet.

The possibility for people to self-identify as vegetarian yet still eat meat highlights a theoretically intriguing and methodologically important distinction: Self-identifying as vegetarian and eating a strictly vegetarian diet are not interchangeable. Based on self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), scholars have posited that people ultimately self-identify as vegetarian because they see themselves as part of a distinct social group—one whose members forgo meat (Rosenfeld, 2019b; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017a; Rothgerber, 2014c, 2014d, 2017). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) complements this view by highlighting that individuals who see themselves as vegetarian experience intragroup phenomena, such as pressures to abide by their meatless diet in order to avoid identity threats. The social identity of being a vegetarian, nevertheless, often extends beyond the absolute nature of one's diet, as many vegetarians accept meat as a normative, though infrequent, part of their diets (Stiles, 1998; Willetts, 1997). Thus, seeing oneself as a vegetarian is largely a psychosocial state of group identification more so than one indicative of actual eating behavior. This discrepancy suggests that no single method of operationalizing “vegetarian” suffices to capture the full scope of what this term means to people.

We theorize, additionally, that impression management—the efforts people take to strategically make a positive impression on others (Goffman, 1959)—explains vegetarians' decisions to eat meat. Because people are often judged based on how they eat, individuals can readily draw upon impression management tactics in modifying their food intake (Vartanian, 2015; Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007), at times eating foods they may typically avoid consuming. Vegetarianism, notably, is a stigmatized identity associated with negative stereotypes (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Kellman, 2000; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Minson & Monin, 2012), and some vegetarians seek to hide the fact that they are vegetarian from other people in order to avoid feeling stigmatized (LeRette, 2014). An effective way to conceal one's vegetarian identity is to eat meat, giving off the image of being a meat-eater. Accordingly, in our research, we were interested in understanding what reasons vegetarians have for violating their diets. We suspected that many vegetarians would opt to eat meat in order to avoid stigma and to make a positive impression on others.

Empirical research identifying psychological correlates of dietary adherence among vegetarians is emerging, yet remains limited to only a few studies (Rothgerber, 2014a, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d). According to this research, factors linked to higher dietary adherence—i.e., a lower probability of violating one's diet—among vegetarians include status as a woman, giving up meat due to a moral concern for animals, feeling disgusted by meat, seeing being a vegetarian as central to one's identity, and having been following a vegetarian diet for a longer duration. Quantitative studies of this nature can shed light on within-group heterogeneity among vegetarians,

highlighting why some vegetarians follow their diets more strictly than others do. A limitation of these studies, however, is that they do not reflect what vegetarians' dietary violations are concretely like and how they unfold within individuals' everyday lives.

Little is known about what social contexts pressure vegetarians to eat meat and how vegetarians navigate and experience their dietary violations, highlighting the need to complement an expanding body of quantitative literature on vegetarian adherence with evidence from qualitative research. As of yet, only a few anecdotes of vegetarians' experiences eating meat have surfaced tangentially within larger investigations of vegetarianism. In these anecdotes, vegetarians have reported violating their diets while dining as a guest at a social gathering, while intoxicated, and while traveling away from home (Esquire, 2017; Hamilton, 2006; Jabs et al., 2000; Willetts, 1997). Vegetarians have also reported that violating their diets can make them feel angry, anxious, and/or guilty (Hamilton, 2006). The core focus of the current research is on what motivates vegetarians to violate their diets and how vegetarians reflect on these violations, with social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and impression management being guiding frameworks we used to interpret these motivations and reflections.

Qualitative research on vegetarian dietary violations is sparse. Moreover, existing empirical research has principally focused on vegetarian dietary violations in a reductionist, closed-ended format, having participants indicate whether they ever eat meat or how willing they would be to eat meat hypothetically. This work has been incredibly valuable for identifying why some vegetarians adhere to their diets more or less strictly than other vegetarians do. It has also been useful for estimating what proportion of vegetarians actually eat meat, or are at least willing to eat meat (28% in Rothgerber, 2014a and 54% in Rosenfeld, 2019c). What the existing literature lacks, however, is a comprehensive account of what vegetarians' dietary violations are like—that is, in what social contexts they most often occur, why they occur, how vegetarians feel about them, how vegetarians rationalize them, and so forth. By knowing these details, scholars and practitioners can understand eating behavior better and help individuals achieve their dietary goals most successfully.

More comprehensive qualitative research on vegetarians' dietary violations can also enable investigators to design closed-ended survey questions with deeper insights in order to assess facets of dietary adherence with greater ecological validity and nuance. As opposed to simply asking participants whether or not they ever eat meat, quantitative research may improve ecological validity by having participants imagine themselves hypothetically in a certain situation and reflect on whether they would consider eating meat in that scenario. A series of three studies by Rosenfeld (2019c) adopted this approach, having participants across these studies, respectively, indicate how much money they would need to get paid to eat meat, how likely they would be to eat meat while dining at a renowned steakhouse, and how likely they would be to eat meat when served meat on a job interview. Without a deeper qualitative knowledge base, however, it remains unknown whether such approaches are truly optimal—or even ecologically valid at all—for assessing what level of dietary adherence vegetarians exercise in their everyday lives. That is, are these hypothetical scenarios ones that actually unfold in vegetarians' lives? In the current investigation, we sought to document how vegetarians reflect on their experiences eating meat through a narrative research design.

We set *a priori* to investigate three aspects of vegetarians' dietary violations. First, given that a wide range of motivations can drive eating behavior (Arbit, Ruby, & Rozin, 2017; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017b; Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995), we examined specifically why each participant decided to eat meat. Second, given that food choice is intertwined with social relationships and sensitive to social context (Sobal, Bisogni, & Jastran, 2014), we examined with whom and where each participant was when he or she ate meat (i.e., context). Third, given that emotional states are central to people's lived experiences (Fredrickson, 2000), we examined how each participant felt about his

or her experience of eating meat. As reviewed below, our investigation expanded *post hoc* to encompass four additional core aspects of dietary violation experiences, beyond the three here we specified *a priori*. These four aspects included whether the participant ate meat knowingly or unknowingly, how the participant cognitively dealt with eating meat (i.e., rationalized it), what social implications the participant reported experiencing from eating meat, and an intriguing phenomenon whereby some participants identified themselves as vegetarian yet directly stated that they recurrently eat meat.

1. Method

We recruited 243 self-identified vegetarians (specifically, 96 vegans and 147 non-vegan vegetarians) from the United States via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), in exchange for \$0.50, as part of a larger study ($N = 924$) on meat avoidance. We targeted people who restrict their meat intake by advertising our survey using the following prompts: “Cutting Back on Meat? Survey for people who limit their meat intakes” and “Survey on Meat Avoidance – for people who refrain from eating meat.”

Our first principal question was whether or not participants have ever eaten meat since going vegetarian. Accordingly, participants were asked, “Since going vegetarian/vegan, have you ever eaten meat?” Of the 243 participants, 124 (51%) responded that they had eaten meat since going vegetarian, whereas a remaining 119 (49%) responded that they had not. There were not significant differences between the proportions of vegans (51%) and non-vegan vegetarians (51%) who had eaten meat since adopting their diets, $\chi^2(1) = 0.00, p > .999$, or between the proportions of men (56%) and women (46%) who had eaten meat, $\chi^2(1) = 1.97, p = .161$.

Participants who indicated that they have eaten meat since going vegetarian were presented the following open-ended prompt:

Think back to a time when you have eaten meat after you had gone vegetarian/vegan. Please write about that experience in the space provided below.

We are interested in hearing:

- Where you were when you ate meat
- Who you were with
- What type of meat product you ate
- Why you think you decided to eat meat during this situation
- How you felt about eating meat
- Any other details or thoughts you would like to share

You are welcome to write as much or as little as you would like. Please try to write at least a paragraph – the more you write, the more you help researchers understand vegetarianism/veganism better.

Of the 124 participants who indicated that they had eaten meat since going vegetarian, 108 provided responses about their experiences. These 108 participants (55% female), who were between the ages of 21 and 73 ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.19, SD = 10.95$), comprised the final sample for this study (see Table 1 for demographics).

We conducted a quantitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952) in order to identify common characteristics of vegetarians' dietary violations. Given that our sample size of 108 participant responses provided low statistical power for testing proportions, we refrained from conducting inferential statistics on our data and thus report a purely descriptive analysis.

Our analyses centered on seven core topics: three of which we arrived at deductively and four inductively. For each participant's response, we noted (1) with whom and where the participant was when he or she ate meat (i.e., context), (2) why the participant decided to eat meat, and (3) how the participant felt about the experience of eating meat—all of which we were interested in *a priori*, as our prompt reflects.

Table 1

Demographic information of study participants.

Demographic	Frequency (Percentage)
Race	
White/Caucasian	80 (74%)
Black/African American	10 (9%)
Hispanic or Latinx	3 (3%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	6 (6%)
Native American	1 (1%)
Mixed race/ethnicity	5 (5%)
Other	3 (3%)
Income	
\$25,000 or less	19 (18%)
\$25,001 - \$50,000	35 (32%)
\$50,001 - \$80,000	29 (27%)
\$80,001 - \$120,000	16 (15%)
\$120,001 - \$200,000	6 (6%)
\$200,001 or more	3 (3%)
Educational Attainment	
Less than high school diploma	0 (0%)
High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)	10 (9%)
Some college, but no degree	16 (15%)
Associate degree	14 (13%)
Bachelor's degree	56 (52%)
Graduate or professional degree	12 (11%)

After examining all of the participants' responses, we identified four additional topics of interest *post hoc*: (4) whether the participant ate meat knowingly or unknowingly, (5) how the participant cognitively dealt with eating meat (i.e., rationalized it), and (6) what social implications the participant reported experiencing from eating meat. Lastly (7), we noted an intriguing theme that several responses expressed: Some participants—to reiterate, all of whom self-identified as vegetarian—directly stated that they recurrently eat meat. In the Results section to follow, we review our findings within seven subsections corresponding to our seven total topics.

2. Results

2.1. Why do vegetarians eat meat?

First, we examined what reasons vegetarians had for eating meat. Of the 63 participants who mentioned why they chose to eat meat, 22 (35%) indicated that they ate meat in order to make a social situation flow more smoothly—that is, to avoid disrupting existing or expected social dynamics in a scenario. Specific examples included eating meat in order to “fit in with everyone else,” to avoid making “a scene,” to “contribute to a family tradition,” and to avoid being “culturally inappropriate.” Most frequently within this category, participants indicated that they ate meat because they did not want to be rude or burdensome—a motive reported by more than half (12) of these 22 participants. Participants provided accounts of eating meat at family and social gatherings because they did not want to have the host go to extra effort to accommodate their vegetarianism; wanted to show their appreciation and respect for the host's effort and hospitality; and did not want to seem rude or wasteful by sending food back. Reflecting on his experiencing eating turkey on Thanksgiving, one participant (38, male) wrote:

During these big family gatherings where there is a meat component to the meal, I would feel guilty that I did not appreciate the effort made by my grandmother and mom on the big family meal.

Concerns about being rude toward another person may directly trump vegetarians' own disdains toward eating meat. Illustrating this value conflict in greater detail, one participant (40, female) wrote:

So, if I am at a social gathering, and someone has lovingly prepared meat for me, (this usually happens when they don't know I am a

vegetarian) I will eat a small amount of meat. I do this out of respect for the care this person has shown and the hospitality they have shown. I normally try to take just a small amount of meat and fill my plate with any plant options available. I would never knowingly embarrass someone who has done this nice thing for me. So on multiple occasions I have eaten a bit of chicken, fish or beef. I don't like the idea, and I don't like how I feel. But I would dislike being rude, even more.

This reason of eating meat for the purpose of easing a social situation was the most common one participants reported, at 35% of participants. The next most common reason, reported by a much smaller 6 (10%) participants, was explicit social pressure—whereby other people directly pushed participants toward eating meat. Participants reported experiencing explicit pressure from friends, family, romantic partners, and coworkers. One instance of this involved a participant eating meat at a restaurant because his coworker urged him to do so. Another participant reported that a woman he was dating pressured him into eating meat while they were having dinner at her parents' house. Social pressure may even extend beyond permitting individual choice and into coercion. One participant (28, female) wrote: “I ate [meat] once when I was in college with my friends because my friends forced me to.” The specific means by which this participant's friends forced her to eat meat, however, were not specified.

Some participants reported that they ate meat because they were craving meat (5 [8%] participants) or simply wanted to experience the taste of meat (4 [6%] participants). What distinguished craving-versus taste-driven dietary violations was a sense of self-control, with cravings characterizing an intense desire that makes meat seem irresistible (Robinson & Berridge, 1993). Five participants who explicitly said that they were “craving” meat described their dietary violations as if they were almost beyond their personal choice, and instead fueled by their physical or psychophysiological states. One participant (38, male) described that his meat cravings were “constant,” involved “dreaming about [meat] at night,” and were tied to his chronic state of fatigue. Two other participants linked their cravings to their bodily states, one saying directly that her *body* craves meat and another framing her dietary violating as tied to being pregnant.

In contrast to eating meat out of cravings, eating meat for taste entailed a greater feeling of deliberate choice—violating one's diet willfully and mindfully simply to experience pleasure, rather than out of an uncontrollable urge. Participants' narratives concerning taste were straightforward. For example, one participant (34, male) wrote:

Last week I went out to eat Chinese food with some friends ... I decided to partake in some of the meat dishes because I truly enjoy the flavor.

Four participants (6% of those reporting a reason) ate meat due to perceived protein deficiency, thinking that they were unable to get sufficient protein on their vegetarian diet. Appealing to the necessity of animal protein to satiate the body, one participant (46, male) wrote:

I went to a Chili's restaurant with family and I ate grilled chicken with rice and black beans, which was very delicious. I was feeling weak and needed something with protein in it and after I ate this particular meal I felt a lot better.

Four participants (6%) reported eating meat for reasons related to novelty—that is, to try something new. All four of these participants ate meat while they were traveling. One participant reported eating whale meat while visiting her boyfriend in Norway because she had never had it before. Another participant ate a meat pastry while on vacation in Turkey. Although she had gone vegetarian recently, she reported that she “felt compelled to have one, since this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to try it” (34, female).

Four participants (6%) reported eating meat in order to avoid food waste. For one participant, this meant eating the remaining meat off of

a friend's plate, whereas another participant avoided waste by eating leftovers in his refrigerator at home. Participants' concerns with letting the meat go unconsumed were grounded in discomforts with letting food go to waste, in general, as well as the specific moral stance that an animal ought not be slaughtered for meat simply for no purpose. Exemplifying this latter position, one participant (36, male) wrote:

I had to dine with some friends and work colleagues at a Korean Barbeque restaurant. They serve beef, and it is customary for the chefs (attendants) to cook the meat and put it on your dish. I did not want to eat beef, and tried to fill my dish with vegetable side dishes, but of course the attendant would put meat on my dish. So, I left the meat there in hopes that she will not refill it. Knowing that if I left the meat there, no one else will eat it, and it will be disposed of when we leave, I took a bite out of it at the end of our meal. I did not want the animal's death to go in vain.

Less common reasons participants had for eating meat were due to financial constraints (2 participants [3%]), hunger (2 participants [3%]), nostalgia (1 participant [2%]), lacking meat alternatives to eat (1 participant [2%]), and alcoholic intoxication (1 participant [2%]).

2.2. *With whom and where do vegetarians eat meat?*

Second, we examined what social contexts were most likely to surround vegetarians' dietary violations. Of the 87 participants who mentioned details about the social context in which they ate meat, 47 (54%) indicated that they ate meat while spending time with family (most often for a family gathering with extended family) or on a special occasion (e.g., a wedding, birthday, or holiday). Five participants (6%) singled out eating turkey on Thanksgiving as a time when they violated their diets. These two contexts—being with family or celebrating a special occasion—were, by a large degree, the most common ones in which vegetarians ate meat. The next most common contexts in which participants ate meat were social gatherings (namely, spending time with friends), at 13 participants (15%); being with one's romantic partner, at 12 participants (14%); work events (including being at work or with coworkers outside of one's workplace), at 6 participants (7%); and while traveling, at 5 participants (6%).

2.3. *Do vegetarians ever eat meat unknowingly?*

Third, we noted whether vegetarians ate meat knowingly or unknowingly. Of the 79 participants whose responses unambiguously indicated whether they ate meat knowingly or unknowingly, 71 (90%) reported eating meat knowingly and 8 (10%) unknowingly. Six of the 8 participants who ate meat unknowingly mentioned details about their experience. In four (67%) of these cases, participants indicated that they ate meat while dining at a restaurant, unaware that their meal contained meat until after they had already consumed either part or all of it. In another case of unknown meat consumption, a participant's family member directly lied to her, saying that a dish did not contain meat when it actually did. Another participant was also fed meat by a family member, but accidentally so in this case.

2.4. *How do vegetarians feel about their experience eating meat?*

Fourth, we examined how vegetarians felt about eating meat—specifically, whether they reacted to the experience positively, negatively, both positively and negatively (i.e., mixed), or neutrally. Of the 59 participants who mentioned how they felt about eating meat, 32 (54%) reacted negatively, 13 (22%) positively, 7 (12%) mixed, and 7 (12%) neutrally. All 8 participants who had eaten meat unknowingly either reported a negative reaction or did not specify how they felt about eating meat—not surprisingly, none of these individuals mentioned a positive, mixed, or neutral reaction.

Negative reactions to eating meat most commonly related to feeling

guilty (12 [20%] participants) or sick (6 [10%] participants). Five of the six (83%) participants who mentioned feeling sick reported stomach discomfort in particular, one of whom believed was because her body was not used to digesting meat. Interestingly, even participants' feelings of physical unease appeared to pervade the moral domain, at times being intertwined with moralized perceptions of purity and disgust. As one participant (30, female) wrote:

I had a steak with friends for a special occasion. I only did this 2 times and it really didn't taste that good. My stomach did not feel good afterwards and I felt dirty. I didn't want to eat anymore meat and I swore to myself I would pass next time.

Aside from feeling guilty and sick, two participants reported feeling angry (1 [2%] participant) or sad (1 participant) upon eating meat. Moreover, one participant (34, female) compared the experience following eating meat as a vegetarian to one of a drug addict dealing with withdrawal, writing:

That night [after eating meat] I was up all night shivering, sweating, and having the worst stomach cramps. It felt like what a drug addict describes they experience during withdrawals.

Among the smaller group of 13 participants who reacted positively to eating meat, narratives most commonly centered on the enjoyable taste of meat (5 [38%] participants), followed by the role of meat in nourishing one's body (3 [23%] participants). In reporting their positive reaction to eating meat, eight (62%) participants actively rejected negative affect—namely, stating that they did not feel bad or guilty about their choice. One participant (34, male) wrote:

Last week I went out to eat Chinese food with some friends. There were a few dishes that there were vegetarian and a few that contained meat. I decided to partake in some of the meat dishes because I truly enjoy the flavor. I did not feel bad or guilty about this. Instead, I felt like I was making a conscious decision and felt comfortable doing so.

Seven participants, notably, reported a mixed reaction to eating meat, viewing their experience both positively and negatively. These mixed-valence narratives depicted a positive element of participants' enjoying meat's taste or its satiating property but a negative element of participants' subsequently feeling sick, weak-willed, and/or guilty. Recounting an experience in which vegetarian options were sparse at a family gathering, one participant (46, female) wrote:

I was hungry, and I'd already had some arguments with my husband about other issues with his family so I felt like I couldn't just ask him to take me home. The meat product was chicken and noodles with gravy. It tasted good, but I knew it would make me sick ... so I only ate a little bit. I got very sick the next day and had to miss work.

Another participant (29, male) recalled a time when he went to a restaurant while in a new city with his parents, describing a mixed reaction to eating meat:

They didn't have any meatless options and I was starving after running a race. I ordered a big plate of nachos with beef. I was happy that my hunger was satisfied, but felt bad having to hurt my diet and eat meat.

Lastly, seven participants reported having a neutral reaction to eating meat. These participants felt neither positive nor negative about their experience. Whereas two participants directly stated that they "felt neutral" or "didn't feel any kind of way," five others actively rejected the possibility that eating meat made them feel bad. Two of these participants reported, specifically, that they did not feel guilty about their food choice. Another participant (25, male) appealed to the stability of his moral character as extending beyond this single event, writing:

"Overall, after eating meat I didn't feel any kind of way because I still have the same beliefs and the willpower to control what I want to eat."

2.5. What are the social implications of vegetarians eating meat?

Fifth, we examined what social implications were tied to vegetarians' dietary violations. Three participants' narratives (3% of the sample) directly highlighted that eating meat as a vegetarian had meaningful social implications—all of which were unfavorable. Eating meat defies the core definition of being a vegetarian, which can make seemingly innocuous dietary violations become social identity threats, particularly when a violation occurs publicly in the presence of others. One participant (33, female) recalled a time when she took meat leftovers home with her from a weeklong family gathering at her cousin's house. Not wanting to be an "annoying vegan," she refrained from mentioning to her relatives that she was hungry, having eaten essentially nothing but bagels for the entire week. Knowing that none of her relatives would notice a small portion of the large amount of leftovers in the refrigerator missing, she decided to curb her hunger by eating and packing up leftover steak, chicken salad, and cold cuts when she had a moment alone in the kitchen. Touching upon an anticipated identity threat she experienced, she wrote:

I would've been so embarrassed if anyone caught me. I would've looked like a "fake vegan." I was just so hungry! And it was going in the garbage anyway, so my eating it wasn't going to cause any more animal products to be purchased to replace it. So no animals would suffer based on my decision. I still feel kind of bad when I think about it, though. Mostly the fear that maybe someone saw me and didn't say anything, but they still know. And maybe they think I've been a poser all these years.

For another participant (31, female), who ate meat unknowingly, the social implications of her dietary violations centered on a newfound distrust toward the individual responsible for feeding her meat: her mother-in-law. She recalled feeling deceived and disrespected:

I was actually at dinner at my in laws and my mother in law made stuffed mushrooms. She knew I didn't eat meat ... I told her they were so great etc. and come to find out at a much later date she had ground up pepperoni and put it in the stuffing for the mushrooms. I was LIVID. So I didn't eat the meat of my own accord, it was hidden in my food and kept from me (basically, she lied about it). I felt really awful and truthfully felt really disrespected. To this day I don't eat food she brings to potlucks or eat dinner at my in laws house.

Another participant, who ate meat knowingly, expressed similarly negative sentiments toward her relatives for failing to provide her with a sufficient vegetarian option at a family gathering at her in-laws' home. Feeling hurt and insulted, this participant started refusing to go to her in-laws' home after this incident.

Aside from these accounts, no participants spoke directly to the social implications of eating meat. We suspect that there is much more terrain to be uncovered on this topic and that our participants largely did not touch on this point because we did not specifically ask them to do so in our writing prompt. The three examples provided here, nevertheless, illustrate that the social and psychological consequences of participants' dietary violations may extend beyond their own personal feelings and spill over impactfully into their interpersonal relationships.

2.6. How do vegetarians cognitively deal with having eaten meat?

Sixth, we examined how vegetarians cognitively dealt with having eaten meat—that is, how they rationalized, or justified, their food choice. In contrast to the *reasons* or *motivations* people have for making

a food choice, which precede behavior, the ways in which people *rationalize* or *justify* a food choice reflect *post-hoc* attitudes that follow eating behavior. Whereas several studies have detailed how omnivores rationalize their meat consumption (Dowsett, Semmler, Bray, Ankeny, & Chur-Hansen, 2018; Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2012), little is known about how vegetarians rationalize their dietary violations. The current study suggests that vegetarians do, in large part, rationalize eating meat in similar ways as omnivores while also appealing to more nuanced forms of cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957; Rothgerber, 2014b) and moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990, 1999) unique to their current status of already being a meat-avoider.

The three most common ways in which participants rationalized eating meat were by moderating their meat intake and/or intending to resist eating meat in the future (4 participants [4% of the sample]); appealing to the normality, naturalness, and necessity of eating meat (4 participants); and rejecting ethical motivation by affirming health motivation (3 participants [3% of sample]). In this first regard, two participants reported making a conscious effort to eat only a small amount of meat during their dietary violation. Another two participants looked toward the future, accepting their current consumption of meat by reminding themselves that they would soon return to their vegetarian diet. Exemplifying this, one participant (35, female) wrote:

I usually eat meat when I visit my family for the holidays because they are doing the cooking and meal selection and they are meat eaters. In December, I ate roast beef and lasagna (with meat) when I visited my family ... I did not feel bad or guilty about eating meat over the holidays because I knew I would be returning to my healthy diet after I got back home.

Reflecting three of the four core domains of meat-eating rationalizations as outlined by Piazza et al. (2015), four participants (4% of the sample) endorsed notions that eating meat is normal, natural, and necessary. One participant (38, female), wrote:

The last time I ate meat was 3 nights ago for dinner when I ate baked chicken with a healthy portion of vegetables and some bread. I honestly felt a bit guilty eating it ... I reminded myself that I still need protein and I don't want to completely deprive myself. I remind myself that this is a healthy compromise for both my health and mental wellbeing ... I try to be reasonable about it though and remember that in the wild, animals eat meat as well to survive.

An interesting case of vegetarian meat-eating rationalization that diverges from omnivores' common rationalization strategies was when three participants (3% of the sample) actively rejected having any ethical motivation to avoid meat and instead affirmed their decision to be vegetarian for health reasons. This strategy may enable vegetarians not only to avoid feeling cognitive dissonance in their moral convictions but also to defend their vegetarian identity from threats that could emerge from violating social group ideological norms. Health-motivated vegetarians may even go so far as to reject the moralized nature of their diets altogether, distancing themselves from individuals who choose vegetarianism for ethical reasons. As one participant (39, male) reported bluntly:

I am only a vegetarian for health reasons. I [couldn't] care less about moral obligations.

Participants used several other cognitive strategies for dealing with eating meat in addition to the three reviewed above, albeit less commonly. Two participants (2% of the sample) rationalized eating meat by endorsing speciesism: the notion that some species of animals are more deserving of moral consideration than others are (Caviola, Everett, & Faber, 2018). One of these participants, for example, justified eating shrimp by stating that shrimp are "simple," implying that they lack advanced mental capacities. The other participant (31, female) who appealed to speciesism also consumed fish, writing about a time when she ate sushi to celebrate her birthday:

"While I do think of seafood to be meat, I don't think it's immoral to eat it as I do animal flesh. I feel really bad about eating the flesh of mammals because I feel connected to them in a way and do not think they should have to die in order for us to eat."

Other participants rationalized eating meat by denying that animal they consumed suffered (e.g., in the case of a participant consuming free-range chicken) (1 participant [1% of the sample]), actively dissociating meat from its animal origins (1 participant), emphasizing that they ate meat only outside of their home but would not do so within their home (1 participant), and reminding themselves that they have generally done well in following a vegetarian diet over the long run (1 participant).

2.7. Vegetarianism: diet or identity?

Thirteen participants (12% of the sample) stated in their narratives that they—currently, or earlier on in their vegetarian journey—eat meat sporadically or regularly, as opposed to their reported meat-eating experience having been a one-time lapse. These accounts support the perspective that being a vegetarian is inherently more about one's identity—how one sees oneself—than one's actual food choices (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017a; Rothgerber, 2014a; Willets, 1997). That is, for some individuals, it may feel perfectly normal to self-identify as vegetarian while still eating meat from time to time. Below are three responses from participants that exemplify this apparently incongruent, yet identity-sensible, phenomenon:

I am married to a meat eater who likes meat every day. I don't typically eat it with him but sometimes I will try a bite of his. (28, female)

I limit my meat eating to twice a week and I have small portions. The last time I ate meat was 3 nights ago. (38, female)

When I first became a vegetarian I would occasionally late night eat fast food hamburgers. (33, male)

3. Discussion

Approximately half (51%) of vegetarians in the current study indicated that they had eaten meat since going vegetarian. Vegetarians' dietary violations, moreover, exhibited a great deal of variance with respect to where, with whom, how, and why they occurred; how vegetarians felt about them occurring; and how vegetarians cognitively dealt with their aftermath—though common trends did emerge, as reviewed in detail above and synthesized with greater interpretation below. Overall, our participants' narratives highlight that vegetarians' decisions to eat meat typically spur not out of missing the taste of meat, but out of efforts to avoid uncomfortable social interactions. Further evident from participants' narratives is support for the notion that vegetarianism may be best conceived as an identity, beyond just a diet. Some vegetarians, notably, view their diets as flexible guidelines, rather than rigid rules they ought to follow without exception.

By a large degree, vegetarians most often reported eating meat when they were with family and/or celebrating a special occasion. Five participants specifically singled out eating turkey on Thanksgiving. Further research on vegetarians' eating behaviors on Thanksgiving seems promising, as the core ritual of celebrating Thanksgiving in the U.S. is eating turkey. The Thanksgiving meal is one that symbolizes familial and cultural ties, wherein food choice is central to affirming customs and group identity. Acting upon one's social identity as a vegetarian may threaten the stability of one's familial and cultural identities. Social psychological research on vegetarians' eating behaviors on Thanksgiving may be useful for examining the interplay of social norms, morality, and social identity, particularly as these concepts intersect and their varying levels of contextual and individual

abstractions conflict.

Other common contexts in which vegetarians ate meat were social gatherings, being with one's romantic partner, and being at a work-related event. What these three contexts share is their high susceptibility to prime impression management (Goffman, 1959), whereby individuals may strategically modify their behavior in order to make a favorable impression on others. Dating, among other romantic and sexual contexts, presents an intriguing behavioral paradigm in which gendered conceptions of impression management are common (Vartanian, 2015). Little research (e.g., Potts & Parry, 2010) has focused on the role of vegetarianism in romantic and sexual contexts, and further research in this domain can be informative in many regards—with vegetarian dietary adherence being an example angle from which to approach this. Like dating, professional work settings prime impression management and often use communal eating as grounds for establishing relationships. Thus, professional work settings may also be of interest for investigators seeking to study dietary adherence.

The most common reason vegetarians had for eating meat (at approximately one-third of participants who reported a reason) was a desire to make a social situation flow more smoothly—that is, to avoid disrupting existing or expected social dynamics. Many participants feared that adhering to their vegetarianism would lead them to make a scene, violate traditions, and ultimately fail to fit in with the group. Most frequently, this form of socially motivated meat consumption stemmed from participants' concerns about coming off as rude or burdensome. Many participants reported that at family or social gatherings, they would feel uncomfortable rejecting the food a host is serving or having the host prepare an alternative vegetarian option for them. Narratives touching upon this notion suggest that, at times, individuals see adhering to vegetarianism as incongruent with socializing successfully.

Instances of socially motivated meat consumption among participants illustrate social identity processes and impression management. First, in eating meat to avoid coming across as rude or burdensome, many participants appeared to construe expressing their vegetarian identity and socializing successfully as two incongruent aims. Presenting their vegetarian self to others would be disadvantageous, and thus they drew upon impression management in order to present the image of having an omnivorous identity. In doing so, vegetarians engage in visibility management strategies “pass” as meat-eaters (Goffman, 1963). Second, evident in some participants' narratives were feelings of stigma in the sense that being a vegetarian reflects possessing a devalued social identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Several participants expected that adhering to their vegetarian diet would be met with social disapproval and/or alienation, whether in the form of insulting the host of a social gathering or feeling excluded from a family tradition. Consistent with Major and O'Brien's (2005) conceptualization of stigma, vegetarians may cope in response to social identity threats by situationally disidentifying with vegetarianism—that is, distancing themselves from this group membership and passing. Vegetarians' strategic disidentifications with their vegetarian identities illustrate a core aspect of self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), whereby different situational cues activate individuals' group memberships at varying levels of abstraction (e.g., seeing oneself principally as a vegetarian at a typical meal versus as an American or a member of one's family on Thanksgiving).

Only one vegetarian reported in their narrative that they were intoxicated by alcohol while eating meat. This low prevalence seems to contrast prior findings that a substantial proportion of vegetarians—37% in Britain—have eaten meat while intoxicated (Esquire, 2017). An alternative interpretation, however, may simply be that many of our participants may have indeed eaten meat while intoxicated but just refrained from writing about that experience in their narrative. Given the role of alcohol in much of social life, and given the known effects of alcohol on decision-making, further research examining the role of intoxication on vegetarians', and other dieters', adherences can

be informative, both theoretically and practically. For example, if vegetarianism is ultimately a social identity, and maintaining such a behaviorally based social identity requires effortful adherence to in-group norms, then impaired decision-making and an altered self-image due to alcoholic intoxication may influence vegetarians' eating behaviors in theoretically intriguing ways.

Also surprising was that only 14% of vegetarians—among those who reported their reason for eating meat—ate meat due to either cravings or missing the taste of meat. This finding is informative in two regards. First, it suggests that most vegetarians do not miss the taste of meat strongly enough to violate their diets. This perspective is in contrast to many omnivores' expectations that eating a vegetarian diet would lack sufficient variety, be boring, and cause them to miss the taste of meat (Judge & Wilson, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018). Second, this finding suggests that vegetarians are much more likely to violate their diets for psychosocial and interpersonal reasons than for taste reasons, as have been reviewed throughout the course of this paper. This highlights that food choice is a strongly social process (Sobal et al., 2014; Vartanian, 2015).

By a large degree, vegetarians most often reacted negatively to having eaten meat. Participants who viewed their dietary violation negatively often reported feeling guilty and/or sick due to eating meat. Some participants reported feeling angry or sad. Negative reactions were frequently both physical and emotional in nature. The second most common reaction—after negative—was positive, with most participants in this group appealing to the enjoyable taste of meat or felt physical benefits upon eating meat. Smaller proportions of vegetarians expressed either mixed (i.e., both positive and negative) or neutral reactions to eating meat.

Although not a central focus of the current investigation, some participants' narratives highlight that their decisions to violate their diets had social implications, which can exemplify additional negative aftermaths of eating meat. One participant was concerned that people would view her as a “fake” vegan if they were to have seen her eat meat. This participant, accordingly, expressed a concern about threats to her vegetarian identity. Scholars have discussed the roles of social identity threats (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999) prior in the context of vegetarianism (e.g., Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017a; Rothgerber, 2014c). Vegetarians who are passionately motivated to eschew meat for moral or health reasons may experience negative affect for going against their moral beliefs (e.g., feeling cognitive dissonance, moral inconsistency, or moral identity threats) or simply for breaking their dietary regimen. Yet if adhering to one's diet confirms one's commitment to maintaining in-group norms as a vegetarian, then violating one's diet may furthermore induce social identity threat and undermine one's social group membership as a vegetarian (Branscombe et al., 1999; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017a). Research has yet, however, to investigate how vegetarians experience and mitigate identity threats. This would be valuable to understand, given that anticipated and experienced social identity threats are likely to be common encounters in the lives of the many vegetarians who eat meat.

Vegetarians' strategies for rationalizing their meat consumption were largely similar to omnivores'. Like omnivores (Piazza et al., 2015), vegetarians in the current study appealed chiefly to the notions that eating meat is normal, natural, and necessary. Yet some vegetarians' rationalizations were unique from omnivores' in that they situated dissonance reduction and moral disengagement within a current status of already being a meat-avoider. In this sense, the need among vegetarians is to justify a single instance of meat consumption—an atypical lapse in one's typically meatless diet. Among omnivores, on the other hand, rationalizations serve to alleviate chronic dissonance due to eating meat regularly. Vegetarians accomplished this by affirming the fact that they are already vegetarian—and thus have removed themselves from grappling with the morally troublesome nature of eating meat—and emphasizing that their motivation for eschewing meat is health, not ethics. Eating meat is morally troublesome to many

omnivores, as it starkly conflicts with their basic desire not to harm animals, creating a “meat paradox” (Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014). Because vegetarians—at least generally—refrain from eating meat, they can simultaneously acknowledge and reject the idea that eating meat has moral implications while affirming their decision to be vegetarian for health. Perceiving themselves as meat-excluders, vegetarians who even have a low dietary adherence may evade the meat paradox by affirming their vegetarian identity, without feeling the need to revise their moral attitudes toward eating animals, as is often done by omnivores (Loughnan et al., 2014).

One direction for future research is to consider the link between gender and vegetarian dietary adherence. Although not statistically significant—presumably due to insufficient power—we found that men were 22% more likely than were women to have eaten meat since going vegetarian. This trend mirrors Rosenfeld's (2019a) finding that vegetarian men follow their diets less strictly than vegetarian women do. As eating meat is linked to masculinity (Rothgerber, 2012; Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012), vegetarian men may face stronger social pressures to violate their diets. Future investigations would benefit to test whether vegetarian men and women have different reasons for violating their diets and construe their dietary violations in different ways. A second direction for future research is to examine whether personality traits, dietary motivations, or moral values are tied to the nature of vegetarians' dietary violations. For example, vegetarians who value agreeableness may be more likely to eat meat in social situations, whereas a vegetarian high in openness to experience may be intrigued to eat meat while tasting novel cuisine in a foreign country. Whether or not vegetarians follow their diets for moral versus health reasons also seem probable to influence their motivations for and reactions to violating their diets. Rosenfeld (2019d), to this point, found that vegetarians motivated by concerns about animals anticipate that they would be more upset to have eaten meat accidentally than would either health-motivated or environmentally motivated vegetarians, an effect mediated by disgust toward meat.

The current findings may be useful in supporting people who wish to adopt and maintain vegetarian, or flexitarian (i.e., meat-reduced), diets for the benefits of animals, public health, environmental sustainability, or other causes. Struggles with following vegetarianism manifest themselves across dietary camps, with many omnivores expressing unwillingness to give up meat (Graça, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2018; Piazza et al., 2015) and many vegetarians ultimately lapsing back to eating meat entirely (Herzog, 2014). In one regard, by targeting factors that most often derail individuals from adhering to meatless diets, interventions may reach the most success in shifting consumers' eating behaviors. Using our findings, researchers seeking to help individuals improve their vegetarian dietary adherence can develop in-the-moment interventions—such as just-in-time-adaptive-interventions (JITAs; Nahum-Shani et al., 2017) and sequential multiple assessment randomized trial (SMART) designs (Lei, Nahum-Shani, Lynch, Oslin, & Murphy, 2012)—in order to track dietary behavior when individuals are in situations that present high risks of eating meat.

In another regard, the current research may be used to promote psychological well-being among vegetarians. We found that eating meat is a normative, and often emotionally charged, experience for approximately half of vegetarians. Thus, it may be beneficial to normalize meat-eating occasions for vegetarians and to ameliorate the negative emotional experience vegetarians tend to have when violating their diets. Our findings related to vegetarians' reasons for violating their diets and the contexts in which dietary violations are most likely to occur suggest that social aspects of eating pose the greatest threat to ease of vegetarian dieting. That is, the pervasiveness of meat-eating in American—and likely most other Western nations—social life makes adhering to a vegetarian diet difficult. The narratives of many participants even suggest that adhering to a vegetarian diet with absolute adherence would lead one to feel alienated, socially withdrawn, rude,

burdensome, wasteful, and socially awkward. This adds to an existing literature documenting the many adverse social consequences individuals experience from going vegetarian (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Hirschler, 2011; Jabs et al., 2000; Larsson, Rönnlund, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2003; LeRette, 2014; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Romo & Donovan-Kicken, 2012; Twine, 2014). Ultimately, vegetarians' decisions to eat meat often reflect neither weakness nor failures of self-control, but rather voluntary and strategic decisions to improve their social experiences through food choice. Large-scale shifts in social, cultural, and familial norms dictating eating would seem necessary to resolve the interpersonal challenges faced by vegetarians.

The findings identified by this study can be used to improve future qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research on vegetarian dietary adherence. By drawing upon the themes we have highlighted as common factors related to vegetarian dietary violations, investigators can engage in more ecologically valid measurement—namely, through employing informed measures intended to assess vegetarians' levels of dietary adherence, or their self-imposed level of strictness. Investigators can also consider a variety of predictor and outcome variables that may be of interest, such as specific reasons for eating meat, reactions to having eaten meat (e.g., whether they are positive, negative, both, or neutral), and cognitive strategies used to rationalize having eaten meat. Individuals may vary in their proclivities to violate a vegetarian diet within certain contexts or for certain reasons, and these individual differences may be valuable to consider in designing interventions that help people meet their dietary goals. Individual differences in dietary violation orientations may also offer value for predicting long-term dietary adherence.

Two limitations of this research stem from its online survey methodology. First, because survey research precludes probing and asking follow-up questions to participants, investigators stand to benefit from conducting in-person interviews with vegetarians about their dietary violations. Second, there is the potential that participants misrepresented themselves as vegetarian—given that imposter participants are problematic in online survey research when eligibility criteria for a study are made explicit (Chandler & Paolacci, 2017)—which may skew the results observed. We did, however, make efforts to minimize the likelihood of misrepresentation by allowing the maximal amount of time (approximately 5–10 min) to pass in between when participants started this study's survey until when they indicated whether or not they consider themselves to be vegetarian (or vegan) by placing these items at the end. During the intermediate time interval, participants completed measures for a separate larger study. If participants indicated “yes,” to the vegetarian/vegan question, and only then, they subsequently completed the dietary adherence question and open-ended prompt. Moreover, participants indicated their vegetarian status amid completing a range of demographic questions, which could have further reduced the chance of misrepresentation.

The current findings provide novel insights into why, where, when, and with whom vegetarians eat meat and how vegetarians construe their dietary violations. These findings are the first, to our knowledge, to document in detail how vegetarians reflect on dietary violations within their everyday lives. Our analysis ultimately highlights value in conceptualizing vegetarianism as a social identity—one that not only accommodates, but may even welcome, occasional dietary lapses. Understanding these lapses can shed brighter light on the experience of being a vegetarian, along with the rich interplay of social psychological forces that challenge, stabilize, and uphold the integrity of this experience.

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