Eating Outside of The Box: Vegetarian Meat Consumption as Ordinary Consumer Practice

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Morten WENDLER[1]

Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of meat consumption among meat-avoiding consumer groups, such as vegetarians and vegans. While previous research has found the phenomenon to be relatively common, knowledge about why it occurs remains limited. Drawing on interviews with 15 young Danish meat avoiders, the study addresses this gap and challenges conceptualisations of vegetarian meat consumption as dietary lapses or violations. It explores how participants use dietary labels and how meat consumption is organised in their everyday lives. The findings show that labels such as "vegetarian" or "vegan" are often used to communicate usual dietary practices, either due to the lack of an appropriate alternative label or as a rejection of strict adherence as a prerequisite for using dietary labels. Additionally, the study finds that instances of meat consumption often result from meat avoiders navigating competing end-goals and social procedures of proper conduct across different meal situations. The study concludes that vegetarian meat consumption is ordinary and expectable behaviour among socially sensitive meat-avoiding consumers, who balance multiple priorities in daily life. By showing vegetarian meat consumption to be a socially situated practice rather than a deviation, the article contributes a more nuanced understanding of consumers' use of dietary labels. The study concludes with implications for research and policy and discusses implications for the public understanding of meat-avoiding consumers' use of dietary labels.

[1] University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Corresponding author: Morten Wendler, mwj@ifro.ku.dk

Biographical notes

Morten Wendler is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen. The research presented in this article was conducted as part of the research project 'Social drivers and barriers for climate-friendly diets', led by Bente Halkier at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen.

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Ethics statement

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Introduction

> *"[Dylan] loves telling people I'm a fake vegan and has made jokes in front of our friends about me being hypocritical. He called me out in front of his brother over eating bacon when I was just a few weeks into my veganism."—Agnieszka (vegan) in The Guardian*

It tends to spark heated discussion when meat avoiders, such as vegans, eat meat: Is it hypocrisy? Is it an understandable slip-up? Or an ordinary part of reducing meat consumption? In The Guardian article[1] "You be the judge: should my girlfriend stop claiming she's a vegan?" (Lawton, 2023), these questions are brought to the fore as the couple Agnieszka and Dylan seek help resolving a dispute: Is Agnieszka a hypocrite for not being 100% strict in her veganism, or is Dylan wrong to question and mock her dietary choices? The ensuing poll among The Guardian's readership was overwhelmingly in Dylan's favor: 74% said Agnieszka should stop calling herself a vegan.

Although a reader poll is not a scientific measure of public attitudes toward vegetarian meat consumption,[2] it highlights a prevailing norm of expecting strict dietary adherence from meat avoiders. This expectation is also evident in academic research, where deviations from vegetarian and vegan diets are sometimes framed as dietary violations or lapses (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2019; Rothgerber, 2014).

This article challenges those expectations and aims to contribute nuance to scientific understandings of both vegetarian meat consumption specifically and consumers' use of dietary labels in general. It does so by investigating the following research question: How do meat avoiders use dietary labels, and how is vegetarian meat consumption organized in their everyday lives? The analysis draws on 15 qualitative interviews with young Danish meat avoiders. In this study, meat avoiders are defined as consumers who identify with diets that exclude meat—and in some cases also fish and other animal products—such as vegetarians, vegans, and pescatarians.

The findings show that participants use and understand labels such as "vegetarian" or "vegan" to describe their usual dietary practice to others, rather than as a strict set of rules. This may reflect the lack of better-fitting labels or a challenge to the ideal of strict dietary adherence. The analysis also shows how vegetarian meat consumption is often the outcome of situations in which other end-goals, such as being a good guest, become central to the organization of a food performance.

Based on these findings, the article argues for a shift away from both scientific and social expectations of absolute dietary strictness among vegetarians and vegans. It concludes that vegetarian meat consumption should be regarded as ordinary and expectable behavior among meat-avoiding consumers. Finally, it discusses implications for research and policy.

Literature Review

Over the past two decades, consumers who exclude meat from their diets or reduce their meat consumption have received significant scientific interest (e.g., Morris et al., 2014; Lang, 2021). Many studies have focused on specific dietary categories, such as vegans (Andreatta, 2015; Greenebaum, 2018; Laakso et al., 2021; Twine, 2014, 2018), vegetarians (Allen et al., 2000; Dietz et al., 1995; Rosenfeld et al., 2020; Vergeer et al., 2020), or flexitarians (Halkier and Lund, 2023; Dagevos, 2021; Verain et al., 2022; Malek and Umberger, 2021a). As a

[1] The article is part of the series "You be the judge," which involves two parties presenting their side of the argument in a domestic dispute. The readers are invited to vote on which party is in the right or in the wrong.

[2] This article, for the sake of brevity, applies the term "vegetarian meat consumption" to cover any instance where a meat avoider, such as a vegetarian, vegan, or pescatarian, consumes something not usually a part of the diet they identify with. I.e., when pescatarians eat meat, vegetarians eat meat or fish, or when vegans eat meat, fish, or other animal products such as dairy or eggs.

result, the characteristics (Cliceri et al., 2018), motivations (Beardsworth and Bryman, 2004; Mortara, 2015; Elzerman et al., 2022), values (Ploll and Stern, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2000; Dietz et al., 1995), and everyday food practices (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2021; Twine, 2018; Wendler, 2023) of these consumer groups are well documented.

It is also well documented that many self-identified vegetarians or vegans report eating limited amounts of meat and fish (Ruby, 2012). However, this fact is rarely acknowledged in literature on dietary change toward reduced meat consumption. This is potentially problematic, as understanding vegetarian meat consumption may offer insight into consumers' use of dietary labels. The following section briefly reviews the existing literature documenting the phenomenon and positions the current study in relation to it.

In a qualitative investigation of 76 British self-identified vegetarians and vegans, Beardsworth & Keil (1991) showed that 5 participants (6.5%) occasionally ate meat ("commonly chicken"), while 18 (23.7%) ate fish occasionally or regularly. In a different study of 90 female self-identified vegetarians, 51 participants (57%) occasionally ate fish, and 14 (16%) ate chicken (Barr and Chapman, 2002). A Finnish survey found even higher rates: 80% of the 783 self-identified vegetarian respondents "did not follow a vegetarian diet according to the operationalized definition" (Vinnari et al., 2009:487).

In a US study, 46% of the 108 self-identified vegetarian participants reported eating fish, and 25.1% reported eating chicken (Robinson-O'Brien et al., 2009). Rothgerber (2014) found that 27.5% of 214 self-identified vegetarians reported eating some types of fish and/or meat. Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2019) reported that 51% of 243 self-identified vegetarians had eaten meat since adopting the diet, and 12% still did so sporadically or regularly. In a French study, de Gavelle et al. (2019) found that self-identified vegetarians reported consuming an average of 6.2 grams of meat per day, compared to 99.8 grams per day among unrestricted omnivores (2019). Finally, in an Australian study, Malek and Umberger (2021b) found that, on average, the vegetarian part of the sample reported eating meat 1–3 times a month.

In short, vegetarian meat consumption appears widespread, though prevalence varies across studies.[3] This has led some authors to argue that self-identification is not a good measure for actual dietary habits (Vinnari et al., 2009).

While vegetarian meat consumption is well documented, only a few studies explore why it occurs. One factor mentioned in the literature is the duration of the dietary practice. Barr & Chapman (2002) found that 63% of vegetarians reported eating fewer animal products than when they first adopted the diet. Similarly, Rothgerber (2014) found that vegetarians who reported eating meat had followed the diet for significantly less time than the "strict" vegetarians. He also found that meat consumption was less common among vegetarian participants who found meat disgusting or immoral (2014).

Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2019) asked their participants to explain instances of meat consumption and to describe their social context. The most common reason (35%) was to make a social situation "flow more smoothly," followed by explicit social pressure (10%) (ibid, p.3). When it came to the social context of the meat consumption, most instances occurred with family (54%), often in the form of family gatherings or special occasions, followed by social gatherings with friends (15%) and eating with their partner (14%).
The challenges of coordinating meals with friends and family are well-documented. They arise during dietary shifts toward less meat (Wendler and Halkier, 2024; Wendler, 2024), in practicing vegetarianism (Wendler, 2023), and are often cited by ex-vegetarians as a reason for returning to meat (Barr & Chapman, 2002; Ruby, 2012).

[3] The differences between the results of the studies on vegetarian meat consumption may be explained by several factors: country contexts, the varying methodologies and ways of measuring meat consumption from study to study, the small sample sizes of most of the studies, etc.

In summary, the literature offers valuable insights into how and when vegetarians consume meat and points to challenges related to the social coordination of food activities. However, there are at least three limitations in the existing literature. First, no existing studies examine whether vegetarian meat consumption can be understood as expectable and ordinary instances of consumption. Most simply report its prevalence without investigating its causes. In both of the most recent studies that actually analyze vegetarian meat consumption, the phenomenon is interpreted as abnormal or deviant. For example, Rothgerber (2014) asks why vegetarians "define themselves in a category whose membership criteria they violate" (p. 98, abstract) and concludes that "something prevents them from full commitment" (p. 105). Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2019) similarly frame their study around understanding why vegetarians "violate their diets" (in the article title). This framing of vegetarian meat consumption as dietary "violations" implies that strict vegetarianism is the norm and should be aspired toward. In contrast, this study shows that vegetarian meat consumption can be an ordinary and expectable part of meat-avoiding consumer practices.

Second, most existing studies rely on survey data (with Jabs et al., 2000 as a notable exception). While survey studies have merits, qualitative dataanalysis can contribute a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of vegetarian meat consumption (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2019). Third, and finally, the existing literature focuses almost exclusively on identity aspects of meat consumption. While the identity perspective is valuable and relevant, it mostly overlooks everyday practice-related aspects of vegetarian meat consumption. This study seeks to address that gap.

Theories of Practice, Food Practices, and Meat Avoidance

In analyzing how vegetarian meat consumption is best understood and conceptualized, this study draws on theories of practice (Schatzki, 1996; Warde, 2005). Theories of practice encompass a range of overlapping theories that share core assumptions and concepts. Arguably the most central shared trait is that practices are placed as the main unit of analysis (Schatzki, 2019). This contrasts with individualist consumer studies, which typically understand consumer behavior as a sequence of choices influenced by different factors such as motivations, values, preferences, and rationalities and constrained by societal structures (Standal and Westkog, 2022; Keller et al., 2016; Southerton et al., 2012; Shove, 2010).

Instead, practice theories emphasize sequences of everyday activity and the routine aspects of consumption (Warde, 2014). While different conceptualizations exist, practices are commonly defined as nexuses of doings and sayings organized by elements (Schatzki, 1996), such as understandings, procedures, and engagements (Warde, 2005).

According to Warde (2005), understandings comprise both practical knowledge and general senses of what to say and do; procedures refer to written, verbal, and tacit rules of conduct; and engagements are the prescribed and acceptable end-goals of a practice. Practices exist, are reproduced, and change through their recurrent performances, i.e., the concrete, overlapping but distinct, temporally and spatially local enactments of a practice by individuals who carry it out (Shove et al., 2012).

Another central shared thesis is that practices overlap, interact with, and relate to each other (Schatzki, 2019). These multiple practices can be more or less compatible with each other, and so it can be a challenge for practitioners to juggle the performances of multiple practices in their everyday lives (Shove et al., 2012; Halkier, 2021).

This article focuses specifically on food practices, understood as a compound (Warde, 2016) of the closely related practices of food provisioning, cooking, and eating (Halkier, 2020). These practices interact and overlap with each other but also with other everyday practices such as work, mobility, and housing practices (Castelo

et al., 2021; Krog Juvik and Halkier, 2024). Food practices are never static but constantly reproduced or changed through recurrent enactments that integrate different elements (Warde, 2016).
Meat avoidance, such as vegetarianism and veganism, can be seen as a variant of food practice performances, organized by certain sets of elements that are in some ways different from those of omnivore food performances. These include understandings of what is normal and proper food (e.g., meat or legumes), practical understandings (e.g., cooking skills), procedures of proper food conduct, and engagements (e.g., animal rights & sustainability vs. cooking child-friendly food) (Wendler, 2023).

Methods

The analysis is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with young Danish meat avoiders (ages 18–30). The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2020 as part of a research project on meat reduction. While 29 meat reducers were interviewed in total, this article focuses specifically on the 15 participants who identified either as vegans, vegetarians, or pescatarians.

The participants were recruited through a CATI survey (n= 3,000) on the food habits of Danes (see Halkier and Lund, 2023). This enabled strategic sampling to maximize variation across factors, including gender, age, geographical location, level of education, household type, and self-reported eating habits. The aim of this sampling strategy was to ensure as many different perspectives on the subject as possible within the target participant group (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The resulting sample was diverse (for a table of the full participant sample, see (Wendler and Halkier, 2024). Compared to the rest of the sample, the meat-avoiding participants were more often college students (see Table 1).

The interviews followed a thematic interview guide designed to elicit narratives about the participants' everyday food practices, processes of dietary change, and experiences with social and practical challenges and support related to their dietary habits (Hitchings, 2012). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full.
The data were first coded openly, which produced descriptive codes and themes. Next, a theoretical coding was applied to compare conceptual codes from the broader research project with the descriptive codes (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). A third round of coding was conducted to identify any prominent themes not captured by the theoretical coding.

This final round of coding led to the idea for this article: While the broader project investigated dietary change toward reduced meat consumption (Wendler, 2023), most interviews with self-identified vegetarians, vegans, and pescatarians included narratives about meat and animal product consumption that did not fit with the technical definitions of the participants' stated diets. These narratives form the empirical basis of this article.

To ensure transparency in interpretation and to enable the reader to draw their own conclusions, each data excerpt used includes as much of the relevant interview context as possible (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010). All interview excerpts in this article have been translated from Danish to English, with attention to contextual meanings and language-specific metaphors.

The study followed established ethical standards for social science research, including the obtainment of informed consent and the anonymization of participant details (ASA, 2018). Participants received a gift card of 250 DKK (approx. €33) for their participation.

Table 1: Meat-Avoiding Participants

Name	Age	Household	Main occupation	(Usual) Diet
Torkild	21	Student dorm	College student	Pescatarian
Siri	23	Shared apartment	College student	Pescatarian
Christian	22	Shared apartment	College student	Pescatarian
Ida	25	Lives with partner	Graduate student	Vegetarian
Louise	23	Shared apartment	College student	Vegetarian
Niels	24	Lives with partner	Sound technician	Vegetarian
Josefine	20	Lives with parents and sister	HPE student[4]	Vegetarian
Laura and Rasmus	20, 21	Lives with partner	Sick leave/sales assistant	Vegetarians
Freja	24	Shared apartment	College student	Vegan
Jakob	29	Shared apartment	HPE student[4]	Vegan
Johanna	21	Single	College student	Vegan
Mikkel	22	Shared apartment	College student	Vegan
Sofie	29	Single	Nurse	Vegan
Stefan	28	Single/shared custody (50/50) of 3-year-old son	Consultant	Vegan

Results

In the following sections, interview data is utilized to analyze 1) how practitioners use dietary labels and 2) how meat consumption is organized in the everyday lives of meat avoiders. The first section shows that participants use dietary labels to describe their usual practice to others, without necessarily understanding them as strict dietary rules. The second section shows how vegetarian meat consumption occurs in situations where other engagements than dietary adherence become central to the organization of a food performance.

"I'm almost always a vegetarian": Dietary labels are used to describe usual practice

Understanding vegetarian meat consumption requires examining how practitioners use and understand dietary labels such as "vegetarian" or "vegan." As noted in the literature review, some studies argue that these labels should be understood as identities (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2019) and are not good indicators of actual diets (Vinnari et al., 2009). While there are no doubt identity aspects to dietary labels, this analysis emphasizes a different aspect, namely how practitioners use and understand these labels in their daily food practices. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with 25-year-old Ida, a college student who lives with her partner, Joachim. When asked whether they call themselves vegetarians, Ida pauses before answering "yes," followed by this exchange:

> *INT: Do I sense some hesitation?*
>
> *Ida: Yes, well... We have some friends who are vegetarians and never eat meat, and I know they think it's a bummer when non-vegetarians think that vegetarians eat fish. And Joachim and I eat fish once in a while. We usually don't cook with fish, but sometimes we eat it when we go to restaurants—we quite like sushi. So maybe that's why I hesitate a bit to call myself a vegetarian. On the other hand, in my daily life, I'm almost always a vegetarian (laughs). So it depends on how much time I have to explain, I guess.*
>
> *INT: So calling yourself a vegetarian can be an easy way of telling people you don't eat meat?*

[4] In Denmark, HPE (Higher Preparatory Exam) is a two-year upper secondary education program designed to prepare students for higher education, typically attended by students who are older than those in traditional high schools (gymnasiums).

Ida: Exactly. It is a label I use to describe myself, but I'm not sure if it is entirely accurate.

INT: Are you a pescatarian then? Although I guess fewer people know what that is.

Ida: Yes, there is that, but I also kind of think that pescatarians eat more fish than I do. Most of the time, I eat only vegetarian food. So I guess I am somewhat in-between (laughs), and there is not really a label for that.

Ida explains her hesitation by referencing a norm of proper vegetarian conduct, namely that vegetarians don't eat fish. She notes that in her daily life, she is "almost always" a vegetarian. When asked if the label "vegetarian" is a way to communicate dietary needs, she agrees and points to the lack of a suitable label for someone like herself, whose diet is "in-between" a strict vegetarian and a pescatarian diet. In this sense, Ida's use of the label "vegetarian" is pragmatic: The label fits with her diet "most of the time," and the alternative label of "pescatarian" is less accurate in describing her dietary habits.

A similar pragmatic approach is expressed by Niels, a 24-year-old sound technician who describes his diet as vegetarian and mostly vegan. Niels mentions eating fish at a Danish holiday dinner (St. Martin's Eve), prompting the following exchange:

INT: Do you eat fish then?

Niels: Yes, but only once in a while. I think it's kind of a sin.

INT: So is it when it is served, or would you make it yourself?

Niels: I'd never make it myself. But, like, at New Year's, I might eat some cod. Aside from that, I never eat fish. [...] I actually asked my mom if I can call myself a vegetarian if I eat fish once or twice a year. She answered by saying you wouldn't call someone a smoker if they smoke one cigarette a year. [...] I think that's pretty accurate.

The excerpt is notable for two reasons. First, like Ida, Niels is aware that a social norm of strict vegetarianism exists ("can I call myself a vegetarian..."). Second, his "smoker" analogy can be interpreted as a challenge to the idea that strict adherence is required to use the label "vegetarian." Unlike Ida, who emphasizes the lack of a better label, Niels justifies his use of the "vegetarian" label by questioning the strictness principle itself.

Together, the two excerpts illustrate a recurrent theme among the participants: dietary labels are used to describe usual dietary performances, not to signal 100% abstention from meat or animal products. Among the 15 meat-avoiding participants in the study, only three never mentioned any consumption of food that is not usually associated with the dietary labels they used. While the sample is not statistically representative, this finding—combined with prior research (Barr and Chapman, 2002)—suggests that complete dietary adherence may be the exception rather than the norm among self-identified meatavoiders.

In summary, this section shows that meat avoiders use dietary labels such as "vegetarian" to describe their usual food practices, not necessarily to indicate strict abstention from meat (or, in the case of vegans, other animal products). These findings contribute to the literature by showing that dietary labels are not only about identity alignment but also serve as pragmatic tools for consumers to communicate their dietary preferences—or simply as the best label available.

"In those situations, the vegan thing is sort of de-prioritized": When other end-goals matter more than dietary adherence

This section focuses on how participants' consumption of animal products outside of their usual diets is organized. More specifically, it shows how situational engagements can take precedence over dietary adherence and become central to organizing a food performance.

As in previous research, the participants almost always mention being in the company of others when they eat food outside of their usual diets (Jabs et al., 2000). For example, Louise, a 23-year-old vegetarian college student, was asked to describe her food habits, which was followed up with a question about meat:

> *Int: How about meat and such?*
>
> *Louise: I mean, I try to live vegetarian, and I've been calling myself a vegetarian for around four years. But if I'm visiting someone, especially my in-laws, who eat quite a lot of meat, sometimes the meat is sort of integrated into the dish.*
>
> *Int: Like in a stew?*
>
> *Louise: Exactly. In those cases, I'll eat meat. But if they make a roast and some sides, then I'll just eat the sides. I think it's because, I mean, I don't want to cause a stir, if that makes sense. [...] Personally, I think there is something socially valuable in cooking for guests, so I think it feels sort of strange to pick and choose and try to push my values on others.*

Louise's goal to not "cause a stir" mirrors the findings from earlier studies, which find that vegetarian meat consumption often happens in the company of others, either to manage the interaction (Jabs et al., 2000) or in response to explicit social pressure (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2019). In Louise's case, she doesn't mention explicit social pressure to eat meat. Instead, she frames her actions as part of proper guest conduct, where refusing food is seen as inappropriate (Warde et al., 2020). In other words, in certain situations, such as eating with the in-laws, other engagements or end-goals can take precedence over dietary adherence and become central to the organization of a food performance. In situations where such end-goals clash with that of dietary adherence, it may result in an instance of vegetarian meat consumption.

This dynamic is also evident in Freja's case, a 24-year-old vegan who participates in a food club with three friends. They "meet up and eat dinner, bake a cake, and watch The Great Bakeoff.[5]" As part of the interviews, participants brought and described photos of their meals from the three previous days. Some of Freja's photos were from that week's food club:

> *Freja: This picture is from Tuesday, from the food club, which was at my friends' apartment.*
>
> *Int: Did you have cake that night as well?*
>
> *Freja: Yes, we had cake later. I forgot to take a picture of that, but it was an upside-down apple cake. [...] The apples are placed in the bottom, and the dough on top, and then you turn it after baking it.*
>
> *Int: Ah, okay, is that to make it look nice? In the spirit of The Great Bakeoff?*
>
> *Freja: (laughs) Exactly. We care a lot about that, actually. And in those situations, the vegan thing is sort of de-prioritized. One week, we tried to make a glace, which consists of white chocolate and condensed milk. [...]*

[5] The Great Bakeoff (called "Den Store Bagedyst" in the Danish version) is a TV program in which amateur bakers compete against each other in a series of baking challenges.

Int: There are usually eggs in cakes as well, right?

Freja: Yes. I mean, butter and milk are super easy to substitute—that is no problem. Eggs can also be managed, at least some of the time. You can use agar powder or aquafaba from chickpeas. So there are options to make it vegan, but it's not that important in that context.

Freja's account illustrates another way in which situational end-goals can take priority over dietary adherence and become central to a food performance. In this case, the social event of baking and watching The Great Bakeoff, as well as trying out different techniques such as decorating a cake with glace, becomes more central to Freja's food performance than strict dietary adherence.

Other participants shared similar examples. Stefan, a 28-year-old vegan, cooks meat for his omnivorous 3-year-old son, as he hasn't found vegan dishes that the child will eat. Jakob, a 29-year-old vegetarian, has a tradition of eating sushi with his mother a couple of times a year. Sofie, a 29-year-old vegan nurse, eats a non-vegan cake when her parents bake it, as a way of acknowledging the gesture.

In summary, this section shows that meat avoiders sometimes eat food outside of their usual diet when other situational end-goals than dietary adherence become central to organizing a food performance. These findings offer a framework for understanding vegetarian meat consumption across diverse social contexts.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article has examined how meat avoiders use dietary labels and how vegetarian meat consumption is organized in their everyday lives. Based on interviews with 15 Danish meat avoiders, the analysis shows that participants use dietary labels like "vegetarian" or "vegan" to describe their usual dietary practice to others, due to the lack of an appropriate alternative label or as a rejection of the idea that strict dietary adherence is a prerequisite for using dietary labels. The analysis also shows that vegetarian meat consumption often occurs in situations where other situational end-goals than dietary adherence—such as being a good guest or engaging in a shared activity—become central to the organization of a food performance. The following discussion connects these findings to existing research and outlines implications for research, policy, and public understandings of meat-avoiding consumers and their use of dietary labels.

From the analysis, four key observations emerge. First, while some meat avoiders may understand strict dietary adherence as the ideal, using a dietary label does not necessarily imply such an understanding. The analysis highlights examples of dietary pragmatism, where participants are aware of the limitations of available dietary labels and sensitive to varying end-goals and procedures of expected and acceptable conduct across social contexts and different eating performances (Halkier, 2022). In other words, vegetarian meat consumption is not the result of a lack of commitment from the meat-avoiding consumer. Instead, vegetarian meat consumption happens when consumers are also committed to other things than dietary adherence, and because, in some situations, the consumers' commitments clash. This finding reflects earlier research, which highlights that consumers use convenience food not out of laziness but as a tool to manage the multiple commitments of everyday life (Jackson et al., 2018).

Second, the results challenge the framing of vegetarian meat consumption as "dietary violations" or "lapses." Instead, the results show that instances of meat consumption are better viewed as ordinary and expectable consumption by socially sensitive consumers who navigate multiple activities and end-goals in their everyday lives (Halkier, 2022). Even if some meat-avoiding consumers aspire to strict dietary adherence, there is no clear reason why researchers should expect complete adherence of all meat-avoiding consumers, or indeed why consumers should expect it of each other. It has long been well-established in the sociology of consumption that consumers are not systematic in their (non-)consumption of other types of products, even when they

state in surveys that they try to be. For example, people stating that they buy only organic products very rarely do so exclusively, and there is a gap between intention-to-buy and actual consumption of organic products (Schäufele and Janssen, 2021). Another example: consumers who think proper cooking means cooking "from scratch" still regularly use and eat some preprocessed and convenience products (Wolfson et al., 2016). In light of these examples, it is unsurprising that occasional meat consumption among meat avoiders appears widespread.

Third, recognizing vegetarian meat consumption as ordinary and expectable, rather than as dietary violations or lapses, does not imply that it will always be so. As the analysis shows, vegetarian meat consumption is often induced by situations in which dietary adherence clashes with other situational engagements and end-goals. Take Louise's example: In her understanding, sometimes dietary adherence clashes with being a good guest (i.e., eating what is served and not making special demands). This type of clash between the end-goals of the situation (e.g., between dietary adherence and being a good guest) in part stems from plant-based eating practices being uncommon. In other words, if plant-based eating practices became more widespread, fewer situational clashes like the above -mentioned would occur in the lives of meat-avoiding practitioners, and so would, most likely, occasions of vegetarian meat consumption.

Fourth, consistent with earlier research, participants most often consume meat or other animal products in the company of others. However, this study adds nuance by showing that vegetarian meat consumption need not be the result of explicit social pressure. Rather, vegetarian meat consumption is often the result of meat avoiders exhibiting dietary pragmatism, as well as sensibility to the varying social dynamics in specific eating situations.

In sum, this article contributes to the literature by showing that vegetarian meat consumption is best understood as ordinary and expectable behavior among meat avoiders. This has implications for how dietary labels are defined and used in empirical research. If occasional meat consumption is ordinary conduct among self-identified vegetarians and vegans, food studies may need to revise how these categories are operationalized. Rather than understanding meat avoiders as people who never eat meat, it may be more accurate to understand them as consumers who actively try to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet.

The results have implications for policy and intervention efforts. Efforts to promote reduced meat consumption—whether for health or environmental reasons—should avoid reinforcing unrealistic expectations of 100% dietary adherence. Apart from being inaccurate, such expectations are potentially exclusionary and stigmatizing (Ruby, 2012), while there is little evidence that they help dietary change along. If prospective meat avoiders believe they need to be absolutely consequent in their abstinence from eating meat to identify themselves as vegetarian, or if they face mockery and contestations for their occasional exceptions to their diet (as in the case of Agnieszka described in the introduction), they may be discouraged from their effort to reduce their meat consumption. Conversely, a shift away from the expectation of 100% dietary strictness among meat avoiders may help make such practices appear more accessible and attainable to prospective practitionersIn other words, intervention efforts should aim to encourage and support consumer efforts to reduce meat consumption, without reproducing narratives of strict abstinence from meat consumption as a prerequisite for qualifying as a meat avoider.

While dietary pragmatism among meat avoiders may be common, it also potentially presents a dilemma. If, as this article suggests, it becomes more widely acknowledged—both politically and publicly—that some vegetarians and vegans occasionally eat meat, it could lead to the perception that serving meat to meat avoiders is socially acceptable, and that they can be expected to eat it. This, in turn, could increase pressure on meat avoiders to make exceptions to their diets.

The Danish Vegetarian Association (DVA) provides evidence that this issue is not merely theoretical, addressing

a "common misunderstanding" about dietary labels on their website. The DVA notes that sometimes "people who supplement their otherwise vegetarian diet with, for example, fish and shellfish, refer to themselves as vegetarians," but emphasizes that "eating fish (...) is not considered vegetarian." Instead, the DVA encourages those people to use "the more accurate term 'pescatarian'" (The Danish Vegetarian Association, 2025).[6] While this example does not speak to how widespread concerns about blurring the lines between dietary labels are, it illustrates that the issue is discussed within at least some vegetarian communities.

In light of the above, a clarification is warranted: This study does not propose a redefinition of what constitutes vegetarian or vegan food, nor does it challenge the concept of what an ideal-typical vegetarian or vegan diet entails. Rather, the analysis shows that real-life meat avoiders use dietary labels to communicate their dietary needs to others, but not necessarily to signify strict adherence to an ideal-typical vegetarian or vegan diet. Of course, vegetarians and vegans are not a monolithic group; individuals vary in how they practice meat avoidance, with some making occasional exceptions and others adhering more strictly. The study also highlights how competing situational end-goals in everyday life can lead meat avoiders to make occasional exceptions to their otherwise vegetarian or vegan diet. In other words, the results of this article are not intended to suggest that vegetarians and vegans should be expected to accept being served meat. Exhibitions of dietary pragmatism among vegetarians and vegans do not change their overall commitment to avoid meat and other animal products.

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