

Masculinity and Men's Resistance to Meat Reduction

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes meat reduction as a masculinity threat for men and presents strategies for making men more receptive to meat reduction. Meat consumption is stereotypically associated with traditional masculinity. Compared to women, men tend to eat more meat and to be more resistant to vegetarianism. Eschewing meat has potential to undermine feelings of and portrayals of manhood, whereas eating meat may provide men with a sense and image of traditional masculinity. Efforts to frame meat reduction as a masculine act may be useful for promoting behavior change among men. Three strategies are proposed for aligning meat reduction with masculinity, ripe for testing in future research. These strategies include emphasizing new forms of masculinity, masculine branding of meat reduction, and touting athletic/sexual performance benefits of meat reduction. Efforts that target beliefs about masculinity have promise for reducing meat consumption among men.

Keywords

vegetarianism, meat, gender, masculinity

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Men tend to eat more meat than do women, and many men are highly resistant to reducing their meat intake. High rates of meat consumption among men threaten environmental sustainability, men's health, and the well-being of non-human animals. Previous research has highlighted that meat consumption is stereotypically associated with masculinity and that this association could deter men from eating less meat.



Aims

The first aim of this research is to evaluate the idea that reducing one's meat intake could threaten a man's sense of masculinity. The second aim is to present new strategies for making men more receptive to meat reduction.

Findings

There is not yet clear evidence that masculinity concerns directly prevent men from cutting back on meat. Nevertheless, there is a strong theoretical basis to suggest that this is the case, and some empirical evidence has linked heightened masculinity beliefs to higher meat consumption. Moreover, men tend to receive more social disapproval for being a vegetarian than do women. It is difficult to persuade people to eat less meat, especially men. Interventions tend to reduce meat consumption less effectively among men than they do among women. In future research, it is worth testing the possibility that men may become more open to meat reduction when their anxieties that meat reduction could undermine their masculinity are assuaged.

Future Directions

Efforts to make meat reduction seem consistent with masculinity may be useful for reducing the amount of meat men eat. Three strategies for doing this are proposed and are ripe for testing in future research. One strategy is to promote new forms of masculinity instead of traditional masculinity. A second strategy is to brand meat reduction as masculine. A third strategy is to inform men about the benefits of plant-based diets for their athletic and sexual performance.

Eating less meat is beneficial for reducing the suffering of non-human animals, improving human health, and promoting environmental sustainability (Willett et al., 2019). As researchers and advocates work toward reducing public meat consumption, it can be useful to consider key individual differences associated with current and prospective eating behaviors. One such individual difference reliably tied to meat consumption is gender: Compared to women, men tend to eat more meat and to be less open to vegetarianism (Rosenfeld, 2018). There is an abundance of theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence suggesting that meat is stereotypically associated with masculinity (Adams, 1990; Rothgerber, 2013; Rozin et al., 2012; Sobal, 2005). This association has a variety of ramifications, from what foods men choose to eat to how they are socially evaluated based on those choices. In the current article, I first evaluate the idea that meat reduction poses a masculinity threat for men. Then, I propose strategies for combating this threat in order to make men more receptive to meat reduction.

Meat Avoidance as a Threat to Masculinity

At present, there is not clear evidence that masculinity concerns deter men from meat reduction, and investigating this matter further should be a priority of future research. There is, however, a sound theoretical basis for this proposition. Meat is traditionally considered a male food (Rozin et al., 2012), and eating meat is an exemplar enactment of manhood (Sobal, 2005). Manhood is theorized to be a precarious state, whereby men need to earn and demonstrate their status as a legitimate man through publicly verifiable actions (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Eating meat meal after meal may enable men to perform masculine gender roles recurrently and solidify their manhood. Masculinity in Western cultures is marked by strength and dominance, and perceptions about the acquisition and preparation of meat (e.g., hunting, killing, and butchering animals) may embody these sentiments (Adams, 1990; Sobal, 2005). For men, eating meat may provide a sense and image of masculinity because it enables feelings of human superiority to other animals and is intertwined with traits that define traditional masculinity (e.g., strength, power) and its corresponding social roles (e.g., being a provider for one's family).

It is thus not surprising that men tend to receive more social disapproval for being a vegetarian than do women (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). This gendered denigration likely exists because people see vegetarian men as less conforming to traditional gender roles, perceiving them as less masculine and more feminine than they perceive meat-eating men to be (Ruby & Heine, 2011; Timeo & Suitner, 2018; cf. Thomas, 2016). The thought of giving up meat does seem to threaten many men's familiar senses of manhood and masculinity. In a survey of men who eat meat, participants condemned men who eschew meat, describing vegetarian men as "lacking testosterone and braveness" and as a "huge disappointment for the rest of the real masculine men," even so far as saying that vegetarian men "should be prosecuted for their unmanly behaviors" (Bogueva et al., 2020, pp. 36–39).

Accordingly, the perception that meat consumption is a masculine behavior may present a barrier to meat reduction among men (Bogueva et al., 2022; Kildal & Syse, 2017), perhaps particularly among men who value traditional masculinity. In one study, greater conformity to traditional gender roles predicted lower openness to vegetarianism among men, but not among women (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021), suggesting that between-gender differences in resistance to vegetarianism may be due to gender role norms among men rather than norms among women. This finding aligns with other research reporting that masculinity threats amplify men's attachments to eating meat, whereas femininity threats have no effect on women's meat attachments (Mesler et al., 2022; Nakagawa & Hart, 2019).

Reducing Meat Consumption Among Men

Evidently, men likely face distinct gender-based barriers to reducing their meat intake. These barriers may help to explain why interventions tend to reduce meat consumption less effectively among men than women (Jalil et al., 2020; Sorensen et al., 2005) and why emotional appeals—such as humanizing non-human animals (Dowsett et al., 2018) or depicting meat as having come from a baby (vs. adult) animal (Piazza et al., 2018)—tend to promote more negative feelings toward meat less strongly for men than they do for women.

Existing evidence suggests that it is challenging to persuade people, especially men, to eat less meat. Indeed, people face many barriers to reducing their meat intake, with the strongest barriers being concerns about the tastiness and healthfulness of vegetarian consumption (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2020). For men, anxieties about feeling less masculine upon giving up meat seem to pose a unique barrier on top of other common concerns. In one study, which took a gender-centered approach to meat reduction, a masculinity affirmation—which involved telling men that they are more masculine than 85% of the population—was shown to reduce men's commitments to eating meat (Mesler et al., 2022). Masculinity affirmations thus offer a promising tactic for improving men's attitudes toward meat reduction. Nevertheless, it remains unknown how enduring any effects from affirmation would be or how readily men might habituate to repeated affirmations over time.

As a complement to masculinity affirmations, and as an alternative either to focusing on common barriers like taste or health or to emphasizing ethical or environmental benefits of meat reduction, a targeted approach that frames meat reduction as a masculine eating behavior may be useful for encouraging men to eat less meat. Here, I propose three strategies for aligning meat reduction with masculinity, which are ripe for testing in future research. The first of these strategies represents a longer-term effort to align meat reduction with masculinity by changing gender role norms, whereas the latter two strategies afford more immediate ways of working within existing social structures to change perceptions of meat reduction.

Promote New Masculinity

Traditional beliefs about masculinity seem to restrict men's willingness to reduce their meat intake. Thus, one strategy for making meat reduction seem more congruent with masculinity is to promote new forms of masculinity instead of traditional masculinity. New masculinity embodies authenticity, self-growth, self-awareness, nurturing tendencies, and questioning of cultural definitions of masculinity (Kaplan et al., 2017). That is, men who subscribe to new masculinity see value in expressing their emotions, being sensitive to others, and becoming better versions of themselves. In rejecting traditionally masculine sentiments that “real men eat meat,” men who embrace new masculinity may

be more willing to empathize with non-human animals, express concern for the environment, and deviate from gendered scripts about eating behavior. Indeed, among men, greater identification with new masculinity is associated with lower meat consumption and more positive attitudes toward vegetarians (De Backer et al., 2020). Interventions encouraging new forms of masculinity have shown benefits for social and emotional well-being (e.g., Exner-Cortens et al., 2020) and may be adapted for research in the domain of meat consumption. Research on gender transformative paradigms suggests that these interventions may be most effective when they address existing social norms that deter men from meat reduction and cultivate new norms that hold men accountable for acting in line with new masculinity (Brush & Miller, 2019).

The most progress may stand to be gained from adopting a more developmental view to identify gender socializations by which children internalize meat-masculinity stereotypes. By intervening on parents, schools, and children's media to encourage new masculinity and to avoid portrayals of meat consumption as tied to manhood, researchers and advocates may achieve the most long-term progress toward reduced societal meat intake. Inevitably, attitudes among children and adults operate conjointly, as adults tend to be decision-makers when it comes to children's upbringings, educations, and media consumption. If the adults with whom children engage subscribe to traditional masculinity, then any efforts to encourage new masculinity beliefs among children will likely be undermined. Thus, to achieve long-term progress across generations, it seems promising to intervene on adults who interact frequently with children. In doing so, adult role models could set norms of new masculinity for children at a time when children are constructing their first narratives of gender roles.

The uptake of vegetarianism in itself could drive cultural shifts away from traditional masculinity, potentially setting off a feedback loop. It is possible that hegemonic masculinity could weaken as vegetarianism becomes more mainstream and accepted by men, which could in turn assuage stereotypes about meat and masculinity. By challenging gender norms, refuting meat-masculinity links, and embodying hybrid masculinity, vegetarian men may expand cultural sentiments about masculinity and combat the idea that vegetarianism is feminine (DeLessio-Parson, 2017; Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018). Practicing vegetarianism may signal a progressive form of new masculinity that echoes feminist sentiments, including challenging the status quo, questioning social norms, expressing compassion for others, and rejecting social dominance hierarchies (Oliver, 2023). By adopting a vegetarian diet, men signal their willingness to deny sociocultural definitions of what it means to be a "real" man (Adams & Donovan, 2007).

Brand Meat Reduction as Masculine

A second—and more immediately feasible—strategy for aligning meat reduction with masculinity is to brand meat reduction as masculine. Perhaps the most direct way to do this is through media endorsements of meat reduction that embody masculinity. Mas-

culine branding of consumption behaviors has been shown to improve men's openness to more traditionally feminine consumption trends, such as sustainable consumption (Brough et al., 2016). Researchers may, for example, identify public figures within their culture of interest who are considered highly masculine and who have publicly endorsed plant-based diets, whether as consumers, advocates, or both. When men are exposed to such endorsements, they may come to view meat reduction as more appropriate for men and in turn be more open to reducing their own meat intake. Another possible endorsement tactic may include advertisements that depict men choosing plant-based products (e.g., Beyond Burger) over meat-based products (e.g., conventional burger) while conforming to images of traditional masculinity (e.g., having a muscular physique, being a leader, attracting women). Key mediators to examine in studying any such endorsements might include meat-masculinity associations and perceptions of masculinity threat tied to meat reduction. Potential moderators could include traditional gender role conformity, gender role beliefs, endorsement of manhood as precarious, and current level of meat consumption. Testing these individual differences could help to identify types of men for whom masculine branding of meat reduction may be most effective.

Notably, efforts to promote meat reduction by appealing to traditional masculinity could be inconsistent the first proposed strategy of emphasizing new masculinity. This inconsistency highlights the need to consider not only which strategies may reduce men's meat intakes most effectively, but also how these strategies may influence gender roles beliefs more generally in adaptive or maladaptive ways. Appealing to traditional masculinity may inadvertently reinforce toxic stereotypical portrayals of what it means to be manly. Toxic masculinity encourages men to compete with and dominate others and discourages them from seeking mental health treatment (Kupers, 2005). One way to assuage this concern is to test whether traditionally hypermasculine men are even essential for achieving masculine branding. Could exposure to vegetarian men across a wide spectrum of masculinity suffice to make omnivorous men see meat reduction as a gender-consistent behavior? This question is ripe for testing, and if it is supported, then efforts to reduce men's meat consumption could leverage diverse depictions of men—and not simply hypermasculine men—to endorse meat reduction.

Emphasize Performance Benefits of Meat Reduction

A third way to align meat reduction with masculinity is to inform men about the possible benefits of plant-based diets for their athletic and sexual performance. Manhood is theorized to be a precarious state calling for recurrent verification through behavior (Vandello & Bosson, 2013), and athletic and sexual behaviors can validate a man's manhood and masculinity (Fergus et al., 2002; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Campaigns like the 2018 documentary *Game Changers* emphasize that athletes can thrive on plant-based diets. Such campaigns seem promising for combating perceptions that meat is essential for building muscle and strength, which may be influential to meat

reduction for men in particular. Focusing on the benefits of plant-based diets for sexual performance, meanwhile, may be more novel while still having a sound theoretical basis. Central to traditional notions of masculinity for men is the ability to attain and maintain an erection (Potts, 2000); erectile dysfunction, thus, can pose a masculinity threat (Fergus et al., 2002). Men may be more easily motivated to change their eating behaviors when they are made aware of links between diet and erectile dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction and cardiovascular disease share an underlying etiology in atherosclerosis and impaired blood flow (Gandaglia et al., 2014). Just as vegetarian diets are associated with lower risk for cardiovascular disease via these mechanisms, such diets are also associated with lower incidence of erectile dysfunction (Carto et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021). In 2010, animal rights organization PETA launched a campaign emphasizing improved erectile function in order to promote veganism, especially for men. Still, research on the efficacy of this type of messaging is lacking, and discussions of links between diet and erectile function do not yet seem mainstream.

Focusing on the potential benefits of meat reduction for sexual performance could be a novel way to appeal to men, offering an alternative to more common appeals to general health, ethics, or sustainability. If men can come to view meat reduction as a vehicle for supporting these types of behaviors that validate their masculinity, then this mindset may ultimately combat preexisting beliefs about meat consumption as a masculine act.

Further Considerations

A general critique of existing research on gender and meat consumption/reduction is that most studies have taken an exclusively binary approach to gender. To understand a fuller spectrum of relationships between gender and eating behavior, it is important to examine a wider net of gender identities, such as individuals who identify as nonbinary or transgender. In addition to considering gender categories, it may often be valuable to assess within-gender variance in gender roles, conformity, and values and to test how these factors associate with meat consumption attitudes and behaviors. To the extent that people view meat consumption as type of gender display, then the self-images and beliefs people hold about gender may directly influence their eating behaviors. Identifying which gender-pertinent self-images and beliefs are associated with high meat consumption could highlight promising targets for behavioral interventions.

Relatedly, research accounting for sexual orientation may be another novel and worthwhile avenue of future inquiry. It is likely that men's beliefs about meat consumption as a gender display differ depending on their sexual orientation. For heterosexual men, eating meat may be a way to enhance one's mate value whereas avoiding meat may make one seem less desirable (Timeo & Suitner, 2018). It would be informative to examine how meat consumption vs. avoidance influences the desirability of gay men and men with other sexual orientations. To the extent that people associate meat

consumption with ideals of heterosexual masculinity, resistance to meat reduction could stem in part from homophobia. Interventions seeking to reduce meat consumption via targeting gender roles would likely benefit from testing sexual orientation as a potential moderator of effects.

Lastly, in interpreting research findings and devising gender-focused strategies for changing eating behavior, it is important to consider the cultural context in which research unfolds. As the meaning of gender varies across cultures, scholars should seek to replicate empirical findings cross-culturally so as to understand which effects are generalizable and which effects may be specific to certain sociocultural conditions.

Conclusion

The amount of meat humanity currently produces and consumes poses threats to human health and environmental sustainability, while harming sentient non-human animals. Gender differences in meat consumption are reliable, with men eating more meat and being more resistant to meat reduction compared to women. The belief that meat consumption is a masculine behavior appears to fuel this gender difference by encouraging men to consume meat; eating meat may be a gender display whereby men perform a masculine role, whereas avoiding meat may pose masculinity threat. To promote meat reduction among men, targeted efforts that align meat reduction with perceptions of masculinity offer promising strategies that may complement messages touting ethical, health, and environmental benefits.

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