

## ABSTRACT

MYCEK, MARI KATE. Meatless Meals and Masculinity: An Examination of Men's Use of Rationality and Scientific Research to explain Their Plant-based Diets. (Under the direction of Dr. Michaela DeSoucey.)

The relationship between eating meat and performances of masculinity has been well studied by sociologists and eco-feminists for decades (e.g. Adams 2000, 2003; Adams and Donovan 1995; Fiddes 1991; Lockie and Collie 1999; Nath 2011; Rogers 2008; Sobal 2005). Their findings have pointed to a historical and long-standing portrayed connection between eating meat and “acting like a man.” However, both performances of masculinity and food consumption practices are not stagnant and change over time. Individuals must adapt to shifting social expectations of what is “normal” and “acceptable” gender and eating behavior.

A burgeoning trend of alternative diets focuses on tenets such as eating local, organic, fair trade, and/or “healthy” foods and is connected to ideas of personal and moral responsibility (Alkon 2012; Biltekoff 2013). This trend is changing what it looks like for middle and upper-middle class people to eat acceptably and allows for a selective group of men to engage in alternative diets. This thesis explores a different side of the meat/masculinity picture; rather than focusing on the perceived connection displayed between meat and masculinity, I examine the lives of vegan and vegetarian men. By engaging in a practice that is conventionally linked to ideas about femininity, veg\* men have an opportunity to challenge gendered expectations.

Meatless Meals and Masculinity: An Examination of Men's Use of Rationality and Scientific  
Research to Explain Their Plant-based Diets

by  
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## DEDICATION

With all of my heart I dedicate this thesis to my parents.

## BIOGRAPHY

Mari Kate Mycek is a graduate student at North Carolina State University. She graduated from Purchase College in 2012, where her interest in the sociology of food first began.

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## INTRODUCTION

Individuals make choices every day to perform what they are socialized to believe is an appropriate gender identity. Gender socialization informs how people think, act, and perceive others. Individuals are socialized to believe that masculine characteristics hold more value and are naturally superior, giving men power and control. How and what individuals eat is greatly influenced by what they are socialized to believe are appropriate gendered choices. Meat eating is a prominent case in point. Long held viewpoints, which do not necessarily reflect historical fact, celebrate the trope of the male hunter and continue to pervade current western ideologies of appropriate food choices for men and women (Adams 2000; Sobal 2005; Sumpter 2015). These ideas are supported through media depictions, everyday social interactions, and the power of socialization. Eating, culture, and identity are intricately connected; eating becomes a base for collective identity and a sense of belonging among communities (Fischler 1988). However, the meaning socially attached to consuming different foods, including meat, changes over time.

Meat eating can be a contentious topic for some Americans: some people refuse to eat any meat and other people do not think a meal is complete without it. Others may not even think about their meat consumption in moral terms; ethical vegetarianism and veganism are grounded in the idea that it is “not right” to eat or exploit animals. Given the role of meat in the traditional American meal and the power of the meat industry, those who choose not to eat it can be seen as deviant or disruptive by others who believe it is an essential aspect of the American diet (Nestle 2002). Meat is (and has been for decades) an integral part of the American diet, often indicating cultural identity and class status. For instance, meat was rationed during American wartimes and socially classified as a symbol of wealth and

prosperity post-war (Biltekoff 2013). Women, historically and presently, comprise the majority of non-meat eaters, which I refer to as veg\*ans<sup>1</sup>, in the US (Newport 2012). Mainstream gender socialization and expectations of masculinity can make a veg\* identity socially and personally challenging for men.

A sociological understanding of masculinity emphasizes masculinity as socially constructed in and through everyday life (Connell 2005). In other words, performances of masculinity are often taken for granted as “natural” rather than understood as socially created and maintained. Academics have noted and studied the connection between eating meat and masculinity (e.g. Adams 2000, 2003; Adams and Donovan 1995; Fiddes 1991; Lockie and Collie 1999; Nath 2011; Rogers 2008; Sobal 2005). Many find that the connection between meat eating and performances of masculinity are perpetuated in the American public sphere, such as through media depictions and everyday interaction.

While some ideas about food consumption have occupied dominant positions in the social imagination for decades, food expectations evolve over time (Biltekoff 2013). A burgeoning trend of alternative diets, for instance, focuses on tenets such as eating local, organic, fair trade, and/or “healthy” foods and is connected to ideas of personal and moral responsibility – helping consumers to see eating as a way to combat social issues such as the “obesity epidemic” and climate change (Alkon 2012; Biltekoff 2013). The idea of “voting with your fork/dollar” has been proven to be largely unsuccessful in actually instituting any change to the current agri-business system (Alkon 2012; Parker 2013). These recent cultural shifts lead to questioning whether and how these changes have social repercussions for how veg\* men negotiate their identities within what they may see as a anti-veg\* American

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<sup>1</sup> Vegans and vegetarians

culture. Below, I explore a different side of the meat/masculinity picture; rather than focusing on the perceived connection displayed between meat and masculinity, I examine the lives of vegan and vegetarian men. By engaging in a practice that is conventionally linked to ideas about femininity, veg\* men have an opportunity to challenge gendered expectations. They may also be held accountable for deviating from gendered expectations, resulting in ridicule or the questioning of their status as men.

I conducted and analyzed interviews with twenty veg\* men to better understand how men make sense of and explain a veg\* identity in relation to their broader identity practices. I find that performances of masculinity in relation to veg\* food choices often defy the historical feminization of being a veg\*an, while they also uphold gendered binaries of emotion/rationality and current ideas of middle-class, white masculinity. They use their diets to bolster their masculine performance by explaining their choice to become veg\* in particular ways that evoke traditionally masculine ideas of rationality, science, and reason.

Below, I begin with a discussion of how masculinity is socially constructed and how meat eating is a part of this practice. I then examine the current cultural climate, one in which veg\* diets are becoming more common and accepted in some communities, and its relevance in veg\* men's lives. Then, in my analysis, I find that veg\* men's eating practices do not challenge existing gender norms and masculine ideals, but instead reinforce a gender binary. The men in my study bolster their decision to avoid eating meat by explaining it as a rational decision and based on scientific research rather than personal opinion or emotions. These explanations position their diet choices as in line with conventional ideas of what those around them expect from a masculine identity. The majority of the men cited ethical reasons as a primary or secondary reason for becoming veg\*, yet their explanations contain a distinct

absence of emotions. Only one of the twenty men interviewed mentioned a visceral and emotional response to killing animals as an explanation for being veg\*.

The men effectively engage in a feminized practice (eating only plants) but masculinize it, rather than feminize themselves and their consumption identities. They give accounts for their consumption identities that bridge the gap between what is expected of a traditional masculine diet and their own actions (Scott and Lyman 1968). This practice has important implications; their efforts to separate themselves from the historical feminization of veg\*ism in the United States further devalues femininity and reinforces the gender binary. Below I also explore in what ways their social class is also a part of how they eat and talk about eating. This analysis has important implications for an intersectional understanding of meat and masculinity. It complicates the gender analysis that has occupied much of the literature about the topic. Eating veg\* in the current cultural climate is not only a personal choice but a way for individuals' to differentiate themselves and obtain culinary capital and class distinction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Shifting Social Construction of Masculinity*

Gendered expectations can change over time on social and individual levels; these expectations are partly expressed by the foods individuals consume. In the past two decades eco-feminists have detailed the ways in which meat eating is detrimental to both women and nature through the depiction of meat as masculine and powerful (Adams 2000, 2003; Adams and Donovan 1995). As participants in identity performances that are mediated by social contexts, individuals learn to use markers and symbols (such as clothing, hairstyles, makeup, food consumption, etc.) to present and perform “appropriate” selves. We adapt our

performances based on our companions and the setting, among other concerns (Goffman 1959). When it comes to gender, people perform in response to messages from their family, friends, and media. Individuals “do” gender every day and accomplishing the appropriate gender display is a reoccurring and practical pursuit. Individuals are held accountable for doing gender “correctly” through interactions with others (West and Zimmerman 1987).

The inequality associated with gender performances has prompted some activists and scholars to pose the question: can gender be undone (demolishing the gender binary) or redone (redefining what qualities are associated with masculinity and femininity)? West and Zimmerman (2009), who originally coined the concept “doing gender,” suggest that what some scholars refer to as “undoing gender” is more accurately termed “redoing gender” and that many cases of individuals deviating from prescribed gender norms is not them doing away with gender in its entirety, but rather is a change in the normative conceptions in which each gender is held accountable. Even many individuals and groups of people who challenge gender norms and expectations often work within the system of a gender binary, namely “redoing” gender and shifting the accountability structure, rather than completely disengaging with it (Brenton and Elliott 2012; Connell 2010; West and Zimmerman 2009).

Differences in men and women are often thought to derive from biological distinctions such as hormones and chromosomes, yet in everyday interaction these parts of a body are not readily visible and cultural practices such as visual cues and behavior are used to categorize who is a man and who is a woman (Schilt 2010). Performing masculinity includes learning a set of collective practices codified as ‘male,’ rather than a single attribute. The ideal set of masculine displays, not just an identity, combines to create what is understood in sociological terminology as ‘hegemonic masculinity:’ the most respected and

celebrated masculine performance (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 2005; Schwalbe 2005). Masculinity is an ideal: what men ought to be, not necessarily what they are, and defined in opposition to femininity (Chodorow 1999). Very few men meet the normative standards for hegemonic masculinity but many men benefit from its existence (Connell 2005). Not all males are a “man” and that the cultivation of maleness does not happen accidentally. The differentiation between masculinity and femininity is purposeful, they are not only different but masculinity is situated as superior in order for men to retain their dominant position in society.

Gender socialization occurs throughout individuals’ lives and unconsciously teaches them what a man or woman “is.” To be socially categorized as a man in the US, one must act in distinctly masculine ways. The institutionalization of a gender binary relies more on the logic of culture rather than an individual’s biological makeup (Schilt 2010). Men need to learn how to convey manliness through currently appropriate actions. Hegemonic masculinity is not the same at all times in all places and men must establish their identity as a man during interactions with other men and women (Connell 2005; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

These actions, or “manhood acts” (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) often go unacknowledged because they are naturalized as “men acting like men.” Though, when critically examined, we can identify how these performances contribute to the reproduction of inequality through routinized interactions and symbols enacted by both men and women. Men achieve differentiation from women by performing “manhood acts” that display the current idealized western traits of masculinity (i.e. rationality, strength, control, etc.) and serve to subordinate women and achieve power. These manhood acts reinforce the gender

hierarchy and subordinate women, they signify a self-capable of exerting control (Schwalbe 2005). Current ideas of masculinity and femininity not only clearly distinguish themselves from each other; masculinity receives its prestige, privilege and power in the US at the expense of women and femininity.

Certain performance elements through socialization become associated with one gender or the other, resulting in binaries that restrict “suitable” behavior for both men and women. Binary thinking results in the objectification and domination of the subordinate half of the binary. Thus, as Collins (2000) writes, “Whites rule Blacks, men dominate women, reason is thought superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supersede emotion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects” (p. 71). It is important to understand, then, how veg\* men explain and justify their practices, because they engage in practices that often have gender-coded meanings. For example PETA’s (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, conceivably the most well-known vegan advocacy group) ad campaigns often try to elicit emotions to make the viewer be concerned for animals, with the intention of making the viewer *care* so much they do not want to eat them. Similarly, vegan campaigns based on health concerns are rooted in the idea that if someone *cares* about their health they would eat healthy (i.e. vegan) food.

### *Meat: An American Symbol*

Eating meat is typically depicted by media as a “manhood act.” Fiddes (1991) writes, “Meat has long stood for Man’s proverbial ‘muscle’ over the natural world” (65). Eating meat symbolically represents the killing and domination of nature and animals. Consuming animals is a way of exerting power. When this activity is portrayed as masculine, the dominance, control, and power associated with it is only allocated to men. Media messages

that perpetuate the idea that meat is a masculine food become signifiers of gendered performances and filter into both everyday lives and special events: eating a steak on Father's Day, or a man ordering a burger on a date while a woman eats a salad. Making food choices is part of actively constructing a gender identity that is normatively appropriate. Symbolic meanings of meat consumption are not generally talked about in everyday conversation, but are deeply embedded in many Americans' cultural beliefs. To see how culturally penetrating these ideas are, we can examine two common cultural sayings: to "beef" something up is to make it better, while to "vegetate" is to be lazy (Adams 1990). When scanning the shelves of a super market, one is likely to encounter products such as the "Man-wich" (a meat sandwich filling) or the "Hungry-Man" (a series of frozen dinner entrees that urge the consumer to "Eat like a Man"). These meat based "hearty" meals are in opposition to the foods that are habitually marketed towards women and are typically meant to "slim down" the eater (such as yogurt, salad, "lean cuisine" frozen dinners). The product names of two frozen meals marketed towards men (Hungry-Man) and women (Lean Cuisine) exemplify gendered food dynamics.

Different forms of media (TV, advertisements, etc.) also consistently show men eating meat and women eating salads and yogurt (Nath 2011; Rogers 2008). Demonstrating masculinity in food choice can include exercising autonomy; men chose what they want to eat (e.g. junk food) rather than what they 'should' eat (e.g. fruits and vegetables) (Sobal 2005). Through such food choices men show their ability to exert control; though they did not kill the animal they are consuming, someone did, and they are symbolically showing their power over nature through the act of eating the product of domination.

Previous studies focusing on the connection between meat and masculinity in advertising suggest that it is not culturally acceptable for men to forgo meat consumption, using various commercials as cases (Buerkle 2009; Rogers 2008). In the early 2000s, a handful of dramatic advertisements emerged to bolster masculine food practices to counteract perceived societal shifts to valuing healthy food choices. These commercials, produced by companies like Burger King, Del Taco, and Hummer, all show men doing feminine, unmanly things that bring shame. They are brought back to their “natural” manly state by eating meat, and in the Hummer commercial by being environmentally unfriendly (Buerkle 2009; Rogers 2008). By eating meat they are exercising control and dominance, perpetuating patriarchal notions of superiority.

### *Cultural Shift?*

The constraints of gendered food choices are evolving. In 2012, vegetarians constituted an estimated 5% of the US population, and vegans about 2% with more women than men that follow plant-based diets (Newport 2012). However, assessing the national statistics on the veg\* population on a large scale has challenges. Many of the questions asked in previous studies, including the aforementioned, use simple indicators of vegetarian diets, namely: asking simply for self-identification with questions such as, “Do you consider yourself a vegetarian” or “Do you consider yourself a vegan.” But, as I found, veg\*ism can mean very different things to different people. For example, I interviewed men who called themselves vegetarians and occasionally ate fish, while others who identified as vegetarians who found this unacceptable. I also interviewed a self-identified vegan who would eat meat if it were going to be thrown away and others who would not even consider buying clothing and household products that include anything animal derived. Quantitatively assessing veg\*

diets can be limiting and may not provide accurate information. I utilize the above quantitative information to illustrate that even accounting for a large margin of error, fully veg\* diets are still quite uncommon in the general US. Interviews, on the other hand, help us to better understand veg\* men's lives in relation to their food-derived identities.

Furthermore, the ways some people use food to signify their identities is becoming more specific. A portion of the population is increasingly aware of choosing alternative (locavore, organic, fair trade, vegan, paleo, etc.) diets for what they say are environmental, health, and ethical reasons (Alkon 2012, Biltekoff 2013). These people – and their tastes – are currently located mainly in the middle/upper-middle class and are predominantly enacted by white people (Cairns et al. 2013; Curtis et al 2009; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008; Toivonen 1997). These alternative diets have become socially acceptable ways for middle-class individuals to display their status, a way to gain more cultural (or “culinary”) capital (Johnston et al. 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2010; Naccarato, and LeBesco 2012). These diets are much easier for white middle-class people or professionals to engage with because they typically have the resources to sustain them (Alkon 2012).

Seen in this light, veg\*ism can be understood as a form of cultural capital, a way to align oneself with those who have the privilege of choice when it comes to food decisions. This opens up more possibilities for middle-class men to adapt their eating practices to changing cultural norms, potentially foregoing meat. Changing accountability structures allow for slight changes in what men can do to signify “manliness” without others reacting negatively to their gender performance. While performing appropriate gender displays is an important aspect of their lives, this pursuit is far from the only part of their identity that affects their attitudes and experiences. Intersectional approaches, both theoretical and

methodological, can illuminate different aspects of inequality otherwise unnoticed. I focus most prominently on gender in the analysis that follows but believe the gender performances of the participants is not the only aspect of their lives that deserves examination.

Over the past year vegan men have been featured in different media in more positive light than ever before, which may indicate a shift in public thought. Whereas media depictions in the past included shaming veg\* men, these publications celebrate them. It is also worth noting that the stories mentioned below come from very different sources than the commercials mentioned previously (featured in Buerkle 2009 and Rogers 2008) and that while some opinions may be slightly changing, it is not universally representative. In July 2014, NPR ran a story entitled, “For these Men, Masculinity Means Protecting the Planet,” featuring “Brave Gentlemen,” an all vegan men’s clothing line based in New York City<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, author John Joseph, a hardcore rock singer, published the book entitled *Meat is For Pussies* (2014). Of note, both the book title and clothing line give positive attention to vegan men by evoking masculine narratives (man as protector/brave and subordinating femininity respectively). Just a month later in August 2014 two more stories focusing on vegan men appeared, “Real Men Eat Plants: Why the Meat and Manliness Connection is Ridiculous” (Engels) and “Eight Scientific Reasons Vegan Men are More Manly” (Olson). These stories are particularly interesting because they celebrate a group of veg\*s, men, rather than focus on veg\*ism as a whole. Veg\* women, who have historically and presently been the leaders and bulk of the veg\* movement, do not often receive such attention.

Almost all the men I interviewed, and a majority of the men featured in the media stories above, are white and appear to me as middle-class. Specific foods the men talk about

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<sup>2</sup> The “Brave Gentleman” clothing line sells men’s (vegan) shoes for approximately \$280 a pair.

eating, as well as the way they eat them can help us understand their identities not just as masculine, but as middle-class.

In what follows, I explore how the veg\* men make sense of their diets and what this has to do with masculinity and manhood acts, as well as social class. I am interested in how being a veg\* is connected to the participants' gender performance and identity. I first examine their use of rational language and reasoning to explain their diet choice. I then analyze their use of scientific research to bolster their choice to switch to a veg\* diet. I also integrate a discussion of class status in relation to their identity constructions, explaining that how they talk about their diets is not just masculinized, but are also influenced by and reflective of their class positions. I then focus my analysis on the significant role that social support plays in their lives as veg\*s. These analyses allow for a deeper understanding of how veg\* men navigate identity construction. I examine in what ways their practices construct the category "veg\* man" to uphold tenets of hegemonic masculinity. This examination also helps us understand how individuals' performance of masculinity changes and adapts to shifting cultural norms in order to maintain its distinction and claimed superiority over femininity. The men I interviewed are engaged in a practice of "redoing" gender; the core ideas of what it means to act in a masculine way (i.e. being rational, maintain control) are maintained but eating a plant based diet is now an acceptable activity, if explained in a particular way.

## METHODS

I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 20 self-identified veg\* men over a three month period in 2014 (see Table A). I recruited participants through local "Meetup" websites for veg\* groups, fliers, local restaurants' Facebook pages, I also used snowball sampling. Sixteen out of the twenty participants are white and heterosexual. Each interview

lasted approximately one hour, and I used an interview guide that I refined throughout the process. I asked questions such as, “Why did you become a vegan” to “How did your friends and family react when you switched your diet?” I usually met each interviewee at a coffee shop, but one interview was conducted in the participant’s home, another over lunch, and one at my university office. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I used line by line coding for all interviews to develop initial codes and then developed focused codes in Nvivo. Two significant themes emerged from the data in which I focus my analysis on below.

While I used a grounded theory approach during research and analysis it would be misleading to say I had no expectations at the beginning of the project (Charmaz 2006). Given the previous research on veg\* diets and masculinity, I expected to find that many men would describe receiving negative attention and push back because of their choices. I also expected them to give emotional reasons for becoming veg\* because of the reasons of veg\* friends, acquaintances, and myself.

Further, I recognized throughout the study that an interviewer’s personal stance on an issue can directly affect data collection, participants’ openness, and comfort with answering questions. Veg\*s often present different “fronts” when talking to meat-eaters and non-meat eaters (Greenebaum 2012). Aggressive or diminishing past experiences make them more cautious about exposing their diets to people they do not know (Cherry et al. 2011). Given this research and my own personal experiences of non-vegans criticizing my diet choices, I readily and openly identified myself as a vegan to potential interviewees. Postings on Facebook and Meetup explicitly stated that I follow a vegan diet. If the participant did not know when the interview started, I mentioned it in some way during the first few minutes.

The ways this affected my data collection became clearer to me when one participant explained toward the end of the interview that he did not know whether he was “coming in for a fight.” He explained that he did not know if I was supportive of veg\*ism, and he was ready to defend his choice if I was not. He revealed this to me to indicate how happy he was that I was “on their side.” The data I collected may have been very different if I did not openly identify as vegan. Some participants may not have been as willing to divulge information, others might have disclosed more or different information. This instance also very clearly reflects the binary thinking and boundaries between meat eaters and veg\*s, the two different groups are often situated as “us” and “them.” The veg\* men upheld the distinction between the two groups by purposefully selecting relationships with other veg\*, examined in more detail below.

Along with announcing my vegan-ness during the interviews, I identify and present myself as a woman. This also likely influenced data collection, since I was interviewing men. I tried to remain keenly observant of subtle gendered interactions throughout the interviews. Women interviewing men can be challenging because interviews are a controlled experience in which the participant is not in control (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). Men therefore may try and gain some control back during the interviews, which can be data itself (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). Some of the men I interviewed did try to control the interview, a few more blatantly than others. Many participants cut off my questions and interjected while I was talking. The most telling example is one interview that lasted two and a half hours. During these hours, I asked only three questions from my extensive interview script. While I am happy that this interviewee had so much to say, and many of the issues I was interested in came up naturally, I felt powerless in that particular interview.

Many of the participants asked or speculated about my age, which was younger than themselves in 19 out of 20 cases. The only source of awkwardness during the interviews often came during the section that I asked about their romantic relationships. This was often met with uncomfortable laughter and comments such as “This is weird talking to a girl about.” This reflects the salience of the male/female binary in their minds and interactions. I was not a researcher looking for answers; I was a girl or occasionally a woman (who they presumably do not usually talk to about romantic relationships).

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

The men discussed below use two different, yet related, discursive tactics in maintaining their masculinity while engaging in veg\* dietary practices: what I call rational discourse and scientific research-based motivations. I created these codes to capture what I saw as recurring themes in how the men talked about their diets. Many utilize both tactics, while some draw more heavily on one. One man does not use either tactic and his masculinity is called into question by a co-worker, as I discuss in more detail below. By invoking rationality and scientific research in explaining their veg\* diets, the men situate themselves on the reason side of the reason/emotion binary and subsequently work to maintain a male/female binary. Importantly, these binaries become key themes in their discursive and cognitive strategies. Veg\* men justify their identities as not only reasonable and rational, but *not* emotional. By making this distinction, they align themselves with binary thinking of men/women, reason/emotion, and they distance themselves from devalued femininity. Rather than risk being seen as feminine by showing emotions, they turn an activity traditionally thought of as feminine into a manhood act; effectively “redoing” gender.

### *Making a Rational Choice*

First, the veg\* men use notions of logic and rationality to explain their decision to become veg\*s. In a contemporary American social context, being rational is a normatively positive attribute; to make rational decisions is to be reasonable and sound. Rationality is socially projected as “objective” and value neutral. Emotions are the binary counterpart to rationality; they are commonly considered personal, subjective, and unpredictable. Decisions based on emotions are not only the opposite of rational decisions, they are less valued and often incite criticism (Hill Collins 2008). This rational/emotional binary is intimately connected to the male/female binary. Part of performing masculinity is making (or presenting yourself as making) rational decisions rather than decisions based on emotions. Rational decisions invoke ideas of control, which the purported superiority of masculinity is predicated on. Decisions based on emotions and personal experiences, more generally, have the potential of being disregarded and undervalued by others, as scholars in the feminist tradition frequently denote (Hill Collins 2008; Smith 1974).

In order to masculinize the practice of eating *only* plant based foods, the men I studied actively frame their decision as rationally, and not emotionally, driven. Bill’s<sup>3</sup> story is illustrative. Bill is a 29-year-old self-described ethical vegetarian, meaning that his decision to become a vegetarian is based on concern for the welfare and rights of animals. He has been a vegetarian for 4.5 years and is considering becoming a vegan like his wife, though “probably not anytime soon.” When I asked Bill how he talks to other people about being a vegetarian, he explained:

I didn’t convert to vegetarianism because I saw a cow slaughtered and had a visceral reaction...It was more talking about it and understanding why exactly, I mean

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<sup>3</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

specific reasons, as to why I'm doing what I'm doing. Once I had a *clear logical structure* in my mind of how it works, I could convey that to other people easily and maybe they're not going to agree with me but I'm going to give them a *reasonable argument* for what I'm doing. I think that's hard not to respect [emphasis added].

Not only does Bill frame his choice in terms of logic and reason, he is primarily concerned with being respected. This statement suggests that he believes he – and his dietary choice – deserve respect. If someone's expectations for power and respect are not met they will likely experience fear, anxiety, and loss of confidence (Turner 2009). Earning respect is important in constructing masculinity, and Bill invoked a rational discourse to explain his veg\*ism with the expectations that people would give him the respect he thinks that the discourse deserves.

Similarly, Dan a 32-year-old ethical vegan who adhered to strict vegan guidelines told me about a time he got into an argument over his diet with an acquaintance at a party. According to Dan's account, someone asked if he ate honey, and he said no, because he saw it as unethical. The argument arose when another person defended her friend's parent's practice of keeping bees and harvesting honey. Dan went on to say,

This girl was insistent that bees hibernate. And then she got upset, she was like, "you don't even know that bees hibernate through the winter, you got no right judging her parents for keeping bees"...So that night I went and looked it up and Facebook messaged everyone at the party to tell them that bees do not hibernate and they do need honey.

This conversation depicts the binary of emotion and rationality. Control over a situation in which the legitimacy of veganism is questioned may be especially important in situations where the men's decision to go veg\* or the rules that they follow are called into question. Many men expressed that they knew that their decision was not a popular one and expected push back. Dan tries to maintain control by staying rational and presenting facts that are presumably more respected than opinion. He contrasts himself to her by attributing her reaction to emotions, describing her as getting "upset." Additionally, by calling the woman a

girl, he diminishes her authority. The woman is presumably a similar age to Dan yet he calls her a “girl.” The image evoked by the word girl is someone who is young and immature. We conflate wisdom with age in the US, and by calling her a girl instead of a woman he is stripping her of the authority and maturity that comes with age. A girl is a child, a woman is an adult; calling a woman a girl disempowers her and reinforces sexism.

Dan responds by giving facts rather than saying his choice to not eat honey is based on his opinion. He does not say that he feels bad for the bees or has any sort of emotional connection to their treatment by humans. His decision is based on what he perceives as facts: the bees do not hibernate, they need their own honey, and sugar water is not good enough. His communication to the group afterwards about his facts is also telling. Like Bill, Dan is a heterosexual white man who likely is not used to being questioned or disrespected. When a “girl” challenges his decision and subsequent data, in order to maintain the binary and dominance, he makes sure everyone who saw the challenge to his masculine self is informed of his “correct” position.

### *Using Scientific Research*

Many of the men also consistently provide support for their dietary decision based on scientific research they or others have done. In the interviews, they describe this research as based on scientific facts and often emphasize that it is from reputable sources. This is reminiscent of Collins’ (2008) discussion of binary thought as “facts supersede emotion in evaluating knowledge” (71). These are not only facts but *scientific* facts, and they refer to “objective” sciences, further emphasizing “fact” over “value” or “opinion.” Brenton and Elliott (2014) find a similar pattern among men engaging in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM); their participants situated their choice to engage in CAM by emphasizing

its scientific and rational components while downplaying the aspects associated with femininity.

Scientific research became a key theme in the interviews I conducted. For instance, in the first few minutes of my interview with Hector, he told me the reason he decided to become a vegetarian was in part because of a book written by a molecular biologist. He explains, “There’s this book that made a lot of sense to me. It was written by this guy who is actually a molecular biologist. What he says makes a lot of sense, it comes from a scientist, not a typical, ya know. I mean, this is a person who really understood things that are granule level.” He emphasizes throughout this part of the interview that the information was from a “legitimate” source, not some “typical” person. Similarly, when I asked Tristan how he responds when people ask him about getting enough protein, he said: “for the protein question I think it’s pretty *scientifically evident* that vegetables have protein and it’s not hard.” Dan, while explaining his decision to become vegan, stated, “I’ve read all the nutrition science and everything that’s out there, I know I can be perfectly healthy.” They maintain the distinction between feelings/emotions and research/science, not only comparing them as opposites but also suggesting that science is undeniable. Backing up their claims with science gives authority to their rationales for becoming veg\*s.

George, a white, 44 year old ethical vegan, did not like talking about being a vegetarian, even to me. He said he felt like an outsider to begin with and thought his diet further isolated him from others. When I asked him why he did not like to talk to others about it, he told me,

They [non-vegetarians] have all this information they must have gotten from their grandparents, or their parents got from their grandparents, that just got passed down. First you just need to do some research and then you can come back and ask me because *I’ve done my research and you haven’t* [emphasis added].

Here he compares family traditions and values against research, situating research as the superior form of obtaining knowledge. This also illustrates another theme that emerged in the data. Many men said they saw their decision as helping them to be in charge of their own lives and following their own path, not the crowd. This is another form of maintaining control over the self; they suggest they are not just following the beliefs of others around them, but carving their own path.

### *Being Held Accountable*

The ways the men explained their diets to me and the stories they told had many commonalities. One man's story, however, stood out from the others. Bryan, a heterosexual 44-year-old ethical vegan who works as the chef in a cafeteria-like establishment, began the interview by explaining that he originally changed his diet because of a "feeling." Later he told a story in which his heterosexuality was called into question in connection to his diet choice (relayed below).

Interestingly, Bryan, who perceived the harshest negative attention, is also the only participant in the study who used emotion as the main justification for his diet choices. His story demonstrates how individuals are held accountable for their characters, motives, and predispositions when they fail to do gender appropriately (West and Zimmerman 1987). Bryan very clearly told me that his choice to become a vegan in high school was based on emotion. He said, "I knew inside I had a *feeling*, it *felt* wrong and I wanted to change [emphasis added]." This is how he explains his decisions to others. When I asked if he had any co-workers that were vegan or vegetarian he instead told me about his sous chef, who he described as "one of those people who lives off of red wine and bacon."

He offered a story to illustrate the sous-chef's feelings about veganism as a

counterpoint to his own. He went to a party at her house, and she served steak. When an acquaintance asked why he was not eating, the sous chef interrupted and said, “he’s a vegan faggot.” I was taken aback by this and asked how it made him feel. He explained his reaction to me as,

I just laughed it off but it’s a shitty thing to do. I wouldn’t call you a meat eating bitch or something like that. It’s been a long journey for me. I’m pretty strong in my beliefs and I can defend them pretty well. I’m pretty unshakeable when it comes to that.

Bryan is in a serious relationship with a woman who he both lives and works with; his visible heterosexual relationship may allow him to brush off this type of interaction. Despite his emotional reasoning for becoming a veg\*, he is also subscribing to ideas of male stoicism by assuring me that he is “strong in his beliefs” and “pretty unshakeable.” He relays that the comment was hurtful (“it’s a shitty thing to do”) but does not say that it bothered him. If he were to react to the comment by getting emotionally upset, crying, or lashing out instead of “laughing it off,” he would separate himself further from the masculine identity he is trying to maintain.

Heterosexuality is a key component of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). Bryan’s sous chef is conflating his veg\*ism with his sexuality, in negative terms, suggesting that becoming a vegan has somehow made him less heterosexual and therefore less masculine. Not only did she make a harsh comment about his diet choice, she used a powerful slur to do so. Calling a heterosexual man “fag” is more than just calling his sexuality into question but casts the recipient as unmasculine and incompetent; “fag” by definition, is the opposite of masculine (Pascoe 2007). Bryan’s emotionally derived reasoning for veg\*ism does not comply with what is ideologically prescribed for membership in the rational male gender group, inciting criticism. Those around him are holding him – or

trying to hold him – accountable for performing masculinity in ways they deem appropriate, effectively policing identity boundaries whether they intend to or not. While individuals are the ones who engage in the actual practice of “doing gender,” the interactional and institutional components are just as important (West and Zimmerman 1986).

None of the other men I interviewed admitted to being in any circumstances in which his heterosexuality, an important aspect of hegemonic masculinity, was threatened or called into question. He does not construct his choice to eat veg\* in the ways the other men do, distancing themselves from the emotions they may see as feminizing or un-masculine. He also does not have as much occupational prestige and educational attainment to call upon as many of the men do; while all the other men I spoke with had bachelors or higher degrees, Bryan has only an associate’s degree.

Importantly, none of the men interviewed ever admitted to me that that the negative attention they received because of their diet bothered them. From minor teasing or family drama, to the insult described above, all maintained that it was not a “big deal.” When I asked Ethan if he ever received any negative attention, he said yes but quickly explained, “It doesn’t matter if they did [give me a hard time] because it wouldn’t affect me. This is who I am.” Others emphasized, “ignoring it” or “avoiding situations in which it would be an issue.” They did not get emotional or say their feelings were hurt, maintaining the stoicism that individuals are socialized to expect from practices of normative middle-class white masculinity. Being hurt implies vulnerability and weakness, which implies a lack of control. While the men are engaging in a practice associated with femininity they are consistently trying to separate themselves from the feminine components and maintain identities that engage with actions and ideas conventionally thought of as appropriate middle class

masculine behavior. They are able to shift what actions constitute a masculine self (eating plants instead of eating meat) by appealing to other masculine coded characteristics alongside the divergent choice.

Analyzing this situation allows for a deeper understanding of how important using rationality discourse and scientific research can be for men in defending a veg\* diet and maintaining masculinity. It emphasizes that the men are “redoing” gender; they are not being held accountable by those around them to eat meat in order to “act like a man” like in the past. They are displaying this choice in ways that are characterized as distinctly masculine. Therefore, those around them are able to allow the activity of eating plants to be part of their masculine performance. Their explanations engage with ideas of a rational male thinker and conventionally accepted ideas of middle-class masculinity. This shift is partly aided by the changing public viewpoint about veg\* diets and its connection to class status.

### *Class Intersections*

My participants explain their choice to become veg\* using scientific research and rationality, but these practices are also highly classed. In other parts of our conversations, many more clearly displayed their class positions as a component of their overall identities. The participants are not just men, or just middle class, or just predominantly white, or mostly heterosexual, but all of the above; their identities interlay in different ways. All of my study participants fall roughly into a middle or upper-middle class category.

The value of different forms of cultural capital continuously changes based on individuals’ valuations of them. Whereas in the past during war times meat was a scarcity and symbolized high culture, its ready availability means that it is no longer a high-status item. The significance placed on different foods changes as their material and symbolic

power changes (Sayes 2010). Knowledge about certain foods can signify an individual's class position.

Current middle and upper-middle class ideas about food include eating food that is healthy, sustainable, organic, GMO free, and ethical; eating and talking about these foods become a way to obtain cultural capital (Johnston et al. 2011). The alternative food movement, though not entirely comprised of veg\*s, emphasizes eating foods that are outside the conventional, industrial food system – foods that are sustainable, local, healthy, and/or organic. The movement is connected to a rise in media attention on the American diet. For instance, the documentary *Forks Over Knives* (2013) came up throughout my interviews as inspiring a change to a plant based diet. Though not all middle-class individuals emphasize these standards, they likely display their position in society in other visible ways (dress, speech, etc.) (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Significantly, all the participants, save Bryan (and Tristan who is in the process of obtaining a bachelor's degree), have high levels of education and are thus connected to class status.

During the interviews, the men explained that they focus on buying and eating food that first and foremost does not contain meat. However, their dietary preferences go far beyond this. Many of my participants told me they do not eat fast food, and very rarely eat any pre-packaged/pre-prepared food at all. Eating food that is organic, sustainable, non-GMO, and healthy is a priority. Some cite all of these food categorizations as important while others emphasize only one or two. These foods are usually more expensive than conventional foods. They also emphasize the variety of food they eat, including ethnically diverse foods, which add to their cultural/culinary capital (Johnston and Baumann 2010). Roger, a 37-year-old white ethical vegan explained, “Basically, I eat raw food; I don't eat

anything pre-processed. I buy all the raw ingredients and I make whatever I'm making.” To emphasize how thorough he is about this rule, he explained that he makes his own soymilk and tofu. While not all of the men are so committed to unprocessed food as Roger, many emphasized that they do not usually buy pre-made, microwavable, frozen, or packaged foods. A few rely on frozen meat-substitutes to supplement a quick weeknight meal but overall importance was placed on making home cooked, unprocessed, fresh meals.

The purchase, consumption, and discussion of specific food choices display their identity and class status through exclusionary prices and availability. Dan holds two graduate degrees and works in a position in the federal government that grants him a considerable amount of autonomy. He and his partner, a vegan woman, own a house that they have converted to run almost solely on solar power. When describing his morning green smoothie he notes its ingredients: chia, flax, goji berries, acai berries, kale, spinach, almond milk, blueberries, blackberries and strawberries. “Super foods,” such as those described by Dan, came up frequently during the interviews. Brock, another participant, succinctly defines them as, “you know those things that cost like a million dollars at Whole Foods.” Many of these items are not easily found in conventional grocery stores and must be sought out specifically. George, a 44-year-old vegan IT specialist, explained to me that there are four different kinds of cinnamon, and that he orders the kind with the most health benefits online. This type of knowledge about food can denote one’s class position, despite whether the knowledge and food are “correct/more healthful” or not. Learning about these foods takes considerable time and effort, and their high prices make their regularized consumption inherently exclusionary. In this case the cinnamon that George prefers is not sold in any local stores and must be ordered online, which adds even more time, effort, and money into obtaining it.

Sociologists use the term “symbolic tools” to explain how some items have much more meaning than just their utilitarian purpose (in this case, nourishment). As Schwalbe et al. (2000) explain, “Symbolic tools used to accomplish oppressive othering include not only classification schemes but identity codes, which are the rules of performance and interpretation whereby members of a group know what kind of self is signified by certain words, deeds, and dress.” These “super foods” and other unconventional food options (e.g. agave nectar, tempeh, nutritional yeast, spirulina) are used as signifiers for the vegan men to differentiate themselves from others. They consider these foods to be highly nutritional and often “essential” to their diet; they become signs of culinary capital (a super specialized form of cultural capital). In turn, those who do not know and eat these food options are cast as “other” in certain situations. Individuals who put such moral value on inherently exclusive food choices not only elevate their own moral status but also devalue those who do not participate.

Some participants talked explicitly about the moral superiority of veg\* diets during the interview. Bill told me a story about discussing his diet with his brother and its moral implications. He said,

I was explaining it to him why I was doing it and I sort of made a comparison between the situation for animals now and the situation for black people in the past. Slavery...or even the holocaust. I mean everyone around you thinks that it's fine that they're doing it. I would hate to think that at the time of holocaust or slavery that I would have been the type of person who was perpetuating it, because it's clearly wrong. Even if it wasn't clear to those people at the time.

While Bill is not calling out any one person as being morally inferior to himself, his comparison holds a heavy moral judgment. Similarly, Dan's blatantly states his views on the matter when he says, “I think it's morally and ethically wrong and unacceptable to not be a

vegan.” Less explicit judgments were passed by other participants, but with similar moral and evaluative connotations. Terms such as “callous,” “uneducated,” and “insecure,” were used to describe meat-eaters. Ethan explained how he felt about vegans in comparison to meat eaters when he said,

I think it’s something that you are born with. You’re probably born with a greater level of compassion than other people. I don’t like to give any credence to the perspective that vegans are high and mighty and all of that, but I think that at the end of the day you have to be generally a more compassionate person. Not everybody has it in them to make the switch and stick with it.

Ethan’s statement is especially interesting because he suggests vegans might be born with more compassion than meat-eaters. This, like claims that suggest masculinity is something an individual is born with, diminishes the social and structural elements of both gender and diet choice.

Without acknowledging the limitations of buying foods high in “culinary capital” individuals may harshly criticize those who do not make the same choices; even disseminating harsher moral judgments (Eskine 2013). The idea of what constitutes “good” food is based on middle class values. Having (or lacking) cultural and financial capital has repercussions for people’s lives. Without the right cultural capital, people may be barred from certain groups or activities, be unable to make connections with people who can help them, or not be taken seriously (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Dominant groups often legitimize their own culture as superior to lower-class culture through opposition and distinctions (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Johnston and Baumann 2010). These middle-class veg\* men see meat as representative of the unethical and unhealthy food practices of Americans and are unaware of the privilege that allows them to choose this diet.

If these specialized food choices became affordable and their availability more universal they would no longer be considered “elite” and could no longer act to differentiate those who eat them and those who do not based on class. Inequalities are based on the fact that individuals are able to clearly differentiate who is a member of their group and who is not. Without this distinction members of a group would not be able to easily identify who should be treated with respect and recognition as part of the group and who should be cast as “other.” If these “super foods” and other specialized veg\* food choices became industrially and commercially produced in a way that allowed them to be sold cheaply and widely they would no longer be able to act as status symbols for middle-class people.

Becoming a veg\*, especially a vegan, requires time, money, resources, and active cognitive engagement. The men discussed how much time they put into reading labels, shopping around, and learning how to live a healthy life without meat. Many of the participants cite Whole Foods (jokingly referred to as “Whole Paycheck” by some because of its prices) as their primary grocery store. However, they are also quick to say that it is not that hard to become veg\*. For example, I asked Robert a white, 54-year-old, health focused vegan, if he thought there were any challenges to going vegan. He responded, “I don’t think so. People always say ‘don’t you get bored?’ I think they're just lazy and don’t think about all the possibilities there are. If you have a wok and a garden, you can make a whole lot of different meals.” This type of comment that places the responsibility on the individual ignores personal and structural constraints those without privilege face in diet choice. Moreover, by highlighting the expensive and exotic foods they eat, as well as knowledge about them, they show that they are not only eating veg\* diets, but an acceptable middle-class diet.

Specialized vegan food choices have become a way to distinguish the consumer as “high status,” “appropriate,” “moral,” middle class people; this distinction creates a moral high ground for middle-class consumption patterns without acknowledging the complications lower-class individuals face in accessing the same foods. Even if lower-class individuals were to be able to gain access to these food through the lowering of their prices, it would not allow them the same cultural capital because the foods would no longer have their symbolic power. These foods become part of the ongoing process of creating distance between groups of individuals; they symbolize social and cultural prestige for middle-class people at the expense of those in less privileged positions.

#### *Social Support and Group Distinction*

Eating veg\* diets filled with symbolically rich food products provide a way for individuals to create group solidarity. Without these distinctions the men would have no reason to differentiate themselves from meat-eaters and simultaneously give themselves a higher-status “morally superior” diet. Similar to Roger’s comment about being pleased I was a vegan when the interview closed, others mentioned feeling more comfortable around other veg\*s. This group isolation acts as a way for veg\* men to surround themselves with like-minded people who are less likely to hold them accountable for eating meat as a part of performing masculinity and acts as a barrier for lower-class people to obtain meaningful relationships with those in more advantaged positions.

Some of the men spoke specifically about wanting or preferring to be around other people who shared their ideas about veg\*ism. Jack is 60 years old, white, heterosexual, a music composer and became vegan to combat his high cholesterol. He succinctly articulates what many of the men expressed during their interviews when he states, “It’s nice hanging

out with other people who have the same ideas about food because you don't have to explain it." Similarly, Greenebaum (2012) finds that veg\*ans often behave differently when among meat eaters and fellow veg\*ans. Their presentation of self among non-veg\*ans is more carefully constructed and managed while their presentation of self among exclusively other veg\*ans is less monitored and often includes reactions to omnivores critiques, frustrations, and strategies for interactions with non-veg\*s. Given these findings and the information provided by my participants that they prefer to engage with other veg\*ans, the line drawn between "us" (veg\*ans) and "them" (meat-eaters) is an important distinction in the participant's lives.

Perhaps unsurprising given the stance many men took in regards to cultivating friendships with non-veg\*, many of the men wanted to date only other veg\*. Fifteen out of the twenty men were in romantic relationships (currently or their most recent past relationship) with another veg\*. Adam, a 35-year-old white ethical vegan explained that he did not have many friends who were not vegan because, "it's really hard to respect someone who exploits animals." Ethan, a 28-year-old white ethical vegan currently applying to graduate school to pursue a career in food science, told me that he does not date women who are not vegan. He explained,

With women it [veganism] has to come up immediately. Relationships don't work, in my opinion, for meat eaters and vegans. If you're going to be intimate with someone... I don't want to kiss someone who was chowing down on a burger. I won't date anybody who won't turn [vegan], or marry anyone who wasn't a vegan. They usually look at me like I'm crazy but it's important.

Participants who were currently dating another veg\* spent a great deal of time with this person (many lived together). Their partners were the people with whom they ate the most often with. Ethan's comment above, "it's important" is how many of the men felt about their

partners also adopting a veg\* diet. Cherry (2006) finds that social support can be the most influential aspect of an individual maintaining a vegan diet.

The salience of having friends and partners that were also veg\* is further illustrated by the case of Brock, whose wife and children are not vegetarian. Brock and his wife initially became vegetarian together. He explained that after some time he would find fast food wrappers in his wife's car and realized that she was no longer following the diet. When they talked about it, she said that a vegetarian diet was not for her. Brock has one of the most flexible vegetarian diets in my interview sample. He attributed this to his wife cooking all the meals and not wanting to burden her with creating additional meals just for him. He mentioned being interested in a vegan diet more than once during the interview, but immediately followed those comments with insistence that he never could because his wife and mother would not be able to cook for him. His refusal to learn to cook for himself also reflects gendered ideas of food preparation (DeVault 1994). Being vegan, for Brock, would potentially cause too much friction in his marriage and family life. He told me, "My mom is terrified I will one day become a vegan." Anticipating a negative response is enough to deter Brock from changing to a vegan diet. His family is holding him accountable for maintaining a consumption identity they believe is more appropriate.

These findings are corroborated by those I interviewed who preferred to be associated with others veg\*ans (and mostly were). Their social networks of veg\* or veg\* friendly individuals is likely an important aspect of why they reported having little negative pushback in their lives. When instances of resistance or awkwardness were mentioned, it was exclusively from non-veg\*. They are able to maintain a masculine identity by surrounding

themselves with individual's who do not see veg\* diets as abnormal and are less likely to hold them accountable to include meat eating in their performances of masculinity.

Their categorizations of who accepted their diets went beyond just describing food preferences. I did not specifically ask about the education or income of their friends, but this information was often given to me nonetheless. In an effort to explain why no one challenges him about his diet, Dan states,

Most of my friends are very well educated and they come from families that are fairly well educated. My whole extended family is really well educated. I think if I was like someone who hadn't gone to college and lived in a whole community that that was the norm, I think I would have experienced a lot more open hostility about my choice.

While Dan is talking about education, he is invoking a social class narrative where education, acceptance of difference, and social class status are deeply connected. Colin, a 36-year-old white ethical vegetarian who works as a college professor, explains a similar sentiment when he says, "The people I know are other professors and graduate students, so it's not that unusual. I don't think about being vegetarian very often because almost no one ever makes me feel like it's unusual." Again, his explanation for why he does not receive negative attention is attributed to being around others with high levels of education.

The men's stated selective affinity for other veg\* has implications beyond just who they associate with. Oppressive othering occurs when "one group seeks advantage by defining another group as morally/intellectually inferior" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 423). When the men in my sample explained that they prefer to be around other veg\*, they are also saying that they do not want to be around those who are not veg\* friendly. This becomes problematic and creates inequality when they see their group as intellectually and/or morally superior because inclusion in the veg\* identity group is far beyond just an individual choice. As described previously making the switch to a veg\* diet requires money, time, resources,

and a receptive support network. As veg\* diets, and other alternative diets, continue to grow as the idealistic middle-class way of eating those with the ability to switch and maintain these diets will maintain their dominant position in the social hierarchy. Schwalbe et al (2000) explain, “Without the right cultural capital, one simply cannot make connections, interact competently, or be taken seriously in certain places” (p. 430). Diet choice may become a social barrier for individuals from different class backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

Despite veg\* men engaging in “feminized” eating practices, they feel able to subvert challenges to a strict gender binary by using masculine ways of explaining their dietary decisions to eschew meat and animal products. They are able to maintain control of the situation by positioning their choice as one driven by rational conclusions and scientific research. Masculinizing a feminine practice rather than accepting a feminized identity is a way for these men to subvert challenges to the gender binary and perform a slightly less conventional masculine practice rather than undo it. These findings suggest that among middle-class white heterosexual men the perceived connection between meat and masculinity may not be as significant to their performances of masculinity.

In addition, it provides evidence for the idea that when individuals deviate from prescribed gender ideology they are often “redoing” gender rather than “undoing” it by still adhering to basic tenets accepted for each gender. The men are not abandoning their masculine performances by engaging in a feminine perceived practice, they are rather able to slightly change what practices can be read as masculine (veg\*ism) by using masculine-coded discourses.

The current social climate, one in which the middle-class is highly concerned with

(mostly others) obesity and alternative foods, has created a space for men to engage with plant-based diets while maintaining their masculinity. As past research suggests, these men may have reported receiving much more negative attention just ten years ago. The positive media attention veg\* men have been receiving is likely influencing the public's opinion. Buzzfeed (a website that aggregates news) ran a story in July 2014 titled, "23 Hot Guys You Didn't Know Were Vegan: Making sacrifices for animals and your health is SO sexy" (Burton). The list included 23 male celebrities and quotes connecting to them not eating animals. Bill Clinton, Samuel L. Jackson, Joaquin Phoenix, and Tobey Maguire all made the list. Not only are these vegan men receiving positive media attention, they are "hot" and "sexy" because of it. This is a dramatic shift from the 2006 Burger King advertisement, "Manthem," that claimed a man was not a man without meat (Rogers 2008). These changes are not surprising given that in order to maintain its dominance the characteristics that define hegemonic masculinity must be responsive to current social dynamics, individual performances of masculinity must adapt to the current social climate. These men have an opportunity to engage in a practice that has been historically socially constructed as feminine in the US and blur the male/female binary. Rather than risk being feminized, they forge a masculine version of veg\*ism.

It is evident that a certain amount of privilege is needed in order to eat a veg\* diet. Men in less privileged class positions may face quite different social challenges in eating a veg\* diet. In order to better understand the role of class in how men talk about veg\* diets and their acceptance in their social communities further research should purposefully sample for less economically advantaged participants, as well as a more diverse race/ethnic group. Examining the experiences of veg\* men in other socio-economic positions will deepen the

intersectional understanding of meat and performances of masculinity.

Further research should also aim to capture information about veg\* men's lives outside of an interview setting. My participants provided valuable information but even more can be learned through an examination of their lives in an everyday setting. The interviews I conducted should be understood as accounts of the participants lives and do not provide the whole picture of the situation at hand.

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE A**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>	<i>Veg*?</i>	<i>Years Veg*</i>	<i>Highest ed</i>
<b>Adam</b>	35	Writer	Ethical	Married	Vegan	15	Graduate
<b>Andrew</b>	20	Student/Car Detailer	Ethical	Single	Vegan	1.5	In College
<b>Ben</b>	40	Pharmacist Tech/Student	Ethical	Separated	Vegan	3	Bachelors
<b>Bill</b>	29	Lawyer	Ethical	Married	Vegan	4.5	JD
<b>Brock</b>	39	Priest	Ethical	Married	Vegetarian	12	Graduate
<b>Bryan</b>	47	Chef	Ethical	Single	Vegan	12	Associates
<b>Colin</b>	36	Professor	Ethical	Married	Vegetarian	27	Graduate
<b>Dan</b>	32	Government	Ethical	Living with Partner	Vegan	3	Graduate
<b>Ethan</b>	28	Student/Sales Associate	Ethical	Single	Vegan	14	Bachelors
<b>George</b>	44	IT Specialist	Ethical	Divorced	Vegan	On/off for 15	Bachelors
<b>Hector</b>	51	Social Worker	Health	Single	Vegetarian	4	Graduate
<b>Jack</b>	60	Composer	Health	Married	Vegan	3	Graduate
<b>Kurt</b>	65	Retired Family Physician	Ethical	Married	Vegetarian	29	MD
<b>Lee</b>	54	Computer Programmer	Ethical	Single	Vegetarian	33	Graduate
<b>Lucas</b>	29	IT Auditor	Health	Married	Vegetarian	1.5	Graduate
<b>Robert</b>	54	Teacher	Health	Married	Vegan	2	Graduate
<b>Roger</b>	37	Environmental Educator	Environment	Married	Vegan	11.5	Bachelors/Educational Certificate
<b>Tom</b>	37	IT Project Manager	Health	Married	Vegan	6	Bachelors
<b>Tristan</b>	30	Whole Foods Bulk Buyer	Ethical	Living with Partner	Vegan	4	Bachelors