

# IT'S NOT JUST MEAT, MATE! THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MEAT CONSUMPTION

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## Introduction

Throughout human history, meat has been associated with strength and masculinity. This can be observed in different attitudes men and women have towards meat, the fact that men are more attached to meat than women, and the high rates of meat consumption in men. The link between meat and masculinity is also omnipresent in our culture, through advertisements, literature, art and other forms of popular culture. We do not only attribute values such as masculinity to specific kinds of food, such as meat, but we also attribute values to the people eating these foods. According to earlier research, the food you consume is an important factor determining how masculine or feminine you appear to others. For example, men eating meat tend to appear more appealing to women.

The above suggests that there is more to food and meat in particular than purely the nutritional aspect: food is also about identity and, more specifically, meat is about masculinity. Since the direct and indirect associations mentioned above are found across different cultures, and since research suggests that biological factors do not fully explain sex differences, we need to take gender norms into account when studying meat consumption. The current study wants to look beyond binary sex differences and considers a broader range of gender norms, examining them in both sexes: *what is the relationship between meat consumption and gender?*

## Method

To address this question, we designed a survey ( $N = 870$ ) which examines meat consumption behavior and gender. Meat consumption behavior was measured by asking the participants how frequently they consumed meat, whether they were open to reduce their meat intake, and by using a scale to measure meat attachment (Meat Attachment Questionnaire). To assess gender, we used two different scales. The first scale (Traditional Masculinity Femininity scale) determined how the participants identified themselves, ranging from very masculine to very feminine. The second scale (New Masculinity Inventory) assesses how comfortable the participants were with new norms for masculinity. We further decided to make a distinction between red and white meat, since earlier research already states that they have different consequences regarding personal and environmental health.

## Summary of results

Results from the survey confirm sex differences in meat consumption behavior. Men consume more meat than women, they are more attached to meat and are less inclined to reduce their meat intake. However, our data also discloses more complicated gender differences within both men and women, related to gender identity and agreement with new masculinity norms. Including the dimension of gender identity disclosed that, compared to men considering themselves less masculine, men considering themselves to be more masculine consumed more meat, showed more meat

attachment, and were less willing to reduce their meat intake. Moreover, our results show that agreement with new masculinity norms plays an important part as well. For both men and women, higher agreement with new masculinity norms corresponded with lower meat intake, lower meat attachment, and more willingness to reduce meat consumption. We also found that all results were more pronounced for red meat. This confirms the association between red meat, norms of masculinity, and the role of red meat in enabling masculinity.

## Implications

The findings of this study could be helpful for health organizations and health care professionals. Even though meat can be part of a healthy diet, personal health consequences, such as increased risk for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and certain types of cancer, should be taken into account. The current study shows that meat consumption is not only about men and their sex, but also about gender identity and new masculinity norms. Health professionals and marketers could thus react to this new information by trying to question the link between meat (consumption) and masculinity. The message that it is not unmanly to reduce meat intake, could help improve personal and environmental health.

Marketers could also use the results of this study to show more diversity in their campaigns on meat consumption, meat reduction and veg\*nism. By showing more diverse people eating plant-based alternatives, marketers could play a role in changing norms connected with hegemonic and alternative masculinity. By increasing the amount of men consuming a veg\*n dish in advertisements, men could feel less pressure to eat meat to show their masculinity, as opposed to how meat is used to convey masculinity now. Even showing men consuming more white meat instead of the traditional, masculine steak could help changing the narrative around meat consumption.