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Does Becoming a Vegetarian or Vegan Affect Your Love Life?

Giving up meat often changes our choices of friends and lovers.

Posted Dec 22, 2020

When I became serious about studying human-animal interactions, [one of my first research projects](#) focused on how people became involved in the animal rights movement and how it affected their lives.

One interview was with a woman I will call Nancy. Like most serious animal activists, she was a vegetarian. But her husband, a Duke University professor, liked meat and regularly ate it. I asked Nancy if their dietary differences affected their relationship. *“Not at all,”* she replied. *“I will buy meat for him and I even cook it for him.”* But then she added, *“But of, course, I would not kiss him after he ate meat.”*

Despite not kissing her husband after dinner, Nancy had apparently made an easy accommodation to his dietary preferences. But for other animal activists, things did not go so smoothly. Elizabeth, for example, articulated a theme frequently expressed by single activists. She told me, *“Vegetarianism definitely interferes with my [social life](#). I won't go out with anyone who is not a vegetarian. It limits the pool of possible men. Early on, most of the men I dated were not vegetarian. I will never do that again. Having that kind of moral blockade between someone you are involved with is just impossible.”*

Another young woman succinctly explained to me why she had given up on [dating](#). She said, *“Just going out for dinner becomes an ordeal.”*

When it comes to love and romance, are most vegetarians like Nancy whose husband's penchant for meat was not a big deal? Or are they like Elizabeth who will not date meat-eaters? With only a few exceptions, nearly all of my married vegetarian friends are married to other vegetarians. But is there any empirical research showing that going vegetarian will change your love life and who you choose as friends?

The answer may be yes, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Social Psychology*. And the old phrase “birds of a feather, flock together” characterizes who vegetarians and vegans consider their BFFs.

Studying the Impact of [Diet](#) on Interpersonal Relationships

The research involved a [collaboration](#) between John Nezlek and Marzena Cyprianska SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities in Poland and the psychologist Catherine Forestell at William and Mary in the United States.

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in the psychology of vegetarianism and veganism. For instance, [in an earlier paper](#), Nezlek and Forestell found that vegetarianism is not just a diet — it is an important part of an individual's social [identity](#). And the social psychologists [Kristof Dhont and Gordon Hodson found](#) that many omnivores are threatened by vegetarians and vegans. Intrigued by these findings, the researchers undertook a series of four studies to learn how vegetarianism affects the formation of friendships and [romantic relationships](#).

The Four Studies

The studies were simple and elegant. In all of them, individuals were asked to describe their diet on a [scale previously developed by Forestell](#) and her colleagues — vegan (no animal products), lacto-vegetarian (consume dairy), lacto-ovo-vegetarian (consume dairy and egg products), pesco-vegetarian (consume fish), semi-vegetarian, occasional omnivore, or omnivore. In their analysis, the researchers combined them to form two categories: vegan/vegetarian (“veg*ns”) and omnivores.

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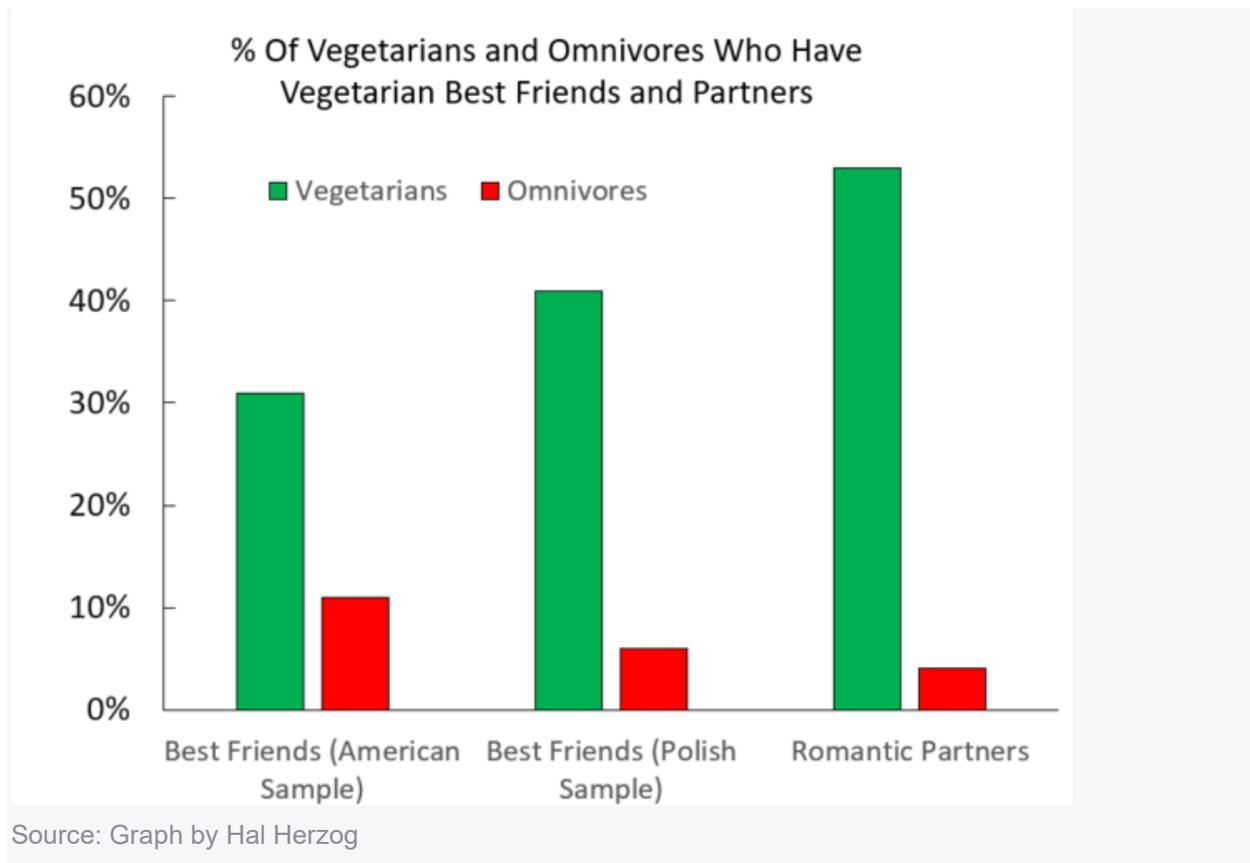
Study 1: Does Diet Affect Social Identity? In the first study, a nationally representative sample of 411 American men and women took an internet survey asking how important their diet was to their sense of self. They were also asked how often they thought about themselves in terms of their eating habits.

Studies 2 and 3: Does Food Affect Your Best Friends? In Study 2 and 3, about 1,200 American university students described the diets of their three best friends (Study 2) and five best friends (Study 3).

Study 4: Vegetarianism — What's Love Got To Do With It? In Study 4, a nationally representative sample of 863 Polish adults was asked to describe the diets of their best friends and their romantic partners using the Forestell scale.

The Results

The results were crystal clear.



Is diet more important to the self-identities of vegetarians and vegans than to omnivores?

Absolutely. On a one to seven-point scale, vegetarians/vegans had considerably higher scores than omnivores when it came to both the importance of the food to their sense of self and how frequently they thought of themselves in terms of their diet.

Are the best friends of vegetarians and vegans also vegetarians and vegans?

Yes, again. In the American samples (Studies 2 and 3), the vegetarians and vegans were *three times* more likely than the omnivores to have their closest friends be non-meat eaters. The difference in the Polish study was even greater: The vegetarians/vegans were *six times* as likely as omnivores to have best buds that did not eat animals.

Love, [sex](#), and veggies.

To me, the most interesting finding was in Study 4. Among the Polish adults, *the vegetarians and vegans were 12 times* more likely than the omnivores to have romantic partners who did not consume meat.

The Implications Are Important

These results raise important issues. Many of the activists I interviewed told me their involvement in animal protection had resulted in alienation from their families and friends. I suspect a lot of this was due to their dietary changes. Across all cultures, much human social life revolves around the sharing of food and drink. It's safe to say that a moral vegetarian would not feel comfortable sitting around a family Christmas dinner table in which the main course was a five-pound hunk of rare rib roast. Similarly, as an older student in a class I was teaching recently told me, many of her long-time friends stopped asking her over to their homes for dinner soon after she became a vegan. They just did not know how to cook for her.

This research has implications for the love lives of vegetarians and vegans. According to the study, giving up meat can shrink your dating pool considerably. And I suspect this is a big problem for ethical vegans. After all, a [2018 Gallup poll](#) reported that only 3% of Americans don't consume any animal-related products. When I suggested to Cathy Forestell that this could result in a 97% reduction in their potential dating partners, she agreed -- but then cautioned me in an e-mail, *Those numbers probably depend to some extent on age and geographical region. I expect that a 20-30-year-old vegan who lives in Colorado would have an easier time finding a like-minded mate than a 60-70-year-old vegan in Alabama.*

The romantic angle of the research hits home with me. My son and his wife have been together for 20 years. She gave up meat back in her teens, but Adam is an inveterate carnivore whose freezer is usually filled with meat from a local farm. At this point, our five and ten-year-old grandsons are omnivores.

But it will be interesting to see how being raised in a culinary mixed [marriage](#) will affect their future dietary choices.

The study also raises another question. What happens to the [friendship](#) networks and romantic relationships of vegetarians and vegans if they revert to omnivory? A study by the animal protection research group [Faunalytics](#) found that [84% of vegetarians and vegans go back to eating meat](#). Do they eschew their vegetarian pals? Do they break-up with their lovers?

I'm hoping this research team will put this question on their list of future projects.

References

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