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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Eating apart together: how vegetarian and meat eating students manage commensality in a flexitarian age

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We are living in a flexitarian age, in which reduced meat eating and vegetarianism are normalising, while simultaneously meat eating is still the norm in Dutch society. A resulting individualisation of diets begs the question whether and how omnivores and veg*ns living together maintain commensality. Based on interviews with 119 young people living in shared households – made up of both veg*ns and omnivores – we investigate how these young adults shape and manage their shared meals. Our results show that veg*ns and meat eaters maintain commensality by, first, using a number of practical strategies that result in meals that are suitable to those different diets, and, second, creating a new norm that defines the diet as an individual choice so as to manage potential conflicts around clashing norms. This results in an active upkeep of tolerance in which veg*nism, meat eating and associated ethical-moral considerations are not discussed. The acceptance of (specifically) vegetarianism, the limited social tensions between meat lovers, meat reducers and meat avoiders, and our finding that people find ways to eat – apart – together, hints at optimism for the future.

Key words commensality • meat consumption • omnivore–veg*n interaction • plant-based food consumption • vegetarianism

Key messages

- Veg*ns and omnivores use different forms of meal pragmatism to create meals acceptable for all.
- Creating a norm of agreeing to disagree works to maintain commensality in shared households.
- Vegaphobia has started to become something of the past.
- Despite differences in ethics and diets vegetarians and omnivores maintain commensality.

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Yet we cannot and should not create a world where omnivores and vegetarians live separately; there must be ways in which we can all join in, and above all, share the dinner table for a communal meal.

De Backer and Fisher (2019: 14)

Introduction

As is common in affluent societies, the Dutch food culture is a meaty one: eating meat is the dominant dietary preference. As a result, current meat consumption in the Netherlands exceeds environmental and health recommendations (Dagevos and Verbeke, 2022). Abundant meat consumption demonstrates that meat is one of the most prominent product categories in the diet, is pivotal to moments of (religious) festivity, celebration or family gatherings, and is associated with cherished cultural meanings (for example, heritage, national pride), symbolic values (for example, status, sense of belonging, social bonding) and identity values (for example, strength, power, virility, masculinity) (for example, Fiddes, 2011; De Backer et al, 2019). Because of such powerful symbolism it is no wonder that Hartmann and Siegrist (2020: 1) noted that ‘almost no other food has such a strong symbolic meaning and is as ideologically charged as meat in Western countries’, and Zaraska (2016: 200) succinctly stated that ‘meat is a symbol-laden element of our culture’. Nor is it surprising that recent research on meat consumption and meat reduction observed repeatedly that many food consumers in the Global North are (emotionally) attached to meat and reluctant to decrease the meat intensity of their diets (for example, Hartmann and Siegrist, 2017; Dagevos, 2021).

Nevertheless, plant-based food consumption can rejoice in increasing interest in today’s Dutch society. Shifting away from meat-rich diets towards meat moderation and more plant-based food consumption is receiving growing attention in the Netherlands lately. This is reflected in abundant media coverage of the adverse effects of meat production and consumption on planetary and human health and of the (hedonic) enjoyment of eating plant-based foods. It is expressed in an extensive variety of meat alternatives on supermarket shelves and an additional rise in sales of these substitutes in Dutch supermarkets in recent years. It is also reflected in increasing attention for plant-based dishes on the menus of restaurants and cafeterias,

providing opportunities for patrons to choose from various ‘herbivore’ options when dining out.

Such omens of a changing socio-cultural context are important, knowing that contextual opportunities and prevailing norms both cultivate and constrain food choices. Food preferences and dietary choices are deeply influenced by socio-cultural processes – the choice whether to eat meat is anything but an exception. Loaded with these symbolic and identity values, choices concerning a diet with or without meat impact our personal and group identities and our social interactions. This is even more so when eating meat is not solely considered normal and natural but simultaneously contested and controversial for global environmental sustainability, human health and animal welfare reasons.

The changing norm around meat eating results in a multitude of different dietary groups existing alongside each other. Dutch society consists of avid meat eaters, but also of small minority groups of dedicated vegetarians and strict vegans (hereafter: veg*ns).² Flexitarians, those who reduce (the frequency of) their meat consumption to some extent, form another substantial food consumer segment (Dagevos, 2021; Verain et al, 2022). Against this backdrop the question arises whether we are heading for normative and social conflict around the kitchen table. The spread of different forms of vegetarianism (pesco-, ovo-, lacto-vegetarians), veganism (ethical, environmental, health vegans) and flexitarianism is a notable expression of what could be termed the individualisation of diets.³ Combined with the centrality of meat in food culture and society at large, this individualisation of diets suggests that social frictions and heated antagonism to ‘other eaters’ is lurking. The question we explore in this article is how this may affect commensality (that is, the act of eating together), and how veg*ns and omnivores shape their shared meals.

Considering that food and eating have been characterised as inherently social vehicles and activities, and eating (the same) food together facilitates and solidifies social bonding, determines group membership, plays a part in constituting (cultural) identity and establishes commonality through shared experiences and meanings, it is unsurprising that a similar question has been posed before. The food sociologists Mennell et al (1992) and Fischler (2011; 2015) associated individualisation with the common meal being in danger.⁴ We repeat this question – whether commensality is at risk – but frame it in the flexitarian age. As indicated, in times of meat lovers, meat reducers and meat avoiders – to leave in-group differences aside – it becomes increasingly important to understand how members of distinct dietary groups respond to each other and what this means for the shared meal. Please note that we use commensality as an ‘entry point’ to better understand group dynamics linked to (not) eating meat within a household context, rather than as a research subject in itself (Jönsson et al, 2021).

In sum, the aim of this article is to understand how veg*ns and omnivores living together shape and manage their shared meals. Our empirical material was collected in and around the university town of Wageningen, the Netherlands. Our study explicitly focuses on the ways in which the shared meal is shaped, the strategies used to eat together despite different dietary styles and conflicting beliefs, and the ways in which commensality is maintained – or not. Implicitly this research responds to a call by Morris et al (2021: 8) who put forward ‘that more research attention needs to be given to daily, ordinary eating practices and how, where and why plant-based eating is already being incorporated into these practices’. This is not only interesting

in the face of understanding how meals are being shaped and diets negotiated; understanding everyday eating practices is also 'key to understanding how our eating can or will change as flexitarianism, reductarianism or veganism become more prevalent' (Morris et al, 2021: 8).

Besides wanting to follow up on these research priorities, the current study connects to the field of how omnivores and veg*ns perceive and treat each other respectively. The following section provides an impression of this research domain. The subsequent section details our study approach. In the results section we show that our respondents use both practical strategies and the technique of creating a shared norm of agreeing to disagree to maintain commensality. The closing section makes some room for further reflection and draws a (reassuring) conclusion with respect to eating – apart – together.

Omnivore–veg*n interactions

While negative bias and treatment of veg*ns goes back to the ancient Hebrew and Christian societies, 20th-century research on how veg*ns are perceived and judged has found frequently that also in modern times omnivores hold negative attitudes towards veg*ns. It is shown that veg*ns have to deal with stereotyping, mocking, teasing, do-gooder derogation, vegaphobia (that is, negative attitudes towards veg*ns), stigmatisation and marginalisation (Minson and Monin, 2012; MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019; De Groeve et al, 2021; Michel et al, 2021). The centrality of eating meat in the dominant food culture explains why meat eaters feel threatened or uncomfortable in the presence of veg*ns and, as a result, why veg*ns are seen as deviants and disruptors of social conventions, are surrounded by unflattering clichés, and are treated with all kinds of prejudices.

Notably, however, current research is suggesting that the tide is changing. Several studies point out that meat eaters' attitudes and perceptions regarding veg*ns are becoming more positive (Judge and Wilson, 2019; Vandermoere et al, 2019; Patel and Buckland, 2021; De Groeve and Rosenfeld, 2022; Pabian et al, 2022). Of course, earlier studies (for example, Chin et al, 2002; Ruby and Heine, 2011; Hartmann et al, 2018) did already provide some evidence for a more positive bias towards veg*ns, but it is striking to notice that a flourishing literature is indicating that the (hey)days of vegaphobia may really be over. De Groeve and Rosenfeld (2022), for instance, found positive attitudes towards vegans as morally committed, and Judge and Wilson (2019) demonstrated that, on average, omnivores' attitudes towards veg*ns were to the positive end of the spectrum.

Pabian et al (2022) add to this body of knowledge by showing that meat eaters hold rather positive attitudes towards veg*ns. Strikingly, these were more positive than vice versa: although the general attitudes of veg*ns towards meat eaters were not negative, they were less positive than the attitudes of meat eaters towards veg*ns. Overall, their research provided little to no evidence of the existence of strong negative attitudes between meat eaters and veg*ns. Patel and Buckland (2021), in turn, revealed that participants' attitudes towards vegetarians were quite positive and associated with favourable personal traits. Meat reducers were perceived most positively while habitual meat eaters were considered less positive. This is another

indication of a cautious reversal of the appreciation of convinced meat avoiders and committed meat reducers on the one hand and dedicated meat eaters on the other.

Finally, a number of papers have reported on the importance of the social environment for whether or not people eat meat. This line of research started with Lea and Worsley (2001), and continued to Stoll-Kleemann and Schmidt (2017) and Rosenfeld (2018) to De Backer et al (2019) more recently. The studies found a reduced meat consumption of individuals with vegetarian friends. Vandermoere et al (2019) add to this body of literature with the conclusion that meat consumption is also strongly related to food choices made by *others than friends* around them: people with veg*ns in, for instance, their household or family also eat less meat. Moreover, Vandermoere et al (2019) found that having veg*ns in one's social network impacts positively on attitudes towards vegetarianism. Vegaphobia was considerably lower when one or more veg*ns were part of the social environment. This signifies, again, that the 'denormalization of meat consumption' (Vandermoere et al, 2019: 5) is inextricably related to the number of food consumers in people's surroundings who are (becoming) convinced meat avoiders and/or committed meat reducers.

Studies on vegetarianism have shown repeatedly how important household members are to veg*ns. Attention has been paid to the household as a barrier, veg*ns facing backlash and reactance from family and friends, and non-accepting social environments raising difficulties for veg*ns to maintain their diet (for example, Verdonk, 2009; Edwards, 2013; Twine, 2014; Asher and Cherry, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018). The current study adds to this literature by including both perspectives: we interviewed meat eaters in a vegetarian household, and veg*ns in an omnivore household, discussing whether and how people with such different diets maintain commensality.

Methods

The present work is based on interviews. These interviews were conducted by a group of approximately 60 bachelor students in the context of the first-year course 'Eating, Customs and Health', taught at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Interviews were held with meat eating respondents living with vegetarians (or vegans, pescatarians or flexitarians) and vegetarian respondents living with meat eaters. All respondents thus live with people with a different diet when it comes to eating meat. As we realise that we used a rather unusual research strategy, we report on this strategy in more detail in the supplementary online appendix.

While there are no numbers on meat consumption and veg*nism among Wageningen students, Wageningen is generally understood as a town where reducing meat consumption or refraining from eating meat is widely accepted and practised. Presumably, the presence of the university plays a role here. However, besides support for an alternative food movement within Wageningen University, there is also ample attention for more conservative ideas about agriculture and food.

Respondents

Our sample contains a total of 119 respondents. Forty-six of these self-identify as meat eater (or omnivore) and 39 as vegetarian. The other respondents identify as flexitarian (19), pescatarian (10) and vegan (5). The average age of respondents is

20.5 years old (age ranges from 17 to 26, for two respondents living in student houses age was not known). Most of the respondents are students: 16 of them are not or we could not confirm this status. For as far as we could identify based on living place and occupation, the sample contains at least 60 Wageningen University students. Exactly half of the respondents live in Wageningen and six in the nearby town of Ede. Six and four respondents, respectively, live in the major student towns of Nijmegen and Utrecht. Other respondents are scattered over the country, both in cities with universities and in cities, towns and villages without universities.

Table 1 shows that most respondents live in student houses. Such households can be as small as two people but also as large as 30 students, but these are extremes: generally, they are inhabited by 5 to 12 students. Another large group of respondents live with their parents. A limited number live with a significant other. The duration with which respondents have been living in their current housing situation differs: respondents living with their parents usually have, not surprisingly, done so all their lives, whereas respondents living with peers may have done so from a few weeks to a few years at most.

Most of the veg*ns already identified as such when they moved into their current house, others stopped eating meat while living with the peers they currently live with, or with their parents. Most omnivores have been eating meat their whole lives. Respondents stated that the main reason for eating meat is that they were brought up this way: they are used to eating meat and like the taste. Despite their self-identification as omnivores, meat eaters often expressed in interviews that in daily practice their diet is more a flexitarian one. This hints to a difference between social identity and dietary habits (see also [Nezlek and Forestell, 2020: 46](#)). Vegetarians, in turn, often stopped eating meat for animal welfare reasons, for the sake of environmental sustainability or for health reasons, and some are not very fond of meat.

Analysis

The analysis as undertaken for this article started with grouping the respondents as shown in Table 1. As most interview notes showed clear demarcated answers for each question, we gathered all answers to all questions from all respondents into an Excel file. We then divided the respondents over the five authors of this article: each author analysed their own cluster, resulting in five separate written analyses, which were then grouped. We discussed these analyses in a number of meetings, each time going into more detail and focusing on differences and striking results. This resulted in a number of main themes, discussed in the next section.

Table 1: Dietary groups and household composition of student participants

	With peers	With parents (and siblings)	With a significant other	Total
Omnivores	35	8	3	46
Flexitarians	14	4	1	19
Vegetarians	23	15	1	39
Pescatarians	8	2	-	10
Vegans	3	2	-	5
Total	83	31	5	119

Results

Commensality as default

Generally, respondents eat with their housemates on a regular basis, at least once or twice a week, often more. When respondents do not eat with their housemates, this is not related to whether they eat meat: respondents eat elsewhere, for instance, or at another time due to other commitments. Hence, when taking dinner at home, for both omnivores and veg*ns, eating with housemates is the default.

‘We never eat apart because of different diets, we only eat apart when we need to eat at different times.’ (Omnivore #33)

Only a few respondents stated that they would occasionally not eat with housemates for reasons that relate to meat consumption. One respondent said, for instance, that he would sometimes eat only with the other omnivores in the house as this was faster and a way to eat meat. A vegetarian respondent argued that she would sometimes cook for herself not only because her housemates like to cook meat, but also because she prefers to eat more vegetables than they do. Such answers were exceptions, however. In general, respondents contended that they try and find solutions to make a shared meal work for all.

Interviews reveal that respondents use two main techniques to maintain commensality in the household despite different preferences with regards to meat eating. First, respondents use practical strategies to combine these preferences, preparing meals that are acceptable for all housemates. Second, respondents avoid conflict and preserve social harmony by not discussing meat eating or vegetarianism as such, but by setting individual choice as the norm. We discuss both techniques in the following sections.

Practical strategies: cooking meals that accommodate different diets

The first technique employed by respondents to maintain commensality in the shared household consists of three practical strategies to prepare dinner. The first one is to cook only a vegetarian meal, to be eaten by both vegetarians and omnivores – a meal that is considered fitting for all.

‘We always eat together with everyone present. If there is one vegetarian present, then the meal is vegetarian. When I eat only with the flexitarian in the house then we often eat some meat. And when I eat alone, I always eat meat.’ (Omnivore #45)

‘When my [vegetarian] girlfriend is here, I simply adapt. Then I eat a vegetarian meal, I don’t mind.’ (Omnivore #29)

The second is to prepare meals that enable both a meat and a vegetarian option. This is done by offering different choices of the protein element in the meal – for instance, by also cooking a plant-based alternative when preparing the traditional Dutch meal of potatoes, vegetables and meat – or by offering meat separately as an extra to be added.

‘Sometimes we eat a dish like mashed potatoes and kale, and then I just add my own bacon. Thus, we don’t eat apart from each other, but we adjust the recipe to our own dietary wishes. And just eat it together.’ (Omnivore #19)

‘When we eat vegetables, meat and potatoes, it is easy to prepare both a hamburger and “vegetarian chicken chunks” separately and eat it together.’ (Vegetarian #9)

The third form of ‘meal pragmatism’ is to cook two different meals, a vegetarian meal and a non-vegetarian meal, and to simply serve both (see also [Salmivaara et al, 2022: 5, note ii](#)). This can mean that the one who cooks, prepares two meals, or that two different cooks prepare two different meals to be eaten together at the same time. In a few cases, the number of housemates is so large that different groups of people eat different meals.

‘We may eat different dishes, but together at the same table. So, we do not necessarily eat apart from each other due to the different diets, but just something else.’ (Omnivore #34)

‘We sometimes cook different dishes, for instance when they have a craving for meat or when I want to eat something specific that they do not like. Usually, we still eat together in these cases, but different dishes. But this does not happen a lot.’ (Vegetarian #30)

How and when it is decided to use which of these three strategies depends on the specific situation, such as whether and how many veg*ns and omnivores are present, who cooks, what people are craving, how long since meat was eaten, how important meat eating is to the omnivores, and how strong the norm of commensality is. Moreover, even though we recognise all three strategies throughout the data, each household has its own routine, which is more or less vegetarian-friendly. In other words, in some households the vegetarian meal is more the norm than in others, where a meat-containing meal is the default. That said, the third strategy seems to be used least (some respondents stated specifically that this strategy is an exception), probably (also) because it involves cooking two complete dishes, which is seen as inconvenient.

‘I eat with the vegans because the food tastes good, and it is just as much effort for me to cook a plant-based meal. It saves time when I do not have to cook every day, so eating together is a good solution. And it is more sociable to eat together.’ (Omnivore #42)

With only a few exceptions, different diets are thus possible and accepted in all households studied: housemates always try and make the meal suitable for all at the table. The following quotes show the different ways in which this is done, and the self-evident way in which meals are adapted to different dietary wishes, depending on the people who make up the household.

‘There are enough vegetarians to cook half/half, for instance one pan with a vegetarian meal and one pan non-vegetarian. If most people are vegetarian, then we usually eat a vegetarian meal.’ (Vegan #6)

‘Sometimes my omnivore housemates really want to eat meat. Then we choose a dish that is easily adjusted to both diets.’ (Pescatarian #4)

‘In practice, we usually eat a vegetarian meal, but with some dishes I would really like to have meat, so then I just cook that to go with it myself.’ (Omnivore #48)

In sum, our data reveal three different practical strategies used by shared households to maintain commensality. Indeed, even though some respondents confessed that it is at times arduous to adjust menus, they contended that they have no problems with the presence of different eating styles: they have found different ways of eating apart together, sometimes more together, sometimes more apart, but always with everyone present at the table.

Tolerance towards and tacit agreement on others’ dietary choices

Our data shows that maintaining commensality also requires a second technique. This is the performance of tolerance towards other diets, which is actively maintained in the absence of a shared norm. Interviewees, both omnivores and vegetarians, argued that they experience tolerance from housemates with regard to their eating style. A tacit agreement seems to exist to tolerate other dietary preferences. Most respondents stated that they hardly receive negative comments at the kitchen table, and that they consider the reaction of others as neutral. Some respondents also specifically indicated that this absence of comments is appreciated. Respecting the choice of the other thus ensures conviviality at the table.

‘They don’t mind me eating meat. I am happy with this response, it would have been a shame if they had reacted really negatively. Such a thing would surely reduce the atmosphere in the house, especially during dinner.’ (Omnivore #1)

‘My housemates reacted well when I told them I was going to eat vegetarian. They always take me into account when cooking without making nasty remarks. I really like this, because it makes it easier for me to stick to my diet.’ (Vegetarian #7)

Interestingly, in the Wageningen context, vegetarians often meet with understanding or even admiration. Several omnivores are neutral or positive about vegetarians: omnivores argued that they admire people who have a vegetarian lifestyle, that it is a good thing to do, and that they would not be ‘capable’ of maintaining that food style themselves. Vegetarian respondents confirmed this attitude/reaction of omnivores in their interviews. Sticking to a vegetarian diet is thus perceived as an individual achievement, requiring skills and personal traits such as abstinence or self-control. In some cases a housemate converting to vegetarianism is first received with negative emotions, but this often passes over time.

‘Pretty positive. For example, they respond with “well done”. Actually, we never talk about it that specifically, most people just say, “oh fine”.’ (Vegetarian #26)

‘My housemates are very open and willing to participate in my diet. When I started living with them, their first reaction was that they were happy that I was vegetarian. They also wanted to eat less meat, so they could easily join me.’ (Vegetarian #5)

‘In the beginning they didn’t know what kind of meat substitutes there were, and they always asked which one was good for a certain dish, but after a month this was over, and they even came up with things that I didn’t know existed.’ (Vegetarian #36)

When omnivores do talk negatively about a vegetarian diet, this often concerns taste and health, referring to an inferior flavour and adverse health effects of meat replacements, and a lack of variety. Some omnivores also argued that vegetarianism is over-the-top and that issues like food waste are more important and impactful. Important to note is that vegetarians can count on more tolerance than vegans: vegans are more often experienced as ‘extreme’ and cooking for vegetarians is considered easier than taking a vegan diet into account. This is consistent with observations in the literature (Nezlek and Forestell, 2020: 46, also see Cole and Morgan, 2011 on attitudes towards vegans).

Tolerance also predominates in veg*ns’ attitudes towards the omnivore diet, but where omnivores are in general positive about a vegetarian diet, veg*ns are more critical. Several of them indicated that omnivores could eat a little less meat, and that they would prefer omnivores to be more aware of what they eat or of the consequences of their food choices. A few respondents were very negative: “I think it [eating meat] is gross” (Vegetarian #17). Remarks often relate to meat eating’s effects on the environment and climate change. Nevertheless, most veg*ns try to keep these opinions to themselves because they do not want to annoy or offend their omnivore housemates, and they expressed little wish to (actively) promote their lifestyles. To put this in words used by Edwards (2013: 121): ‘many vegetarians do not want to ruffle any feathers’. Or in terms of the communication technique Paxman (2021: 758–760) highlights: do not impose your views on others. This is not so much a matter of self-silencing (Bolderdijk and Cornelisse, 2022) but rather of pragmatic consideration that commenting on other’s dietary choices is not effective, potentially sensitive and a matter of personal choice.

‘If there is a conversation about it, I express my opinion. But I will not try and convince them at my own initiative.’ (Vegan #1)

‘I’m not going to argue about it, people have to decide for themselves, but personally I think seven days of meat a week is a lot. Also, if you eat meat, eat good meat. Eat meat from an animal with a good life. Make sure you get quality meat, so no broiler chicken. Animal welfare in general can be given more thought, I think, apart from budget.’ (Vegetarian #13)

‘I don’t care what someone else eats but if someone eats meat, I hope they do know the impact it has on the environment and do their best to reduce meat consumption.’ (Vegetarian #40)

Thus, while tolerance trumps in these mixed households, this mutual tolerance needs to be actively maintained and presented. A number of omnivores argued that they do not want to be criticised for their diet, or to be ‘measured ethically’. They want their housemates to respect their choice, as they do theirs. A few respondents argued that they do not want their vegetarian housemates to present themselves as better people because they make ethically better choices, and that they do not like vegetarians ‘on a mission’.

‘Some disapprove. I don’t like reactions to my eating pattern. What I eat is a personal choice. I don’t think it’s fair if they address me as if they have the “moral high ground”. There are many things that impact the environment that are not taken into account. Besides that, it’s a personal choice, I respect their choices too, so I expect mine to be respected as well.’ (Omnivore #49)

Veg*ns, on the other hand, stated that omnivores often become defensive when they find out about the respondent not eating meat.

‘Even when I did not say anything about it people pretended like I was judging them all and trying to make them feel guilty. Often they started saying preventatively, “I don’t want you to try and make us eat vegan too”.’ (Vegan #5)

‘People get very defensive. Even if I didn’t even explain yet why I am vegan and how I think about others. They start saying things like, “We have reduced our meat intake too”, or “I also buy sustainable produce”.’ (Vegan #1)

Omnivores themselves, however, expressed that they do not feel a need to defend themselves when talking to veg*ns. Some argue that promotion is ‘pointless’: for instance because it may evoke *aversion* (Omnivore #10), roommates have been vegetarian for a long time (Omnivore #2), or roommates are *completely convinced of their diets* (Omnivore #6). Omnivore #20 expects negative responses because their roommates are ‘fanatic’ veg*ns. Other omnivores, however, argued that they would have no arguments to promote their own diet – some stated that a vegetarian diet is indeed ‘a good’ or even ‘the better’ dietary choice.

In sum, while interviewees talked about tolerance at the kitchen table, this tolerance is not self-evident. Sharing a meal benefits from a shared norm, but such a shared norm is absent in households with both meat eaters and vegetarians, especially in the specific context of this study: while meat is the common norm in an average Dutch household, it is contested in Wageningen students’ kitchens. Thus, in line with studies presented earlier, our results show indications of vegetarianism becoming the norm. Where in earlier times vegetarians may have received negative comments or have been marginalised, their diet is now accommodated, and their lifestyle accepted and even applauded. This changing situation and the existence of two conflicting norms creates a potentially explosive situation in which conflict may prevail. Housemates navigate this situation and maintain commensality by agreeing to disagree, and by creating a new, shared norm: diet is an individual choice that should be respected. Thus, besides the practical solutions discussed in earlier sections, potential conflicts are

being controlled by leaving them undiscussed. Housemates tacitly agree to not remark about each other's dietary habits and to not discuss the ethical-moral considerations associated with these habits: at the shared table it is not accepted to actively promote meat avoidance, nor is it accepted to (openly) express the joy of eating meat. Only joking and teasing is allowed to release the tensions that this may lead to. In other words, to allow the possibility of a shared meal, and to enable commensality, the social norm is to avoid conflict, and to keep diets out of ethical debate.

'I don't feel the need to promote my diet. If everyone just keeps to their own eating style and does what he or she feels good about, then I am happy, and the atmosphere is pleasant. There is no need to change someone else's diet. If someone has a need for it, they should make that change themselves.' (Omnivore #19)

'I don't feel the need to defend myself. It does happen secretly because we eat vegetarian more often. So it has sort of crept in. I don't want to convince people because I think people have to choose of their own accord to change their diet. They really have to want it themselves.' (Vegetarian #13)

All in all, our data show that in the current flexitarian age, commensality can be maintained. We do see an individualisation of diets, but these diets are also flexible. Omnivores do not require meat every day, and often happily consume a vegetarian meal. Veg*ns accept meat at the table for others. Housemates thus use practical strategies to make sure everyone receives an appropriate meal, and smother potential (ethical) conflicts around meat eating by agreeing to disagree and respecting individual choices. These two techniques bear resemblance to the findings of Paxman (2021) who showed that smooth interactions between vegans and non-vegans were facilitated by vegans engaging in topic avoidance as well as by cooking and sharing vegan food ('let the food do the talking, so to speak').

Discussion and conclusions

We investigated what happens when omnivores and veg*ns share a household: do they maintain commensality and, if so, how? Our work, based on interviews with young adults, shows that respondents use a number of practical strategies that help creating meals that are adapted – or adaptable – to different diets. Combining autonomy and flexibility, these eating arrangements are directed to commensality. We call this 'eating apart together', and it provides a reassuring response to Fischler's fear that commensality is in danger (see introductory section).

Interestingly, our research shows that both veg*ns and meat eaters mostly agree that eating less meat is 'better' – for planetary and personal health. However, they draw different conclusions from that idea when it comes to their dietary choices. On the one hand, among our young adult respondents eating meat is a normal thing to do and this reflects the normality of meat eating in the Netherlands. On the other hand, we see evidence consistent with the findings of Salmivaara et al (2022), who recognise a change in social norms around eating meat and plant-based food: they speak of a nascent 'demeatification of the diet', and a shifting norm 'turning the meanings of majority and deviant behaviours upside down' (Salmivaara et al, 2022: 6). Even if

Wageningen may be a special context in this respect, it is certainly no exception: as shown in the introduction to this article, flexitarianism and the accommodation of vegetarianism are gaining broader momentum in the Netherlands.

The food practices of today's Wageningen students reveal that housemates prepare and eat their meals in kitchens in which two conflicting norms exist simultaneously. As a result, the shared meal requires constant efforts from all table companions: they consciously avoid conflict by agreeing to disagree. Rather than discussing the moral-ethical concerns underlying different diets, or debating whether meat eating is or should be accepted, there is a (temporary) denial of such moral-ethical differences. The new, shared norm prescribes that diet is personal. Commensality is enabled by emphasising the choice to eat meat as an individual one. Tensions that inevitably arise from this are discharged through jokes and teasing. Put differently, despite an increasing individualisation of dietary forms, our research demonstrates that rather than drifting apart, housemates focus on eating together, and on making that work. Although (or because) 'conventional' ways of eating have become less taken for granted – particularly with respect to eating meat and/or other animal-based foods – students hardly respond to this situation by antagonising others. They do not separate from those roommates who want to eat 'unconventionally' but react to them with tolerance and pragmatic complacency.

In her book *Beyond Beliefs* on improving relationships and communication between veg*ns and meat eaters, Joy (2018: 177) argued that when people are dealing with a difference (of opinion) in a relationship, they have two options. They either accept the difference without feeling the need to change the other, or accept the difference and still request the other to change. Our findings point out that the first option is clearly dominant among our respondents, irrespective whether they are veg*n or omnivore. To a large extent this choice is based upon the premise that one's diet is someone's individual choice. A possible response to this way of reasoning is that in this way (ethical) discussions about 'good food' are avoided: both veg*ns and omnivores choose the safe way that avoids confrontation and conflict (see [Buttny and Kinefuchi, 2020](#)). In this respect our student respondents let the following words of Foer (2009: 56) largely pass by: 'And it isn't just what we put into our mouths that creates table fellows, but what comes out. There is also the possibility that a conversation about what we believe would generate more fellowship – even when we believe different things – than any food being served.'

What we (don't) eat signals who we are, and to which group we (don't) want to belong. The way in which we conform to a particular food culture is part of our identity, and eating together builds and maintains close relationships. Conversely, dietary choices can also divide us or lead to a harsh exclusion of 'others' who are perceived or stigmatised as 'different'. That said, the student circles we explored suggest that the times of treating veg*ns – particularly vegetarians – with contempt or antipathy, or to discredit them in other ways, are over. This is in line with an observation of De Groeve et al (2022: 15): 'there are signs that the zeitgeist in Western countries is shifting in favor of veg*n diets'.

While a divide between meat eating and meat avoiding Dutch students surely exists to a certain extent, this divide is mostly bridged pragmatically and peacefully. Frictions between members of distinct dietary groups appear to be smothered in tolerance. Negative reactions or lack of empathy towards vegetarians did not predominate in the students' responses, nor in veg*ns' responses to meat eating students. Aggressive

situations or social rejection are extremely rare. In fact, vegetarians were generally applauded for their dietary choices. Hence, it seems time to nuance the idea that vegetarians are ‘the others’ and that veg*ns and meat eaters live disconnected from each other. This outcome is on par with results obtained in other recent studies devoted to veg*n–omnivore interactions (see the section on ‘Omnivore–veg*n interactions’). Future research could further investigate such pragmatic – ‘depolarising’ – approaches and explore how carnist and veg*n identities respond to each other in such ways that negative stereotyping is avoided and a reluctance to adapt to a meat-free communal meal is overcome. Our interview data generated a picture of more relaxed and respectful interactions between veg*ns and meat eaters than earlier explorations on veg*n–omnivore discussions (for example, [Greenebaum, 2012](#); [Edwards, 2013](#)), and simultaneously showed that ‘face-saving’ strategies and finding gentle, non-confrontational methods to approach other dietary groups are not only relevant to veg*ns nowadays but also – and especially – to meat eaters. Future research would benefit from delving deeper into potential positive feedback loops in changing eating patterns and practices generated by veg*ns gradually shifting the social norm.

This article’s main result does not, however, imply that implicitly or explicitly there is no dissatisfaction with vegetarians, or with omnivores. Also under circumstances of prevailing tolerance and willingness to cater to meat avoiders’ dietary needs, meat lovers can be annoyed by vegetarians (and especially by vegans), or strongly stick to their meat eating habits. Not eating meat still deviates from the prevalent norm and can still have social implications. Our findings do imply though that we can confirm the hypothesis by [Vandermoere et al \(2019\)](#) that the presence of vegetarians in people’s social environments will be accompanied by lower levels of vegaphobia. ‘Ally support’, as [Bolderdijk and Cornelisse \(2022: 5\)](#) call it, is and remains of vital importance to the social normalisation of vegetarianism. Our findings also concur with [Salmivaara et al \(2022: 8\)](#) concluding ‘that the social norms of one’s own immediate circle can be changed, at least to some extent’.

If our findings give a glimpse of the future of food consumer culture then this future looks pretty bright. First, a dietary shift away from meat-heavy diets towards more plant-based food consumption is clearly positive from the perspective of planetary and people’s health. Second, optimism is justified because we can draw a similar conclusion as [Pabian et al \(2022: 11\)](#) did: also the present study provides ‘little evidence of the existence of strong negative attitudes toward an out-group with a different dietary identity in a Western sociocultural context’. In other words, social tensions between meat lovers, meat reducers and meat avoiders may be more limited than expected given the centrality of meat in the current Dutch diet and the support mainstream meat culture enjoys in this omnivorous society. Third, in this flexitarian age in which an individualisation of diets is likely to increase, commensality is not necessarily thrown overboard causing a ‘commensality crisis’ ([Jönsson et al, 2021: 9](#)). Rather, people keep on trying and keep on finding ways to eat – apart – together.

Notes

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² Although the number of veg*ns is not fixed and difficult to verify, current estimates fluctuate between 4 and 7 per cent ([Dagevos and Verbeke, 2022](#)).

³ With ‘individualisation of diets’ we refer to creating one’s food consumption pattern in such a way that it meets one’s personal requirements. It is regarded a salient feature of contemporary

food consumer culture – just like individualisation is considered a characteristic of Western society. To avoid possible misunderstanding: an individualisation of diets does not imply that individual food choices are not influenced by the socio-cultural, political or ethical context, nor is it synonymous to the students' opinion that one's food choices are an individual matter. The individualisation of diets is also broader than eating or not eating meat specifically: manifestations of 'specialized diets', to borrow a term from Warde (2016: 145), can also be found in contemporary food consumers' eschewing of carbs, refined sugars, gluten or lactose. Sobal (2006) distinguished four types of 'individualisation of eating': (1) collective eating, that is, a commensal group eating the same foods; (2) individualised eating, that is, consuming shared but personalising foods with others during the same meal; (3) individualistic eating, that is, consuming different meals than those of meal companions but maintaining commensality; and (4) individual eating, that is, consuming food alone, imposed or elected. The section on 'Practical strategies' shows that types 1–3 are found in this study; for type 4, see, for example, Koponen and Mustonen (2022).

⁴ Fischler (2015: 17–18) posed the following question: 'Will people give up all forms of commensality or will they invent new viable forms that are flexible enough while also being sufficiently ritualized to impart meaning to the experience of a shared meal?' This clearly illustrates the resemblance to our research interests.

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Supplementary data

Please see the supplementary online appendix for more information on our methods used.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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