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Vegan Men's Food and Health Practices: A Recipe for a More Health-Conscious Masculinity?

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Abstract

In the age of the Anthropocene, questions of ecological sustainability, animal ethics, and human health are intimately entangled. From a gender perspective, compared to women, men's diets tend to be less healthy and sustainable. This is linked to worse health outcomes for men. Therefore, alternative, more ethical ways of eating that have the potential to improve men's health and well-being and simultaneously contribute to better public health and sustainability outcomes should be encouraged. Veganism addresses issues of food, health, climate change, and animal justice simultaneously.

This article explores vegan men's food practices in relation to health and well-being, drawing on qualitative interviews with 61 vegan men. The interview material was analyzed using the method of thematic analysis. Our findings suggest that becoming vegan encourages positive changes in men's health behavior. This includes paying more attention to nutrition and taking better care of one's health. Vegan men report experiencing better physical and mental well-being upon going vegan. Based on these findings, we argue that vegan men's food and health practices contribute to the emergence of healthier masculinities, as vegan men help to challenge links between risky health behavior and masculinity.

Keywords

veganism, gender, men, masculinity, health, health behavior

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This article focuses on food practices from the perspectives of gender and health. We explore the experiences of vegan men with food and eating in relation to health and well-being. Our broader aim is to bring new insights into links between masculinities, food consumption, and health.

Today, more than ever before, questions of human nutrition and health should be understood in a global context and tied to larger concerns extending beyond social factors and our own species. Links between the well-being of ecosystems, other species, and human beings are particularly pertinent in the age of the Anthropocene, where the human species is irrevocably changing our planet's biosphere, with disastrous consequences to ecosystems and all living beings. In this context, questions of animal ethics, ecological sustainability, and human health are intimately entangled. Raising animals for human food is one of the key drivers of climate change (Steinfeld et al., 2006; GRAIN and The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2018). It is also an increasing public health

concern, as antibiotic-resistant bacteria (e.g., Landers et al. 2012) and the spread of zoonotic diseases (Brown, 2004) are becoming increasingly serious concerns for humanity, the latter being aptly demonstrated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, animal-based diets, particularly those including high intake of processed meats, have been associated with some common preventable life-style diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, and some types of cancer (Bouvard et al., 2015; Micha et al., 2017). Following from this knowledge, a number of international health and sustainability organizations call for a reduction in or elimination of animal-based foods from human diets

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(e.g., Willett et al., 2019; Wiseman, 2008). Veganism—the practice of abstaining from the consumption of animal products—addresses issues of food, health, climate change, and animal justice simultaneously.

Exploring intersections between health, sustainability, food consumption, and gender is important for a number of reasons. Men have historically been the key drivers of climate change (see Hultman and Pulé, 2018), as their overall ecological footprint is larger than that of women (Räty and Calrsson-Kanyama, 2010). This includes their carbon footprint from food, as men's consumption of meat is higher than that of women, globally (e.g., Wang et al., 2010). At the same time, men are experiencing worse health outcomes and lower life expectancy compared to women (World Health Organization, 2018). Universally, men have been found to engage in more risky health behaviors (World Health Organization, 2018) and their diets tend to be less healthy and less sustainable, containing more meat (Nakagawa and Hart, 2019; Prättala et al., 2007). Thus, a change is needed in men's food and eating habits if we are to strive toward better health outcomes for men and a more egalitarian and sustainable world. Therefore, it is vital to focus on men's practices that have the potential to improve their health and well-being and simultaneously contribute to better public health, sustainability, and animal welfare outcomes. Veganism opens up opportunities for men to perform masculinity differently, in ways that display more care toward (nonhuman) others and the self (Aavik, 2021a). This includes new ways of relating to one's own body, health, and well-being.

In this article, we focus on the following question: How has transitioning to veganism shaped men's health, well-being, and food practices as perceived by vegan men themselves? We draw on 61 qualitative interviews with vegan men based in Finland and Estonia. Our findings suggest that becoming vegan helps to bring about positive changes in men's health behavior, even if men's primary or initial motivations behind veganism do not include the goals of healthier eating and living. This includes taking better care of one's health and experiencing better physical and mental well-being, as reported by Finnish and Estonian vegan men. Based on this, we argue that men's veganism constitutes one way of moving toward healthier masculinities.

Background and Previous Studies: Men, Masculinities, Veganism, and Health

Critical Approaches to Studying Men and Masculinities

In studying vegan men's relationship to health and well-being, we draw on insights from critical studies on men

and masculinities—a field of research within gender and feminist studies that sees masculinity as socially constructed and critically examines men's practices and cultural norms of masculinity, seeking to challenge men's social power and patriarchal norms. There exists a multiplicity of masculinities in the gender system (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), hierarchically organized in relation to each other and to femininities, with some more culturally valued than others. In other words, masculinities should be seen as relational (Robertson, 2007). The social construction of masculinity implies that there are multiple ways of doing masculinity that change over time and in different social contexts. Thus, men's relationship to their bodies, health, and food is not fixed, but open to (positive) change, as patterns of masculinity and other social circumstances are transforming.

Men, Masculinities, and Health

In discussions on health from a gender perspective, certain concerns regarding men's health are consistently expressed, related to men's life expectancy, morbidity, and their health behaviors (Robertson, 2007: 15–16). Although men in Europe are living healthier and longer lives than ever before, there still exists a life expectancy gap between men and women that biology alone cannot explain (World Health Organization, 2018).¹

Growing evidence suggests that social and cultural factors, notably gender norms, and constructions of masculinity, significantly shape men's health outcomes (Gough and Robertson, 2010; World Health Organization, 2018). Men's risk-taking behaviors and underuse of health services are prevalent across many countries and are linked to socioeconomic factors and norms around masculinities. Compared to women, men tend to use more tobacco and alcohol, have a poorer diet, and a higher rate of injuries (World Health Organization, 2018). In countries with higher levels of gender equality, men have lower mortality rates, higher well-being, and are half as likely to be depressed and have lower suicide rates (World Health Organization, 2018).

Noncommunicable diseases and injuries are the leading cause of death for men in Europe. The largest share of the burden of disease among men in 2016 was caused by five major risks: dietary risks, tobacco, raised systolic blood pressure (BP), and alcohol and drug use (World Health Organization, 2018). Main dietary risk factors included low whole grains, nuts, fruits, vegetables, omega-3 fatty acids-rich foods intake, and high intake of sodium (World Bank, 2017).

Cultural representations of masculinity and health suggest that men are depicted and expected to lack interest in health and nutrition (Gough, 2007). Qualitative studies focusing on men's health perceptions and

behaviors are still relatively rare (Robertson, 2007: 25). Yet, self-reported understandings and experiences of health are significant, to understand gendered identities and the ways in which gender plays a role in health outcomes. Men's perceptions of their own health and their accounts of their health behaviors are indicative of their constructions of masculinity (Robertson, 2007: 5).

The Vegan Diet, Human Health, and Environment

Veganism is a practice of refraining from consuming non-human animals, typically done for ethical, environmental, and/or health reasons. Despite still-dominant cultural stereotypes and—particularly in some countries—hostile attitudes of medical professionals toward veganism and vegans (Aavik, 2019), veganism has been recognized by the world's leading nutrition organizations as an appropriate diet for human beings. According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and British Dietetic Association, nutritionally adequate and well-planned vegan diets are suitable and healthy for people of all ages and may even prevent certain chronic conditions (British Dietetic Association, 2017; Melina et al., 2016).

Reducing or eliminating meat and other animal products from the diet can offer a number of health benefits including lower risk of cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, and some types of cancers. Vegans have been found to have lower mean BMI compared to meat eaters (Spencer et al., 2003; Tonstad et al., 2009). Plant-based diets can help decrease certain health risks, including abdominal obesity (Rizzo et al., 2011), blood pressure (Pettersen et al., 2012), serum lipid profile (Wang et al., 2015), and blood glucose (Barnard et al., 2009), and are therefore associated with a lower probability of developing and dying from cardiovascular diseases (Crowe et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2012; Orlich et al., 2013). Epidemiologic studies have consistently shown that regular consumption of fruit, vegetables, legumes, or whole grains is linked with reduced risk of certain cancers (World Cancer Research Fund, 2007). Conversely, positive association has been observed between processed red meat consumption and the risk of colorectal cancer (Bernstein et al., 2015; Rohrmann et al., 2013), which is why red meat and specially processed red meat is classified by the World Health Organization as a carcinogen (World Health Organization, 2015).

Increasingly, the environmental aspects of diets are being considered in nutrition recommendations, as the food we eat does not only influence the health of people but also has a significant impact on our ecosystems and the entire planet. It has by now been established that plant-based diets are more environmentally sustainable than diets rich in animal products because they use fewer

natural resources and are associated with much less environmental damage (GRAIN and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2018; Poore and Nemecek, 2018; Steinfeld et al., 2006). Foods with the lowest environmental impacts often have the greatest health benefits whereas foods with the largest environmental impacts—unprocessed and processed red meat—often have the largest negative impacts on human health (Clark et al., 2019). According to the EAT-Lancet Commission report published in 2015, a diet appropriate for people as well for our planet's health is mostly plant-based, consisting largely of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and unsaturated oils (Whitmee et al., 2015). Compared to animal-based and vegetarian diets, the vegan diet has the smallest ecological footprint (Chai et al., 2019). Thus, human nutrition and planetary sustainability are interlinked in important ways. The same dietary changes that could help reduce the risk of diet-related noncommunicable diseases could also help meet international sustainability and animal welfare goals.

Inevitably, going vegan involves changing habits related to food consumption, in terms of nutrition and eating patterns, even if these changes are not consciously pursued by vegans for health or other reasons.

Gendering Food Practices: Men, Masculinities, and Veganism

Food and eating practices are gendered (Counihan, 1999) and linked to men and masculinities in particular ways (for an overview on this, see Modlinska et al., 2020). Meat consumption, unhealthy eating, and distancing from household cooking have been identified as among the key food practices or cultural patterns associated with men and masculinities (Szabo, 2019).

Eating meat continues to be culturally coded as a masculine practice, with meat-eating men perceived as more masculine than vegetarian men (Ruby & Heine, 2011) and vegan men (Thomas, 2016). In most societies, meat is still seen as appropriate and necessary nourishment particularly for men (Szabo, 2019). In Western countries, there are significantly fewer men among vegetarians (Ruby, 2012) and in most societies, eating animals remains a powerful norm for men through which to reaffirm their masculinity, as cultural representations of masculine ideals attest (Stibbe, 2004). Men's attachment to meat eating as a way to construct masculinity suggests that masculinity plays a role in gender differences in the consumption of meat as well as in adverse health outcomes for men stemming from their meat consumption patterns (Nakagawa & Hart 2019; Prättala et al., 2007).

Unhealthy eating is another food practice primarily associated with men—evident in cultural representations and from empirical research (Szabo, 2019). In contrast to

women, men's diets on average have been found to be unhealthier and contain more meat, as data from Finland and the Baltic countries suggest (Prättälä et al., 2007).

Keeping a distance from household cooking has been long considered a marker of masculinity (Szabo, 2019). While younger men in the Global North today are increasingly more involved in household cooking than older men, men's share of home cooking still remains significantly smaller than women's (Szabo, 2019). Vegan men have the potential to challenge these patterns, as veganism encourages a more intimate relationship to food and an increased participation in home cooking as feminized activity (Aavik, 2021b). This may have positive implications for gender equality as well as for men's health, as homecooked meals tend to include less processed ingredients.

It is difficult to speak of a single vegan masculinity, as this would assume that all vegan men are similar (irrespective of race, class, geographical location, reasons for becoming vegan, etc.). Yet, despite this diversity, the common element to men's veganism—rejecting the consumption of animals—has implications for men's everyday (food) practices, social interactions as well as for their health and well-being. By abstaining from eating animal products, vegan men disrupt the link between meat eating and masculinity and thus open up the potential for doing masculinity differently (Wright, 2015: 26). Because of strong cultural associations between men and meat eating, men who become vegan can experience negative attitudes (Szabo, 2019) and their masculinity may be questioned. Thus, adopting veganism has ramifications that transcend diet.

Some previous work has focused on vegan and vegetarian men and masculinities (Author1, 2021; DeLessio-Parson, 2017; Greenebaum and Dexter, 2017; Mycek, 2018; Potts and Parry, 2010; Rothgerber, 2013; Sumpter, 2015). This research has mostly explored vegan men's identities and everyday practices, and has been interested in how veganism may challenge traditional constructions of masculinity. Thus far, little is known about how men's veganism relates to their health, health behavior, and well-being. This article aims to fill this gap.

Research Design and Methods

This article draws on qualitative narrative interviews with vegan men based in Finland and Estonia. In total, 61 interviews (30 in Estonia, 31 in Finland), with an average length of 83 min, were conducted by the first author in 2018–2019.² Informed consent was obtained from the research participants to take part in the study. Research participants were recruited via the two largest vegan-themed Facebook groups in the two language communities: Eesti Veganid (Estonian, ca 9000 members at the

time) and Vegaani (Finnish, ca 12 000 members). The interviewed men were between 18 and 56 years of age, with an average age of 34 years. The sample included men who lived alone, with friends and/or parents as well as those cohabiting with a female partner; a few had children. The time they had been vegan ranged from a few months for some to nearly two decades for others. It is important to note that the research participants constitute a privileged group: they were white, predominantly ethnic Estonian or Finnish, typically middle-class, living in urban areas, and most had completed tertiary education. This privileged social position was likely to facilitate these men's vegan transition, including gaining knowledge on vegan nutrition and health, and the ability to act upon this knowledge in their everyday food practices, choices, and health behavior.

The interviews were narrative, aiming to elicit detailed stories about key aspects of the men's vegan experience, such as their transition to veganism, their relationship to food, and perceptions of their health.³ Links between veganism and masculinity were among the topics explored in the interviews.

To analyze the interview material, we followed the principles for qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both authors first coded all interviews separately, focusing on themes related to food, eating, health, and well-being. As a result of the first round of coding, both authors developed a separate thematic map of main themes and subthemes, which were merged as a result of a joint discussion. Subsequently, both authors used this theme map to do a second, more focused coding of the interviews which resulted in a more comprehensive theme map. Based on the updated thematic map, the first author compiled the draft of the analysis of interview material related to food and health, and the second author focused on health and well-being. We then merged these analyses and developed them jointly.

We illustrate our analysis with excerpts from the interviews, using pseudonyms to refer to the research participants.

Main Findings: Vegan Men's Food and Health Practices

This section is structured according to the key themes and subthemes that we identified in our analysis, pertaining to vegan men's food and health practices. We begin by exploring the role that health and nutrition played in the research participants' transition to veganism. We continue with a discussion on men's perceptions and experiences of the health effects of veganism and changes in their health behavior. This is followed by an examination of how men's relationship to food and eating habits changed after they went vegan, with a focus on healthy

versus unhealthy eating. We finish by discussing how the research participants promote change to men's food and health practices. Throughout the analysis, we consider how these practices relate to and help transform men's health behaviors and cultural ideals of masculinity.

The Role of Health and Nutrition in the Vegan Transition

"I Realized That Eating Animal Products Is a Health Risk for Me": Health Reasons as a (Primary) Motivator Behind Transitioning to Veganism. While most research participants became vegan for ethical and/or environmental reasons, health featured as a secondary reason for many and the primary motivation for a few. Existing health problems, documentaries, articles, and YouTube videos about health and nutrition that they had come across, social media influencers, and the wish to prevent chronic health conditions were primary factors that led men to investigate more about vegan nutrition. Such investigations prompted some men to become vegan, while for some others, health and nutrition information about veganism was sought soon after the vegan transition:

Paul, 44, EST: It all started when in November 2011 I watched CNN. They played a clip called "The last heart attack" by Dr Sanjay Gupta. This clip focused a lot on Bill Clinton who had changed his diet after a heart attack which resulted in a quadruple bypass. Then they put in four new blood vessels which started to clog up and they were going to do another operation to install more blood vessels. Clinton asked the doctor if there is any other way and the doctor said: "Yes, if you are willing to change your diet and lifestyle. Go to this clinic in Cleveland and see Dr Caldwell Esselstyn, who has for decades helped people to change their lifestyle. If you change your diet, then your atherosclerosis will stop and improve." And then Bill Clinton went and changed his diet and no longer had a need for further operations. This sparked my interest. I then ordered Caldwell Esselstyn's book from Amazon [. . .]. Half of it was theory [on vegan nutrition] and half of it recipes. The theory seemed convincing and so I started trying out the recipes.

This narrative demonstrates the importance of positive male role models whose Relationship to food and eating habits after going vegan health behaviors have inspired other men.

Prevention of noncommunicable diseases was an important motivator for men who chose veganism for health reasons. They identified meat consumption as a public health issue and pointed out that at the national level too little attention is paid to nutrition as a way of preventing chronic diseases. They considered adopting a plant-based diet as a significant positive step that one can take to lower one's risk of lifestyle diseases:

Paul, 44, EST: I realized that eating animal products is a health risk for me. I'm an Estonian and if I eat like all other Estonians then I'm likely going to end up exactly like them, which means that 75% die of cancer or heart disease. Then I looked at the causes of death in my family: cancer and heart disease. And then I realized that this risk is very important for all of us. It is totally irresponsible to consume meat in such quantities.

While many such health narratives did not explicitly highlight gender and focus on men's health in particular, they function as implicit critique of men's risk-behaviors, as related to diet.

"I Have Spent Countless Hours Reading About Nutrition": Science-Based Approach to Vegan Nutrition. The vegan men in this study, irrespective of their motivations behind veganism, sought to familiarize themselves with vegan nutrition quite thoroughly:

Raido, 28, EST: I have spent countless hours reading about nutrition and different ingredients. Everything seems very simple and logical to me.

It was important for the men to consult sources they trusted. These typically included publications by medical doctors and nutritionists, scholarly articles, and studies by international health and nutrition organizations. The choice of these sources suggests the importance they placed on the trustworthiness of the information:

Tarmo, 36, EST: I read all the studies by the World Health Organization, I looked through some Oxford studies and others. I have read a lot. Lately, I haven't really felt like finding out more, I haven't felt the need, because I familiarized myself with vegan nutrition thoroughly.

This reliance on scientific information on health and nutrition aligns with findings of previous research suggesting that vegan and vegetarian men adopt an evidence-based approach to their diet (DeLessio-Parson, 2017; Mycek, 2018). Such scientific approach to vegan nutrition aligns with and supports dominant constructions of masculinity valuing rationality (Mycek, 2018). However, we suggest that the need the men felt to familiarize themselves with knowledge on nutrition, and their emphasis on scientific information cannot only be explained by men following cultural scripts of masculinity, but significantly emerged from interactions with non-vegan others. Men typically shared experiences of non-vegan others asking them about the nutritional value of vegan foods, including about the protein, vitamin, and mineral content. Thus, to a significant extent, their knowledge of vegan nutrition developed as a result of having to explain and

justify to non-vegan others that veganism is a nutritionally adequate diet:

Ilmari, 27, FIN: I would research a lot. Not in the same way as now but you know, because I noticed very quickly that people were starting to ask like about the protein and all of that, you know, are you full or something and then that would make me, you know look at it because I didn't have the answers. So, I was like, well, I want to know. So, then basically usually I just answer people, just simply, you know, are you getting enough protein and then I'm like well from my breakfast, I got this and this amount of protein [laughs] and then you know, they're kind of surprised when they. . . because they don't expect you to know, it was kind of, they're just questioning the whole thing.

Men's descriptions of what they eat suggest that they overall had a relatively good idea of the principles of healthy and balanced vegan nutrition, as they noted the importance of consuming legumes, fruits and vegetables, whole foods, nuts, and seeds along with a few supplements recommended for vegans. We observed this also among men whose veganism was not primarily motivated by health concerns:

Sander, 19, EST: I sometimes take a blood test. The latest ones have been totally fine. I take B12 supplements, also vitamin D and I make sure that my diet includes all food groups. So, my typical dinner consists of some veggies, like beetroot, turnip, and carrot, along with some grain, like rice, buckwheat, or spaghetti. I always add some legumes and some oil, to make sure I include something from all food groups.

As a result of immersing themselves in this information, the men claimed to have become much more aware of nutrition and its links to health, as well as developing a more critical attitude toward mainstream nutritional information. These findings suggest that transitioning to veganism can promote an increased awareness of nutrition among men.

Perceptions and Experiences of the Health Effects of Veganism

"The Vegan Diet Just Seemed Better": Changes in Perceived Health Status and Self-Reported Health Behavior. Overall, men considered going vegan as a positive change in their lives (for more detail on this, see Aavik, 2021a). Some experienced positive changes in their health, both physical and mental; only a few did not report any changes.

Physical Health. Because the vegan diet is culturally seen as a restricted diet with a potential risk of causing health problems, it was important for men to stress that they do not have health issues and feel good after

switching to a vegan diet. The positive effect of vegan food on the body was commonly emphasized. Some even pointed out that this was the case irrespective of what one eats, as long as the food is plant-based:

Tanel, 31, EST: I can now eat everything I want; I can stuff myself, but it doesn't tire me, I actually get more energy. And you don't get fat. At least not as fat as before.

Thus, men emphasized how for them, eating vegan food offers health benefits without much effort, such as diet or exercise—it was considered an easy and convenient way to keep fit.

Some men described specific positive changes in health, such as weight loss, higher energy levels, feeling good, clear skin, and regression of stomach and digestive issues:

Martin, 27, EST: It started for health reasons. The vegan diet just seemed better. I felt like I got more energy, and my digestion became better. Previously, when I ate porridge and bread with sausage for breakfast, I felt like I had no strength in my limbs. But once I started having vegan food for breakfast, I felt strength in my limbs. So, it started for rather selfish reasons.

Men active in sports reported positive impacts on training and competition results. In a few cases however, adverse health effects, like unwanted weight loss—culturally coded as desirable for women, but unwelcome for men—were observed. This nevertheless did not dissuade men from veganism, but instead encouraged them to pay more attention to their nutrition.

Mental Health, Well-Being, and Changing Health Habits. Previous studies have demonstrated that vegan and vegetarian men display lower anxiety levels than omnivore men, and this has been explained by the effects of antioxidant-rich foods (Modlinska et al., 2020: 10). Our findings support the suggestion that veganism helps to improve men's mental health and overall sense of well-being, as our research participants reported a significant positive change in this realm. We suggest, however, that reasons for this are not only diet related. Typically, men felt that after becoming vegan, they were living more in line with their values and beliefs and that this has increased their well-being. Some men reported that as a result of becoming vegan, they feel more in control of their life and health, that they are more responsible for what happens to them in life. Some men pointed out that becoming vegan was best decision they had made in their lives:

Erki, 18, EST: I just have such a good feeling within myself for doing something right [. . .] I have met the goal that I

have long been striving for. Finally, I am here and this is good for everyone. It makes me feel so good.

The change in diet typically coincided with changes in other health habits for some men, such as decreased alcohol consumption or giving it up altogether, quitting smoking, and becoming more physically active. According to the research participants, these changes were not always directly related to veganism, but often followed, as the men started—inadvertently or consciously—to pay more attention to their health, some seeking simply to feel better in their bodies. Particularly men who initially chose veganism because of health reasons, talked about changing other health habits; following one major life change, others were found easier to change:

Tanel, 31, EST: I decided to quit drinking and smoking and go vegan at the same time. This was a really big life change for me. I also quit my job and started a company. So it was a 180 degree turn.. and thanks to this. . . Well, I drank, smoked, and ate meat with my friends and now I don't have friends anymore. The only thing we had in common was alcohol and partying.

Our findings suggest that men identified positive changes in their health upon transitioning to veganism, and this enabled other positive life changes.

“I Started Cooking for Myself”: Relationship to Food and Eating Habits After Going Vegan. Assessments of going vegan as a positive experience in the men’s lives included a better relationship to food, eating, and consequently to health and well-being. It was typical for the research participants, even for those not explicitly health-oriented, to begin cooking more at home:

Lukas, 25, FIN: When I went vegan, it forced me to cook. And it forced me to like learn to make food and make everything myself. So, for the first five years or something like that, I was making actually quite a lot of food myself and baking and doing stuff like that, which was really nice. Just maybe now being busier and with this kind of ready options available I don't do it that much anymore, just like during the weekends or special occasions.

The men reported that they have increasingly incorporated more whole meal ingredients, protein, fruits, and vegetables in their meals. At the same time, they preferred simple, fast, but healthy foods:

Oskar, 32, FIN: Well, I just try to eat. . . calculate my protein intake per day, because it's like 20 grams that your body can at one time take, the rest will turn into fat. So, I'm trying to eat like three times a day. And every time there's like some protein, like if it's oats or beans. Well, that's the. . . that's my

typical like pasta and. . . with the pulled out. So that's my typical lunch when I'm working. So, there is enough protein and. . . [. . .]: I'm doing like really easy. . . really easy dishes. Like typical pasta, sauce, really easy, and fast. [. . .] So, it's really easy.

Likely as a reaction to cultural stereotypes viewing veganism as a restrictive diet, men emphasized how going vegan had actually made their diet more versatile and healthier. Some associated this with a growing awareness that one has to pay more attention to one’s health when getting older:

Tom, 41, EST: I was not at all health conscious. While coming from a mother who was very health conscious, I was not. And maybe that was part of me rebelling against her. I was eating a lot of junk food. But I think it was through going vegan that I started cooking for myself and I think that started me on that path to thinking about my food in a more serious way. But also thinking about putting on weight and other things got me interested in nutrition in a different way. [. . .] It was not like I was interested in health, so I went vegan. I was vegan and I wanted to be healthy, so I just tried to make my vegan diet healthier.

The vegan men actively challenged the common belief in popular cultural consciousness that following a vegan diet, particularly one that is nutritious and healthy, is difficult:

Tõnis, 33, EST: To start eating healthy, I watched a 40-minute video clip and learned what I have to pay attention to. I just follow this advice, and everything is fine. There's nothing complicated about it.

These experiences help to challenge the widespread assumptions that veganism is complicated, which may be an obstacle to going vegan particularly for men.

“Health Veganism” Versus “Junk Food Veganism”. Vegan men pointed out that one can be healthy or unhealthy as a vegan, depending on what one eats and what other health habits one adheres to. It was suggested that veganism is not always necessarily healthy, and that not all vegans aim to live healthy lives.

Yet, a typical attitude among the vegan men was that even if one does not pay particular attention to healthy eating and incorporates varying degrees of processed food in their diet, veganism is still healthier than an average omnivore diet:

Jukka, 30, FIN: Obviously, it's healthier for you and nowadays I don't exercise all that much but eating plant-based helps me keep my gut in shape—so to speak—more so than it would have been on an omnivore diet.

The men identified and related their own food practices to two discourses characterizing two (seemingly) oppositional eating trends among vegans: “health veganism” and “junk food veganism.” Health veganism refers to such vegan eating practices that pay particular attention to assuring that the food consumed is nutritious and offers health benefits. This typically includes avoidance of foods and cooking techniques considered unhealthy. Health veganism usually also entails efforts to learn about the health effects of foods on the body. Although research participants were mostly reluctant to label themselves as a health vegan, many men’s descriptions of their eating habits aligned strongly with the principles of health-oriented eating. This included for example increasing their intake of legumes and greens, avoidance of sugar and processed foods, and preferring homemade meals:

Holger, 34, EST: I think of myself as a vegan who eats healthy. Well, I'm definitely interested in trying out all these replacement products, cheeses, soy burgers, veggie dogs and so on. [. . .] But I won't eat only these processed foods. This is not for me to throw food in the microwave. . . I don't even have a microwave.

Junk food veganism, on the other hand, refers to including in one’s diet, to a greater or lesser extent, food that is typically considered unhealthy and highly processed. The discursive identification with either health veganism or junk food veganism partly stemmed from the motivations behind men’s veganism. For example, for those whose main motivation behind veganism was their own health tended to emphasize the importance of healthy eating more, in contrast to those whose veganism had to do primarily with ethical or environmental concerns:

Veli-Matti, 34, FIN: I could not care less about health [laughs] because, I know the founder, you know, the Chips Beer Vegans, Sipsikaljavegaanit [. . .] I was one of the like the first 100 joiners of the group because back then, before it became a really big trend. [. . .] the group is about body positivity. And for me, [. . .] it was more about just being a normal, living normal life, in a way normal life being a vegan. [. . .] Anyway, I don't care about health that much.

In this excerpt, a reference is made to a popular Finnish vegan Facebook group Chips and Beer Vegans, featuring photos of vegan junk food posted by the group members (the group does not allow photos of what are considered health foods to be posted). The group resists the common association of veganism with healthy eating, slim and fit bodies, or conceptualizations of veganism as a health trend in popular consciousness. Such online vegan communities attempt to “normalize” veganism by emphasizing that vegans do not need to give up “junk food,” a desire also reflected by several men in the study, as

illustrated in the excerpt above. The claims of not caring about one’s health and distancing from diet cultures align with cultural expectations and representations of masculinity (Gough, 2007).

Ethically and environmentally motivated vegan men in particular suggested that health concerns, including healthy eating, constitute egoistic or selfish reasons behind veganism. Such reasons focused on the self were not considered appropriate for “true” vegans, whose primary motivations should have to do with concern over the well-being of (non-human) others:

Lauri, 28, FIN: I have this sort of like bad attitude to like health veganism. I didn't like these sort of like selfish reasons like health reasons. I had . . . like . . . my sort of veganism was more linked to the sort of like anarchist animal rights things and like anti-fascism and feminism and that sort of thing. So, it was more like I had. . . I would think about it has to be this political thing and like self-centered health things are like not my thing. But I don't really know any like health-based vegans or vegetarians. I don't know of any. But there's this. . . I may be wrong, but this sort of American sort of like vegan bodybuilder men, vegan athletes and vegan celebrities that are sort of promoting veganism for health reasons. And I'm more distant to that but I think it has something to do with the sort of like maybe something to do with like the cultural overweight thing or something. I don't know, but I don't really care about like that sort of like health veganism thing as much as caring about like sentient beings and like the climate.

The men who considered animal rights reasons as the only legitimate reason to go vegan expressed negative attitudes toward so-called health vegans. Particularly some Finnish men who had chosen veganism because of ethical reasons claimed not to pay much attention to their health or did not consider this aspect important. In interviews, some called themselves “junk food vegans,” perhaps as part of efforts to normalize men’s veganism. Yet, it was typical for those who chose veganism for ethical and environmental reasons to consider the health benefits of a vegan diet as a bonus or claim that health has become a more important aspect later on. Choosing veganism for health reasons and seeing healthy diet as a significant benefit of veganism was a more common theme in the interviews of Estonian men.

We suggest, as one possible explanation to these cultural differences, that a stronger and longer animal rights tradition in the Finnish society (for historical reasons) has enabled more men to associate themselves with it than in Estonia. Also, Finland, with its more egalitarian gender norms, compared to Estonia, enables men to practice alternative and more caring masculinities more easily than for men in Estonia, where more traditional ways of doing gender prevail. Going vegan for motivations

having to do with one's own health and not for nonhuman animals and their suffering, constitutes a more individualistic and "egoistic" reason, aligning with and stemming from the prevalent individualistic tendencies in the neoliberal Estonian society, an ideal that many men aspire to. In a more conservative society in terms of gender norms, going vegan for health reasons may appear more masculine than ethical veganism, particularly when coupled with athletic practices to achieve a more muscular body. In the more gender-egalitarian Finnish society, alternative performances of masculinity are more socially acceptable, including those embracing care for nonhuman others. At the same time, men's practices that involve healthier ways of living help to challenge patterns of masculinity associated with negative health behaviors and outcomes.

While the men made a discursive distinction between these two ways of eating, and some labelled themselves junk food vegans and explicitly distanced themselves from health veganism, we argue that the men's actual eating practices cannot be easily separated into these two categories. This is exemplified in the following extract:

Tapani, 35, FIN: [. . .] in the early years when I was a vegan, there seemed to be this idea that vegans are people who eat like wholegrain [foods] and carrots. It got mixed up with this health thing. And these days it has become more common to differentiate between ethical vegans and health vegans. And I'm firmly into ethical veganism. Even though I'm interested in the health effects, I'm not vegan because of health reasons.

Here, Tapani illustrates how it was typical of vegan men primarily motivated by ethics and or environmental reasons to be critical of popular associations of veganism with health concerns, yet, at the same time to display at least some awareness of and care about health effects of food and even strive toward healthier eating. Thus, in different ways, explicitly or implicitly, most men aspired toward or displayed orientations healthier ways of eating, even if they did not ascribe to or resisted the idea of "health veganism." This illustrates how the "health vegan" can be constructed as a rather negative figure.

"I'm Still a Bad Vegan": Aspirations Toward Healthier Eating. It was typical for men, even for those who criticized the health vegan movement, to aspire to eat healthier. Motivations behind this had mainly to do with their desire to feel better in their bodies and/or have more energy. Statements such as "I know I should eat healthier" or "I try to eat healthy, but it doesn't always work out" were made, suggesting awareness of links between health, well-being, and food and efforts to try to eat better.

A distinction between a "bad vegan" and "good vegan" was drawn by some men, where a "bad vegan" is someone who eats junk food whereas a "good vegan" ate or aspired toward eating healthier foods. Most men aimed to reduce their intake of "processed food":

Daniel, 34, FIN: I'm still a bad vegan, a fast-food vegan [laughs], so I'm still bad.

Panu, 22, FIN: I've been a quite unhealthy vegan, eaten vegan junk food a lot and I quite enjoyed it. And I don't exercise that much. So, it's been quite nice too because more and more these junk food options have come up, vegan burgers and.. I was completely addicted to it so. . . But more recently I've taken more like time, like I've paid more attention to what I eat. I don't eat French fries every day and hamburgers or things like that. Preferring healthier options. [. . .] I just want . . . maybe I want to take better care of myself. I'm 23 years old in July. So, I'm not in a hurry to make my lifestyle any healthier, but I think it's good to start early.

Eating what was understood as junk food was still considered acceptable and as part of a generally healthy diet, as long as one mostly eats healthy:

Ilmari, 27, FIN: You know, sometimes I'll just, you know, have pizza and burgers and whatnot [laughs] and then I'll go like eating some soup and some salads. But it's been a growth process of like, you know, sometimes like actually realizing like 'oh, I don't feel so great', maybe it is because I haven't been eating like that much protein recently or I haven't been like. . . not that I like pay that much attention to like the nutrient aspects of it because I've done before when I've been like trying to like lose weight or stuff like that.

Vegan men's orientation toward healthier eating helps to normalize ways of doing masculinity that pay more attention to health and well-being.

"Unhealthy Eating Seems to Be Seen as a Manly Thing": Promoting Change to Men's Food and Health Practices

Challenging Stereotypes About Men's Food and Health Practices. Research participants identified and challenged stereotypes and social expectations related to men, masculinities, and food. The main stereotype they brought up was that eating meat and eating unhealthy foods is or should be considered masculine:

Niko, 26, FIN: That kind of unhealthy eating seems to be seen as kind of like a manly thing. [. . .] like really greasy food and beer and these kinds of things. It's maybe like you're [not] a manly person if you don't. . . like eat just really junky or really heavy food. People then don't think

that vegetarian food can be that. So, I just remember like back in high school, also with my group of friends, we used to do this like-like really horrible kind of fool things—like whatever bacon bits are, greasy things, and that was kind of like almost like a value in itself: like eating really unhealthy.

Recognizing these gender stereotypes and gradually coming to see them as harmful was illustrated for example by narratives of personal transformation—from a heavy meat eater to a vegan man. Through such transformations, dominant masculinity scripts are challenged which associate masculinity with risk-taking and health-adverse behavior:

Timo, 38, FIN: I would choose the meal with the most meat that I could find. It was just like the grill platter or whatever I could eat [. . .] That's how I always chose my meals and then after that meal, I would still drink my protein shake which was of course made of cow milk protein and I had actually because I could also eat a lot because I had a lot of. . . I burned a lot of calories due to the lot of exercise that I did and therefore I just ate a lot and then I had friends who said like, "Okay. When I invite you for a barbecue, I have to actually do extra shopping because I get- have to get so much meat" because I wouldn't touch the salad. I would just eat the meat and just loads of it because I thought that's the way of gaining muscle. [. . .] I still remember eating meat although it's now I don't know nine years ago, but I still remember that — what it tasted like and that I liked it. And also what it meant to me as a man to eat lots of red bloody meat and the more blood, the better and how manly that felt in a way that's. . . I just now know how wrong it was and I can't — I can't spit out the meat that I have eaten in my life. I would if I could. But the harm is done in a way, but I just don't want to have anything to do with it anymore. [. . .] I mean, I was the meat-eater of the planet.

The cultural association of plant-based eating with dieting, lack of protein, and loss of body weight and muscle, particularly for men, was challenged. Men dispelled it as a myth that vegan men lack strength to exercise; instead, the figure of an athletic vegan man was valued and presented, by men actively playing sports:

Raido, 28, EST: For the past eight or nine months I have been in ideal weight and my weight index has consistently improved, meaning that my fat percentage has dropped, and my muscle ratio has increased [. . .] My eating is optimal, including my intake of protein. Plus, I'm getting stronger.

Concern with (the potential loss of) muscle mass aligns with dominant cultural masculinity scripts. In contrast to constructing the ideal of a vegan man as muscled and fit, another view was presented: several men specifically stated that they did not care about achieving and maintaining a muscular body and dismissed such a concern entirely, problematizing the cultural expectation for men

to cultivate well-built bodies and contested the expectation for vegan men to so.

Advising Other Men on Vegan Health and Nutrition and Role-Modeling. The vegan men in our study acted as role models and inspiration for other men, either consciously or inadvertently. They motivated other (non-vegan) men in a variety of ways, for example through vegan food and fitness blogging, giving health and nutritional advice to other men, typically through everyday conversations and activities.

Some men recognized that they act as (passive) role models who inspire others to change their diet through their own everyday lived experience as a former (heavy) meat eater and now a (health-conscious) vegan:

Timo, 38, FIN: I don't know how many people eat less meat for example nowadays just because they, they figured that "Ah, this Timo guy changed so I can also change and why not and he seems to be so healthy so it can't be wrong" [. . .] you automatically become this role model in a way for many people.

Experiences of motivating others were also of a more direct kind, such as helping a male friend to improve his diet and thereby health outcomes:

Paul, 44, EST: I have a friend who has had high cholesterol for a long time and he takes statins to lower it. He was interested in lowering his cholesterol and in reducing his health risks, so we made an experiment. I made a menu for him for four weeks. We went shopping together, I helped him shop, then we went to have lunch together and I helped him to choose the right foods. He took a cholesterol test before the four-week period and then after it. His cholesterol levels had fallen lower than ever before, to a completely normal range. And he felt good after this.

These activities can be thought of as a form of everyday activism (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012; Vivienne, 2016) that have the potential to transform doing masculinity and men's health outcomes. Everyday interactions with non-vegan men and role-modeling are good examples of contexts in which vegan men's health and nutrition practices become more visible to other men.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the context of the current global sustainability crisis and an increasing prevalence of lifestyle diseases in Western societies related to animal-based diets, there is an urgent need to adopt healthier and more sustainable ways of living and eating that are less damaging to the human body, the environment, and other species. Food and eating practices are gendered (see Counihan, 1999; Modlinska et al., 2020). Compared to women, men's

lifestyles on average are more damaging to the environment (Räty and Calrsson-Kanyama, 2010) and their health behaviors and outcomes tend to be worse. This includes unhealthier and more animal-based diets (Nakagawa & Hart, 2019; Prättala et al., 2007). It is thus crucial to challenge these patterns of masculinity by examining and offering alternative ways of doing masculinity that are more sustainable, caring toward nonhuman animals, and produce better health outcomes for men.

This article has examined links between masculinity, eating practices and health, by focusing on how vegan men relate to food and health, drawing on qualitative interviews with 61 vegan men based in Finland and Estonia. We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyze the empirical material.

While most men in this study did not become vegan for health reasons, nevertheless going vegan was identified as a profound and positive change in the men's lives and seen as improving their physical and mental health. These two aspects were intertwined in the men's experiences. Transitioning to veganism typically inevitably involved incorporating more whole foods, fruits, vegetables, and legumes in their diet, which led to healthier eating patterns and better physical health, as indicated by the men. Feeling better in one's body was tightly linked to better mental well-being. A significant source of mental well-being stemmed from feeling that one lives and eats according to one's core value of not harming other animals. While previous research has suggested that men following plant-based diets have lower anxiety scores compared to omnivore men because of consuming antioxidant-rich foods (Modlinska et al., 2020), our findings add a social dimension to this, linking vegan men's sense of well-being to cultivating and practicing empathy toward non-human others.

The vegan men in our study distinguished between "health vegans" and "junk food vegans," with some men, particularly those who were vegan for animal ethics reasons, identifying with the latter label. The figure of the "junk food vegan" among these men relates to cultural masculinity scripts in a contradictory manner: on the one hand, it highlights empathy toward nonhuman animals and condemns "egoistic" health-related reasons behind veganism, yet on the other hand, dismissing healthy eating helps to boost traditional ideals of masculinity. Nevertheless, the research participants' lived experience suggests that despite this discursive difference, they do not fall neatly into these two groups. Irrespective of their motivations behind veganism, most men in this study displayed relatively high awareness of and aspiration toward healthy eating, to either prevent noncommunicable diseases, to achieve better physical fitness, or simply to feel better in their bodies. They typically sought detailed and scientific information about vegan food and nutrition

upon transitioning to veganism, to make sure they make informed choices about their diet as well as to be able to explain to (concerned) nonvegan others that they eat a nutritionally adequate diet. Thus, our findings illustrate how men aspired toward healthier eating and living while not necessarily adopting or even in some cases rejecting the label of a "health vegan," a culturally feminized figure. Such concern for one's health and the desire to prevent lifestyle diseases challenges typical health behaviors of men, which involve dietary risks (World Health Organization, 2018) in the form of insufficient intake of fruits and vegetables (World Bank, 2017). The evidence-based approach the vegan men took to health and nutrition aligns with the findings of previous studies (DeLessio-Parson, 2017; Mycek, 2018). However, we suggest that beyond reproducing dominant masculinity scripts, the men's focus on scientific information about vegan nutrition is largely a reaction to cultural stereotypes deeming vegan food nutritionally inadequate and therefore unsuitable particularly for men. These stereotypes lead vegan men to justify the adequacy of a vegan diet to non-vegans, especially to omnivore men, to challenge cultural beliefs about veganism as emasculating for men.

Living as vegans, the men either inadvertently or consciously acted as role models to other men and helped to transform traditionally masculine health behaviors and eating patterns: they challenged cultural stereotypes about men's food habits and shared vegan health and nutrition advice with other men in everyday social interactions, as a form of microactivism (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012; Vivienne, 2016) helping to transform men's food and gender practices. We suggest that their gender and otherwise privileged social position may help them to communicate this knowledge to others: as (privileged) men, they are taken more seriously by their peers and their arguments are more likely to be seen as convincing. It is easier for them, compared to less privileged groups, to convey their knowledge and experience as trustworthy.

Through the food and health practices discussed in this article, vegan men help to challenge cultural misconceptions about the vegan diet, which may prevent many men from going vegan: they stressed that the vegan diet is nutritionally adequate and contains sufficient protein; they emphasized the diversity of plant-based eating, as opposed to its perceived restricted nature; they highlighted that vegan cooking can be simple and quick. Thus, vegan men challenge cultural associations of masculinity with lack of interest and knowledge in health and nutrition (Gough, 2007; Kiefer et al., 2005).

While not explored in depth here, the findings of this article suggest the importance of understanding men's veganism as shaped by broader social and cultural gender norms, health, and eating patterns. This article has examined men's veganism in two geographically close, but

socially and historically somewhat different settings: Finland and Estonia. Finland exhibits more egalitarian gender norms and Estonia displays more conservative gender patterns. It is likely that a more gender-equal setting, such as Finland, enables and encourages the emergence of alternative ways of doing masculinity, including men's veganism. However, we have suggested that in Estonia, it might be easier for men to go vegan for health reasons, as this aligns with the prevailing individualist values and more traditional gender norms, according to which empathy for nonhuman others is incompatible with masculinity. The contextual nature of men's veganism, including vegan men's health behaviors and its implications for (local) masculinities, should be explored further in future research.

Overall, our findings suggest that veganism encourages positive health behaviors in men; however, some of the interviewed Finnish and Estonian vegan men were health conscious even before going vegan or had ample opportunities to acquire information on nutrition and act upon it, due to their privileged social position. It is easier for privileged men to go vegan and adopt culturally feminized health behaviors, such as plant-based eating, without this threatening their (sense of) masculinity, as the experiences of the men in this study attest. If anything, for privileged men, going vegan and a subsequent orientation toward healthier eating and living do not emasculate them, but help them to maintain or even increase their masculine capital.

The food and health practices of vegan men discussed in this article have implications for redefining cultural ideals masculinity and men's health behavior, associated with meat consumption and poor diets (Szabo, 2019; World Health Organization, 2018). While veganism is not (yet) part of dominant masculine ideals and the practices of individual men do not automatically translate to cultural change in masculine ideals, we suggest that vegan men help to transform traditional patterns of masculinity (Wright, 2015: 26) in a small, yet significant way, as they challenge typically masculine behaviors around food and eating, such as unhealthy eating and eating meat (Szabo, 2019). Thereby, vegan men help to normalize and encourage the emergence of more health-conscious ways of doing masculinity. Amidst the current global health and sustainability crises, plant-based diets are becoming more culturally visible and increasingly practiced by younger generations. Consequently, more health-conscious masculinities could be on the rise. Vegan men help to pave a way for this.

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Notes

1. In 2017, life expectancy at birth in the European Union was estimated to be 81 years, reaching 83.5 years for women and 78 years for men (Eurostat, 2020).
2. Interviews with Estonian men were conducted in the Estonian language (the interviewer's mother tongue) and interviews with Finnish men in English. The quotes from the first set of interviews were translated into English by the first author.
3. We acknowledge the significance of the interviewer's positionality vis a vis the research participants and how this social relationship shapes the content of the narratives produced, with categories such as gender, age, and class playing an important role (see Manderson et al., 2006). The first author who conducted the interviews identifies as a woman. Previous research on illness narratives (see Manderson et al., 2006) has suggested that women interviewing men tend to find it easier to elicit more open and emotional accounts, compared to men interviewing men. In addition, in the context of the present research, the interviewer's own veganism likely facilitated establishing rapport with the research participants.

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