

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

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I would like to express my great appreciation to my supervisor, Prof. Jill Bradbury who continuously supported and guided me through my study.

To all who have participated in the research, thank you for your time and contribution.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore vegetarian identity and relationships among young South Africans. Food forms a part of every person's everyday life, not only as it is a biological need but also because practices involving food, the consumption of food and thoughts about food are meaningfully intertwined with cultural norms and socio-political values (Caplan, 1997; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002).

The participants in the study were eleven vegetarian individuals living in Johannesburg, most of whom were university students. Data collection was done in two stages including individual semi-structured interviews followed by a focus group to which participants brought vegetarian food tasters to share. The study was done using a qualitative research approach within a thematic analysis to explore how vegetarian identity is negotiated in the individuals' different relationships and how this identity and lifestyle is understood by participants in relation to both the South African and wider global context. In particular, the intersection of vegetarian identity and other aspects of identity such as gender, 'race' and culture, was explored.

The study found that some participants offered ethical reasons for their vegetarianism, including principled objections to consuming animals and not agreeing with the way animals are kept and bred to be eaten. Another finding was the disagreement within the participant group over whether vegetarianism was a healthier alternative to main-stream diets containing meat. The participants connected their experience and identity of vegetarianism to other alternative, marginal or less traditional identities, for example, expressing progressive and inclusionary views on homosexuality. Participants also strongly asserted progressive views on gender roles but these were contradicted by description of daily life in which traditional gender roles were maintained, particularly in relation to household tasks in the preparation of

food .The contradictions in traditional South African identity was highlighted in that the (highly masculinised) ritual of the braai is asserted as defining “South African” culture across the divisive lines of ‘race’ but simultaneously, there is national pride in wildlife and the conservation of natural resources.

The vegetarian community both physical and virtual was an important factor in relation to maintaining the vegetarian identity. The results revealed that participants generally avoid tension in their personal relationships. This avoidance was related to behaviour which worked to minimise conflict or potential tension. Participants displayed an overwhelming tolerance for meat-eaters’ diet despite their own strong views against eating meat.

Keywords:

Vegetarian identity, relationships, vegetarian community, bio-psycho-social model, socio-political issues, gender roles, masculinity, femininity, ethics, South African identity

TABLE OF CONTENT

	Page no.
DECLARATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v-ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1-4
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	5-34
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Food practices in the South African context and global food politics	6-12
2.2.1 Food Security	6
2.2.2 Food and Social Media	8
2.2.3 Food traditions in South Africa	10
2.3 Reasons for adopting a Vegetarian diet	12-17
2.3.1 Religious reasons	12
2.3.2 Health reasons	13
2.3.3 Political and Ethical reasons	15
2.4 Identity Development	17-25

2.4.1 Vegetarian identity	17
2.4.2 Erikson’s identity crisis	19
2.4.3 The Bio-psycho-social model	21
2.4.4 Identity Salience	22
2.4.5 Identity and power	23
2.4.6 Relational identity	24
2.5 Food and Relationships	25-35
2.5.1 Food and Social Connection	25
2.5.2 Families	27
2.5.3 Peer Relationships	29
2.5.4 Romantic Relationships	30
2.5.5 Maintenance of the Vegetarian identity	31
2.6 Conclusion	32
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	34-43
3.1 Methodological Approach	34
3.2 Participants	34
3.2.1 Diversity	35
3.3 Table 1: Demographics of research participants	36
3.4 Table 2: Additional information of research participants	37

3.5 Data collection	37-40
3.5.1 Phase One	37
3.5.2 Phase Two	38
3.6 Data analysis	40
3.7 Ethical consideration	41
3.8 Reflexivity	42
3.9 Conclusion	43
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	44-90
4.1 Introduction	44
4.2 Ethics	44
4.3 Health	48
4.4 Socio-political issues	51-65
4.4.1 Vegetarianisms link to alternative identity	51
4.4.2 South African identity	54
4.4.3 Race and Class	59
4.4.4 Gender roles	61
4.4.4 Masculinity and femininity	63
4.5 Vegetarian community	66
4.6 Relationships	71-87

4.6.1 Avoidance	71
4.6.2 Across generational relationships	75
4.6.3 Tolerance	84
4.7 Intensifying of vegetarian identity	88
4.8 Conclusion	90
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	91-94
5.1 Introduction	91
5.2 Recommendations for future research	92
5.3 Strengths and limitations	92
5.3.1 Strengths	92
5.3.2 Limitations	93
5.4 Theoretical and practical implications of results	93
5.5 Conclusion	94
REFERENCES	95-108
APPENDICES	109
APPENDIX A: Participant information sheet	109
APPENDIX B: Interview consent form and recording consent	111
APPENDIX C: Interview schedule	112

APPENDIX D: Consent form focus group and recording consent 114

APPENDIX E: Focus group schedule 115

APPENDIX F: Internal Ethical clearance 116

TABLES

TABLE 1: Demographics of research participants In text 36

TABLE 2: Additional information about research participants In text 37