

Understanding the cheese paradox: Why do vegetarians eat animal products?

July 25 2023



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A new study by the University of Stirling has sought to understand why vegetarians consume non-meat animal products despite their concerns that animal agricultural production can be cruel.

Vegetarians choose not to eat meat, poultry, or seafood but often consume non-meat animal products (NMAPs), such as [cheese](#), eggs, and milk, that can be derived from [intensive farming](#), a process critics claim is cruel.

Researchers have described this conflict as the cheese paradox in homage to [a 2010 study](#) which coined the phrase "meat paradox" to describe the conflict between an affinity with animals and a desire to eat meat.

Stirling researchers found that [vegetarians](#) who participated in the study acknowledged that producing NMAPs can be harmful to animals, but that they found it easier to forgo milk while still enjoying cheese.

The presence of cognitive dissonance—the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs do not align with actions—was strongly supported by the data.

This was aptly demonstrated when comparing attitudes to milk and cheese. Vegetarians felt more ethical conflict about consuming milk than cheese, despite them coming from the same source.

Co-author Dr. Carol Jasper, a lecturer in [psychology](#) at the University of Stirling, said, "This is the first paper to examine why vegetarians still consume non-meat animal products.

"We discovered that, while vegetarians dislike [animal cruelty](#), and often express disgust for liquid milk, they routinely consume cheese which is, of course, milk in its solid form.

"We found a conflict between people's consumption of non-meat animal products, such as eggs and dairy, despite knowing the harmful consequences they entail.

"One way in which this cheese paradox could be explained is the process of dissociation, whereby the further a product is removed from its animal origin, the more willingly people consume it.

"Fluid [milk](#) triggers empathy as it looks almost identical to when it was taken from the cow, compared to cheese which has undergone various stages of industrial processing, changing shape, color, taste and texture in the process."

Industry benefit

Psychology tutor, and co-author, Devon Docherty added, "Our research has uncovered some of the specific personal and [social barriers](#) which must be addressed before people feel able or willing to take the next step in adopting a fully plant-based diet.

"Industry, particularly plant-based food manufacturers, can benefit from our research by understanding the needs and wants of people who are still consuming NMAPs, which will greatly aid in the design, uptake, and impact of their products."

The researchers conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 12 participants. Qualitative research often has smaller sample sizes because of the depth of data to be analyzed.

Dr. Jasper added, "This is an exploratory study intended to be food for thought and not representative of the entire [vegetarian](#) population. We welcome the exploration of our ideas in future studies."

The study, "The cheese paradox: How do vegetarians justify consuming non-meat animal products?" was published in *Appetite*, an international research journal specializing in cultural, social, psychological, sensory, and physiological influences on the selection and intake of foods and

drinks.

More information: Devon Docherty et al, The cheese paradox: How do vegetarians justify consuming non-meat animal products?, *Appetite* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.106976](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.106976)

Provided by University of Stirling

Citation: Understanding the cheese paradox: Why do vegetarians eat animal products? (2023, July 25) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-cheese-paradox-vegetarians-animal-products.html>

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