The Transcendence of Veganism and Vegetarianism as an Identity Movement

By Dina Abdalla

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Introduction

Diets are often defined as the eating habits and foods that we consume on a regular basis. They may differ often depending on restrictions caused by health circumstances, weight, religion, allergies, or just mere habit. It sounds rather simple, but if we delve into the deeper meaning of what we each consume, and why we consume it, we will find that it plays an integral role in our social identities and that there is a much more profound meaning behind it. Diets may open doors that lead to numerous social movements and group identities that can create a divide at times, but also a form of unity for a greater purpose that is beyond just the individual self. The research question I seek to answer is how do the consumption identities that vegans and vegetarians assume compare to those of non-vegans and non-vegetarians- and how does this play a role in how they identify themselves socially? Additionally, how do these definitions lead to such stigma of the non-conforming group (in this case non-vegans and non-vegetarians) and how has the spread of veganism and vegetarianism, originally supposedly a positive, ethical, and progressive movement, halted the image of other social justice movements, causing a shift in the movement’s original ethical image?

I will discuss how the organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) has played a role in promoting the vegan and vegetarian movement and how the differences in what we each consume can in some cases lead to social upheaval, a conflict of interest, and the development of social movements (such as PETA); who advocate for animal rights using
questionable campaigns that evoke both disturbed viewers and passionate vegans and vegetarians. I argue that the vegan and vegetarian subculture has developed into an “identity” movement, rather than a simple diet, that shames those that are not within their subculture by using stigma and guilt to promote their cause, ultimately shedding negative light on their own supposedly positive cause. In this paper, I will explore the fundamentals of veganism and vegetarianism and the social implications of the subculture on the individual self by observing social identity theory, labeling theory, and stigma theory as my theoretical framework - as veganism and vegetarianism emerge into a socio-political identity which portrays meat-eating as the new transgression.

**A Powerful Consumption Identity**

Veganism and vegetarianism have transformed from being a rare practice to a rather idealized and widely accepted new norm. I argue that the vast social movements surrounding veganism and vegetarianism have helped the subculture succeed over meat-eating, making meat eating appear as a transgression, even to those who partake in it; not because it is known to be a healthier way of life, but because of the strength of the social identities of the individuals involved make others outside of the subculture seem lacking. The social movement of veganism and vegetarianism is deeply rooted in the animal rights movement and the collaborative desire to end animal cruelty. Nicola Richardson discusses the shifting behavior of those who consume meat. She states, “behavior is predicted by intention, which in turn is predicted by attitudes and perceived social pressure. Attitudes are predicted by the sum of beliefs about outcomes of the behaviour multiplied by evaluations of these outcomes” (Richardson, 42). Those who consume meat are beginning to be swayed by the social identities of vegans and vegetarians who have
formed a subculture which strictly divides themselves from those who consume meat, and have begun to perceive this social pressure set forth by the practices of vegans and vegetarians. Kenyon and Barker make an interesting point which reveals that teenage girls who consume meat have begun to disregard conforming to familial standards in order to assimilate to a great social force (the vegan and vegetarian subculture). Their study found that, “teenagers abstaining from meat-eating may be discarding traditional family values, including food aspirations. Rejection of meat may also reflect family tension, disharmony, or a non-compliance with the family status quo” (Kenyon & Barker, 197). The subculture of veganism and vegetarians has formed an internalized stigma towards the consumption identities and practices of non-vegans and non-vegetarians. Essentially, social movements are redirecting eating habits and diets in a trend towards the protection of animal rights, and those in the outgroup have become ostracized, stigmatized, and have been made to feel like the negative label. The ideologies and beliefs that vegans and vegetarians hold have transcended into a consumption identity that is deeply rooted to their own self-image as well as a widespread social-identity viewed in the public eye. This subcultural movement has developed into a sophistication stringent enough to put those outside of it at odds.

Veganism and vegetarianism as a subculture is heavily focused on social “identity” as their label which rejects those that are outside of the subculture and generates unity between those on the inside. Elizabeth Cherry discusses the terms “punk vegan” and “non-punk vegan”, stating that, “both punk and non-punk vegans knew and referred to the Vegan Society definition of veganism, which excludes all animal products. Punk vegans tended to adhere to that definition in practice, but non-punk vegans often deviated from that definition yet still called themselves vegan” (161). While punk vegans adhered to every minuscule rule of veganism, non-punk
vegans still identified themselves as vegans, but deviated from the confines of the label at their own discretion. Punk and non-punk vegans still share the same social identity and therefore share a sense of unity and common understanding within the subculture which those outside of the subculture do not experience. In a book titled *Toward a Paradigm of Labeling Theory* by Francis and John Cullen, they state that “since deviance exists only when an actor’s others define him/her as a deviant, an actor (or act) may be deviant to some but not to others” (13). Assuming the subgroups here are “punk” and “non-punk” vegans, they both fall underneath the same social identity or “label” which is not stigmatized and accepted within the subgroup. Those outside this subgroup are therefore considered deviant and stigmatized for disregarding the dietary restrictions set forth by dominating subculture. Rachel Povey discusses how this divide occurs and why non-conformers being to assimilate, she states, “people who are ambivalent may perceive both advantages and disadvantages towards an object simultaneously, or have both positive and negative attitudes together” (17). In reference to those who consume meat, their identities can be swayed to believe that not consuming animals can be both a positive and negative thing, whereas the consumption identities of vegans and vegetarians are far less ambivalent. To add to this, Dr. Wendy-Atkins Sayre mentions that,

“social movements, if they are focused on identity work, must continually articulate particular identities in order to invite individuals—supporters and others—to view themselves in a particular way. It is not only a subject being “hailed” that needs to occur in this identity appeal, but an investment on the part of the subject (Hall, 1996, p. 6). In other words, the appeal must be compelling enough to create the needed incentive to change. The visual element, that fast mode of manipulating identity, strengthens the identity argument” (314).

The phenomenon of the strong social identities of those within the vegan and vegetarian subculture having the ability to sway the possibility weaker identities becomes complicated with introduction of PETA campaigns, and their effects on such viewers. While identity appeal is
central to the growth of the vegan and vegetarian movement by inviting non-conforming individuals and openly articulating their identities to them, PETA ads bring this spread to a precipitous halt.

**PETA’s Stigmatizing Guilt Campaign**

PETA has launched rather problematic campaigns that use eye-catching images to grasp and potentially sway the practices of its viewers. I argue that these campaigns have inadvertently caused a decline in the legitimacy of the vegan and vegetarian movement. Jonathan Matusitz and Maya Forrester discuss this tactic of “shock advertising” that Peta uses to capture the interest of viewers and potentially reel them into joining the cause. The article states,

“A common social noise tactic used by PETA is shock advertising, which is instrumental in the cultural construction of animal rights. Shock advertising has a magic-bullet effect; when PETA resorts to soft pornographic female nudity and graphic video recordings of animal abuse, it instills feelings of ‘shock’ on the target audience in order to get its point across. By the same token, shocking advertising content significantly increases attention and memory, and positively impacts behaviour change. The success of shock advertising, then, hinges upon its ability to engage a subject, even briefly” (85).

While some may find these campaigns insightful, the majority of viewers are disturbed and shocked by such images, thus evoking viral discussions. This photo advertisement below is one of the many Peta campaigns that have been launched in order to advocate for ethical treatment of animals, and essentially, the practice of vegetarianism. Depicted is an overweight woman in a swimsuit with a caption stating “Save the Whales” which is an ill-mannered pun referring to both the actual animal (the whale) and the overweight woman depicted in the photo. Referring to the woman as a whale implies that this overweight woman also needs saving, not just the sea animal. The ad then goes on to say, “Lose The Blubber: Go Vegetarian”, yet another ill-mannered pun implying that both the overweight woman possess “blubber”, defined as either fat (in the
woman’s case) or the fatty tissue that some sea animals possess, such as the whale. The image incorporates fat-shaming and depletes the self-identity and self-esteem of overweight individuals, women, and creates a stigma towards those who do not conform to the practices of veganism and vegetarianism. A book by Stephen C. Ainlay titled *The Dilemma of Difference: a Multidisciplinary View of Stigma* states that, “the conceptualization of stigma also indicates that those possessing power, the dominant group, can determine which human differences are desired and undesired. In part, stigmas reflect the value judgements of a dominant group” (212). Here there are two dominant groups, one being those with the consumption identity of veganism and vegetarianism, and the other being individuals of “normal” weight. In turn, the groups being stigmatized are those who possess the undesired traits, such as obesity, or the underlying reference which is to those who are not a part of the veganism and vegetarianism subculture. This isn’t the only degrading campaign that PETA uses however. Depicted below in figures 2 and 3, PETA uses another degrading tactic to reel in viewers. In these specific images, PETA is attempting to bring the animal on the level of the human. To show humans that animals are physically the same as women, and that in turn should generate empathy in viewers to treat animals with the same love and compassion.
tha/society apparently treats women. But this here is a major. Contradiction and flaw in PETA’s reasoning. These campaigns are actually degrading women in the eyes of those whom are not involved in the vegan and vegetarian movement because they are bringing the woman to the level of the animal. The word “pussy” is used to refer to both the cat in figure 2 and a woman’s private parts, so by saving the cat you are saving the woman as well, since they are, according to these campaigns, one in the same. Issues of degrading women and demeaning the feminist movement arise from all three of the above campaigns.

PETA continues to attempt to spool in potential members to their cause, but this time by making false and dangerous claims to gain attention—PETA begins resorting to deviance and the use of deviant ads to gain attention. Figure 4 depicts a risky claim made by PETA involving a serious mental health condition. This advertisement is yet another stigmatizing guilt trip made by Peta. Here Peta is trying to convey to non-vegan and non-vegetarian parents that there could be a possible link between the development of autism in their children and dairy products such as milk. Depicted is a bowl of cereal and milk with an unhappy face made from an arrangement of cereal. The caption then states “Has your child got autism? Learn more about the link between
autism and dairy products at PETA.org”. These ads start to go beyond just the personal level, by targeting parents who have kids, knowing that even if the parent is reluctant to look after their own health, they will be guilted into feeling like they have somehow failed their child by letting them consume potentially harmful substances. Bearing in mind that these aren’t just any temporary consequences or illnesses, but a serious life-long mental illness, autism. This campaign can take it even further and evoke stigma towards those who have mental illnesses. In addition, research suggests that these claims are in fact false, the protein casein that is found in milk can exacerbate the pre-existing symptoms of autism, but do not by any means cause a child to develop the disease. Stephen C. Ainlay states that “a common secular substitute of morality in modern society is the awareness that playing according to the “rules of the game” is simply prudent, that the most important thing is to keep out of trouble. This is actually a completely amoral situation, a sort of a maxim for survival in an absurd social system” (36). In this social system that has been formed by PETA, they use dangerous tactics that they know will evoke upheaval in order to gain what they want, “survival”. They aim to gain attention to their cause so that the subculture can survive against the meat-eating subculture. The same risky claim is made in figure 5, where PETA asserts that mothers who consume chicken can be putting their sons at risk for developing a not-so-
developed “dick”. Although the claim is irresponsible and has no feasible merit, this campaign creates concerns for mothers and probably fathers as well. Shlomo Shoham states that,

“stigma feeds, on the guilt feelings that are in turn nurtured by the suppressed antisocial or deviational tendencies of the stigmatizer. Society is riddled with innumerable normative mandates, proscriptions and prohibitions. Faulty or inchoate internalization generates conflicts and pressures to infringe upon these norms, resulting in guilt feelings which feed the urge to stigmatize others whose overt behavior seems contrary to the same norms” (100).

Essentially what we see in these campaign advertisements is that Peta is making an effort to create stigma around those whose actions deviate from the practices of vegans and vegetarians, which were once actually the “deviational tendency of the stigmatizer” the roles reversed, thus portraying veganism and vegetarianism to be normative and causing those who are now outside of this subculture to feel guilt and pressure to conform using unethical means, creating a contradiction in their original supposed aims. Shoham says, “the process of self-definition following a definition by others is lacking. This missing link is readily supplied by the stigma premise” (185). We each define ourselves based on our set of beliefs towards ourselves and we each may differ in what we believe to be the norm, therefore others may then perceive our acts as deviant even when we are perceiving them as normal mundane acts. This is how stigma comes to develop, when the rising group is given the power to label the acts they view as deviant, even when the acts may not be so. In the end, this stigma causes a sense of guilt in the person being stigmatized, a not so ethical way of advertising a social justice cause.

**Deviance in a Newly Invented Socio-political Identity**

I argue here that the effects of the PETA campaigns have turned veganism and vegetarianism from an ethical consumption identity to a rather profound socio-political identity,
thus partially negating the movement’s original core values. Maneesha Deckha describes the core of the issue with these PETA campaigns. While PETA is a social justice movement that strongly stands for the ethical treatment of animals, their campaigns have slandered the legitimacy and importance of other social justice groups, perhaps inadvertently. Consequently, this has not only shed negative light on PETA themselves, but the whole subculture of veganism and vegetarianism and those who share the same consumption identity. With regard to PETA’s advertisements that appeared somewhat anti-feminist, Deckha states, “these campaigns and their responses highlight the ethical question of how a group which advances a social justice agenda, and thus presumably self-identifies as progressive, may interact with - whether by disregarding, not addressing, harnessing, or exploiting - other social-justice causes” (37). While PETA may not have slandered feminism as a movement, some of their advertisements which I examined earlier, certainly do exploit women and therefore disregard the feminist movement. When one social justice movement maligns (non-purposefully or purposefully) another, the legitimacy of the movement as a whole becomes diluted. Deckha points out that PETA is tenaciously focused on grabbing the media and public’s attention to promote the vegan cause that they end up throwing other social justice causes under the bus which has a counterproductive effect on the movements overall core principles in the public eye, thus making the veganism and vegetarianism consumption identity into a newly developed socio-political agenda. While PETA believes their campaigns are effective and aim to gain animal rights, an outsider’s view of their actions could say that these campaigns are just shedding a negative light on their entire cause. Cullen and Cullen state that “individuals stigmatized in certain settings are able to maintain a normal identity elsewhere through such techniques as “information control” and “impression management” (14). While PETA is trying to stigmatize those in the outgroup, the outgroup is
also stigmatizing their questionable actions as well. To some, PETA creates an impression of love and justice, but some are viewing the information as rather hostile and derogatory. Vegan and vegetarian consumption identities have become increasingly integral to their overall social justice movement which brings up issues when the image of the movement as a whole becomes tainted by PETA’s efforts to stigmatize the outgroup. Deckha says, “attention to objectification is important not simply because it may harm women, but because it undermines the post humanist project in general that PETA seeks to advance” (55). The PETA campaigns have deemed to be counterproductive in the eyes of some viewers and the effect on the movements overall core principles in the public eye has shifted, thus weakening the strength of the movement overall. From a consumption identity to a socio-political movement, PETA has managed to distort the ethical standing of the pro-ethical aims of the vegan and vegetarian subculture. To this, Cullen and Cullen would say, “unless there is total consensus in a group concerning an actor’s nature, his/her identity as a deviant can vary within a given social audience (Cullen & Cullen, 14). The issue of the PETA campaigns is incredibly controversial, and depending on a person’s consumption identity and whether or not they are a part of the in-group, PETA’s actions will only be seen as deviant to some.

Conclusion

Veganism and vegetarianism began primarily as a movement that hoped to fight for the ethical rights of animals with the possibility of becoming the new norm and displaying meat-eaters as the real transgressors. It soon emerged into a consumption identity that was all for healthful eating as well as the ethical treatment of animals. The initial social identity exhibited strong internal values and the personal and social identities of those involved were able to sway
the thoughts and opinions of those outside of the subculture. However, the movement soon
transcended into a socio-political subculture which seemed to have lost sight of its initial purpose
or message that began the whole movement. The movement was driven by a passion for getting
animals equal rights, which soon unfolded into the use of questionable and provocative PETA
campaigns which unintentionally but clearly repressed other social justice groups. The
campaigns portrayed images that underhandedly threw dirt on social justice movements like the
feminist movement by portraying images of naked women, comparing them to animals, and fat-
shaming them. The campaigns also used tactics to gain the attention of viewers by feeding them
false information and causing unwarranted fear and worry for the well-being of their children.
Perhaps PETA was aiming to create stigma against their organization by causing upheaval and
gaining mass media attention. There are always two sides to every situation, in this case, those
who support PETA and those who are completely appalled by the content of their
advertisements. Stigma, as we know, depends on the time, the place, and people; it deals with
issues such as dominance, majority vs. minority groups, as well as who is in power. Therefore,
while these campaigns may raise eyebrows, they may also be raising valid claims to those who
choose to see it that way, those within the in-group. That being said, the future of the reputation
of this subculture is in the hands of PETA. PETA sets the tone and image that represents the
cause, they either reel people in or they push people away. We may even speculate that if PETA
resorted to safer tactics it might alleviate some of the negative attention on their cause, but it may
also have caused the subculture to be unheard of as it once was, rather than potentially replacing
meat-eating as the new norm. As we have seen, the vegan and vegetarian subculture is more than
a social identity, more than a consumption identity, the subculture as a whole has acquired a
socio-political label. The movement swept in like a hurricane as it grew vastly and assumed an
ironic and contradictory transformation that somehow shed negative publicity on the cause- but also managed to be seen as a whimsical new norm, as if no damage was ever done.
Works Cited


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Academic Press. 18 Mar. 2019


Richardson, N., Shepherd, R., & N. Elliman. "Current attitudes and future influences on meat


Links for photos

Figure 1:  
http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/31606/1/the-five-worst-examples-of-body-shaming-ads

Figure 2:  
https://www.peta.org/blog/grab-a-pussycat/

Figure 3:  
https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/lucy-watson-reveals-animals-made/

Figure 4:  

Figure 5:  