From the Outside In: Veganism, Identity Communication, and Resisting Carnism

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Abstract

Veganism is a philosophy and lifestyle which rejects the consumption of animal products and calls for an end to animal exploitation. This article is an ethnographic exploration of how vegans internally comprehend and externally communicate vegan identity. Ethnographic data is drawn from a mosaic of personal reflections, virtual engagement with university-aged vegans, and observation of online vegan spaces. This data demonstrates that veganism and vegan identity are, at their core, a rejection of carnism: the social norm of accepting animal exploitation. Using psychological and linguistic approaches, I describe vegan identity as performative— vegans use behaviour and language used to identify themselves as vegan amongst peers and in public spaces. Through an ethnographic approach, I argue that the invisible dominant ideology of carnism rules both the minds of omnivores who accept it, and the behaviour and identities of vegans who fight it, particularly in online spaces. Both vegan identities and vegans' interactions with omnivores are shaped by defiance of carnism.

> "It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being… the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?"
> Jeremy Bentham (1789:245)

In September 2020, down a rabbit hole on the internet, I was forced to recognise that I was undoubtedly a hypocrite. My whole life I'd preached love for animals and the planet, volunteering at rescues and marching for the climate. Yet, every morning, I drank my tea with dairy milk. Down the rabbit hole, I discovered to my horror that that dairy cows, constantly impregnated to continue producing milk, are killed brutally before 5 years old (out of a 20-year life span), that male chicks born to the egg industry are macerated alive the day they hatch, and that pregnant pigs are kept immobile in their own excrement for the duration of forced pregnancies (Animal Equality 2014). Additionally, animal agriculture produces more greenhouse gasses than the entire transportation sector, and is a leading cause of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water pollution (Machovina 2015:424-427). Sat in bed watching footage of factory farms, I recognised the hard truth— that to continue calling myself an animal lover and environmentalist, I had to change.

Veganism is a philosophy and lifestyle that rejects the consumption of animal

products and calls for an end to animal exploitation. I went vegan in September 2020 and was immediately granted access to a new and exclusive social group. Encouraged by my vegan peers, I set out to share my great new glowing wisdom with others. Yet, I feared how non-vegans would see me and veganism in extension. I questioned if I was a good vegan, and if non-vegans found me irritating. Almost two years later, "vegan" is now a cemented part of my identity and impacts how I relate to those around me. Still, my old fears and questions about vegan identity remain. I have chosen to explore them here.

In this article, I write both as a passionate vegan and as an ethnographer interested in my own community. I draw my ethnographic data from a mosaic of personal reflections and virtual engagement with vegan peers (participants) and online vegan spaces. From this data, I conclude that veganism is, at its core, a rejection of carnism: the invisible dominant ideology justifying animal exploitation. Vegans perform their opposition to carnism through role performance and language use, both online and in real-life interactions. This identity performance can be seen clearly within vegan-only spaces, and in interactions with non-vegans. Using an ethnographic approach, I argue that the invisible dominant ideology of carnism rules both the minds of omnivores persuaded by it, and the behaviour and identities of vegans who seek to fight it.

Reasons and Terminology: What is Veganism Anyway

'Veganism' denotes a form of personal ethical commitment reflected in one's lifestyle. Veganism is popularly defined as When introducing 'veganism' to non-vegan peers, this is a preferable and approachable definition to use, as evidenced in my ethnographic fieldwork. Ethical convictions differentiate 'vegan' from 'plant-based'; vegan is "for the animals" (a participant Luke's words), while 'plant-based' is a diet free from animal products but not motivated ethically. There are strong motivations behind the decision to become vegan, including the benefit to the environment, benefit to personal health, and fierce opposition to animal exploitation.

> "a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude- as far as is *possible and practicable*- all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose"
> The Vegan Society, 1979

Ethnographic Data

It's a Friday evening, and my phone is buzzing. The group chat vegan supremacy (a Facebook chat for a small collection of vegans at the University of St Andrews) is active[1]. Charlotte, Henry, and Jesse share images of the dinners they've just cooked, and Jon, Eric, Anna, and Blake are discussing the latest Earthling Ed video[2]. I receive a response from Kiera[3], one of my participants, on when we can video chat. I stand over a sizzling pan of tofu,

1. All names of members of this group chat have been altered for privacy.
2. Earthling Ed: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVRr-GAcUc7cblUzOhI1KfFg
3. Names of participants have, with consent, not been altered, but only first names are provided.

glancing at my phone every few minutes, pondering how veganism has altered my social life.

I was welcomed into the unique social world of veganism quickly and had no issue finding fellow vegans interested in discussing the topic. Kiera, with whom I attended school years ago, has been vegan since August 2019. Luke, an acquaintance from *vegan supremacy,* has been vegan since October 2020. Finally, I chose to speak with a long-time friend Daniela, who was vegan for three years but has been an 'omni' (vegan shorthand for meat-eater, commonly used online) for two years since. I also spoke at length with several other vegans, but have chosen to focus on these three conversations, as they felt the most in-depth and applicable.

The social world of veganism takes place largely online. Many vegans make their vegan identity known on social media platforms, and it was only through these "public displays of veganism" (Daniela's words) that I found my participants. I had not spoken to Kiera in six years but knew she was vegan because of her occasional posts about animal rights and vegan snacks. Luke posts at length about the horrors of factory farming and is an active member of *vegan supremacy*. While a vegan, Daniela had posted about vegan cooking regularly. Online spaces are central to the social life of vegans I spoke to— the importance of online vegan identity will be explored in more depth later in this ethnography.

All conversations with participants took place virtually through video calls on social media platforms. Beyond these virtual discussions, I spent time in online vegan spaces, so will also mention the *vegan supremacy* group and other platforms like r/vegan on Reddit. A full ethnography could be written about these spaces alone; I include them as a supplement where relevant to my discussion. This exploration of veganism/meat-eating focuses only on a Euro-American context, and the definitions and relations described in this article are only applicable to that setting.

It would be impossible to disconnect myself from the process, and so have chosen to include a significant amount of auto-ethnography, defined by Ellis et al as "to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (2011:273). In other words, I will include and reflect upon my experiences of veganism to understand the broader meanings of 'vegan' and 'vegan identity'.

Carnism: Veganism as a Challenge to the Norm

A vegan identity would not exist without social norms to the contrary. Carnism, a term coined by sociologist Melanie Joy, refers to the invisible belief system or ideology of a society that applies empathy asymmetrically to animals (2010:30). In a carnist society, dogs are given love and kindness while pigs in factory farms are kept in small pens then sent to CO2 chambers to become bacon. This unexamined difference between precious pet and food exists and is justified for no reason apart from 'that's just how things are' (Melanie Joy, 2010:27). This is the product of a carnist society, in which the

exploitation and eating of certain animals is deemed normal and appropriate. Carnists, as Joy terms meat-eaters (this is where the vegan insult 'carnie' originates), eat meat because it is what is normal, and this 'normal' is not often challenged (Melanie Joy, 2010:30). Eating a vegan diet is seen as coupled with one's disposition, while the same is never said about meat-eating. Even the term 'meat-eating' is an action, divorced from belief or personality (unlike 'vegan') (Melanie Joy, 2010:29).

I will return to the theme of carnism later, but now turn to how vegan identity is formed in online spaces and in-person interactions with omnivores.

Vegan as a Social label

Vegans are a magnet for attention. Ex-vegan Daniela commented wryly, "you will stick out like a sore thumb". By accepting the term 'vegan' as part of one's social identification, one must decide what it means to be vegan, and how (or whether) to let this guide interactions.

All my participants, and the vegans I know personally outside of this project, seem acutely aware of how this label is viewed by others. It's clear why: the common stereotypes that 'the first thing a vegan tells you is that they are vegan', or that vegans are 'judgemental' and 'holier-than-thou', pervades common narratives[4]. Headlines like "Militant Vegans are Out of Control" in *The Independent* are not uncommon. Vegans are often portrayed as either illogical hippies or aggressive, judgemental, and dangerous— either way, there is something not right with them. This reality is embraced by some: 2022 bestseller *This Is Vegan Propaganda (And Other Lies the Meat Industry Tells You)* by popular vegan advocate Ed Winters (Earthling Ed) is a long-form discussion of the issue[5].

It is not apparent whether many non-vegans think of vegans in this negative way or if vegans just fear they do. Nonetheless, these narratives influence the way vegans like me, Luke, and Kiera carry out social interactions. Many vegans seem to feel obligated to represent veganism in a good light— in a conversation with Kiera, we exasperatedly agree on the pressure of self-constraint. When eating alongside non-vegans, we sit stiff lipped while friends express how good the meat tastes. Fielding questions from intrigued acquaintances, we shy away, and at times, uncomfortably repeat the phrase "I'm not one of those vegans".

The constant negative stigma around the 'vegan' label can be tiring and restricting. Kiera expressed frustratedly to me, "I'm always afraid of making it my whole identity, like, I feel like people would just think I'm annoying!!". Daniela told me a large reason why she gave up veganism was the social pressure of always being 'the vegan girl'.

> "It was exhausting. I felt like I had to adopt the identity of a vegan and I became the 'vegan spokesperson' every time I went anywhere. I didn't realise it at the time, but it really affected me" -Daniela

4. Vegan (mis)representation in media: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDnfsgttuK4

5. This Is Vegan Propaganda (And Other Lies the Meat Industry Tells You): https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/144/1444658/this-is-vegan-propaganda/9781785043765.html

Vegans adopt the label for a reason, though. Identifying with the label implies an intentionally defiant and deeply involved moral stance. I chose to focus on veganism for this project, in part, because a friend remarked on my "constant comments about animal agriculture" and told me to find a new "victim" (*"but the only victims are the animals!"*). I did not share vegan ideas to pass judgement. I wanted my loved ones to know the truth about animal agriculture. As Luke told me enthusiastically, "I feel like when you go vegan you want to tell everybody about it. I haven't had the opportunity yet because of lockdown, as soon as I'm released out into the wild, I'll be like, *mental*". Good intentions can only go so far, though: vegan identity is polarising, and vegans' communication with non-vegans can be fraught.

Identity and Role Performance: Psychological Reflections

Throughout my conversations with participants and vegan friends, the term identity cropped up constantly. To understand what 'vegan identity' means, and how it relates to broader non-vegan society, it will help to understand what identity means in the first place. Two related theories of identity can be applied in veganism's case: psychological theory and linguistic theory. I apply these theories to vegan identity within vegan groups (internally) and to vegan identity in vegan X non-vegan relations (externally). I begin the discussion of identity with Burke and Reitz's psychological theory of identity.

Burke and Reitz suggest an understanding of identity centred on "meanings one attributes to oneself in a role" (1981:84). These meanings are defined as social products created and maintained by social interactions, which are symbolic and reflexive, and organised to create a concept of self (Burke and Reitz, 1981:84). In other words, identity is a socially constituted sense of self. This approach to identity is part of a broader view of identity as performative behaviour. Role performance is how an individual performs or expresses their identity around others (Burke and Reitz, 1981: 85). The performer asks their audience to take this performance seriously and recognise the intended identity being portrayed (Goffman 1956:10-20).

In internal vegan circles, vegans perform vegan identity by providing indications of their genuine vegan-ness through language, tone, expression, and evidence, like pictures of meals or unique memes. This performance asserts its difference from a non-vegan alternative. In v*egan supremacy*, I found myself providing recipes alongside rants about carnism: the space is given wholly to veganism, and all other identities are secondary. In online spaces with anonymity like r/vegan, I found identity performance to be even more dramatic or involved. In these spaces, group participants' online personas were entirely about veganism, with other personal traits hardly acknowledged. This performance of vegan identity is ubiquitous in vegan spaces: vegan 'culture' is concerned with animal liberation, vegan food, and debating carnists, so identity performances in

vegan spaces reflect these interests.

Conversations with my participants suggest that outside of vegan circles (external) is understood as the most important site of vegan role performance. Vegans interacting with non-vegans must act the part, voicing the tenants of veganism but avoiding offence. Challenging carnism is important to many vegans, but the defiance of social norms can make veganism an incredibly isolating identity (noted by all participants). Daniela described an experience of "scary in-group out-group" dynamics. Luke, the nephew and cousin of dairy farmers, vets, and jockeys, voiced anxiety about bridging the seemingly insurmountable gap between veganism and his family's "intensely different" worldview. The choice to take on and perform the identity of veganism, when so opposed to the likes of Luke's family's, is the cause of this isolated feeling. Veganism, both as an ideology and identity, stands defiantly against and distanced from carnism. The role performances linked to these opposing worldviews are accordingly divergent, and the people who embody them notice.

Identity and Role Performance: Linguistic Reflections

The psychological approach, which mentions language in its theorising, can be supplemented by a direct focus on linguistics. In linguistic anthropology, the term identity can refer to membership in social groups or categories *created through* language (Kroskrity 1999:111). Language and communication are involved not only in the creation of a community, but also in the definition of that group by outsiders. In a contemporary, fast-paced world, linguistic appeal to groups is more common than ever (Kroskrity 1999 :112). Passing moments of conversation mean that identity is created rapidly and strategically to fit a scenario.

Language is used to create and display identity within vegan circles (internally). For instance, many vegans share vernacular and colloquialisms. Some common examples include 'earthlings' (a term for all human and non-human animals), 'veeganator' (a vegan on a mission to 'convert'), insults like 'omni', 'meat/cheese-breath', or 'carnie', and words for unique vegan ingredients like 'aquafaba' (chickpea water) or 'nooch' (nutritional yeast). This insider language is shared between vegans and was present in my participant conversations. My observations indicate that this language is popularised and circulated in online spaces where an entire group identifies as vegan. In the U.S. and U.K., vegans are a small minority. In contrast, online vegan groups are populated only by those who identify as a vegan. This all-vegan setting allows for the creation and spread of vegan identity-linked language. To put it simply, this language is vegans performing their vegan-ness to other vegans: internal identity performance. Language like this was most often employed in online groups like *vegan supremacy*, and even more so on r/vegan.

Beyond the 'inner circle' of veganism, language is important for how vegans portray themselves and are portrayed by non-vegans. Vegans, like those in

vegan supremacy or on r/vegan, arm themselves for verbal battle with shared arguments. These can be sourced from personal reflection, from vegan creators like *Earthling Ed*[6] or *ComicSkeptic*[7], or from websites like *Your Vegan Fallacy*[8]. Those looking to avoid conflict will learn to deflect questions, and echo repeatedly that veganism is "not a big deal" (Kiera). Meanwhile, vegans and veganism are (re-) constituted in media representation, online dialogue, and individual non-vegans' perceptions.

Carnism Revisited: Interacting with the Non-Vegan Other

Despite the claim that veganism is "not a big deal", all vegans I spoke to and know seem to be actively interested in challenging carnism. Debating non-vegans is commonly considered a core tenant of veganism. Luke voiced that vegan identity means a responsibility to challenge the cognitive dissonance (a term referring to supposed love of animals whilst paying for animal exploitation) of family or peers[9]. Kiera recounted a story,

'A friend came over, and I have a bunch of cow pictures on my wall, and my friend was like "aw they're so cute" and I was straight up like, "why'd you eat beef last night then?". She just went silent… but I had to say it'
-Kiera

Challenges to cognitive dissonance provoke varying responses. Luke became vegan when a friend challenged him to think more deeply about his eating a piece of chicken— and now he is one of the most outspoken vegans I know. This is a rare story; most attempts are met with avoidance or anger. Yet, just by being vegan and choosing to identify with the label, vegans resist carnism constantly. Every day a vegan must choose to eat an a-typical diet, resist social pressure from non-vegans, and reaffirm their belief in the justness of veganism. As Luke noted,

"With other [controversial] stuff, people will take criticism better when it's not their lifestyle, it's not what they're actively engaged in… eating animals is an ideology, it's just the dominant one[1]. But I'm proud it's one I'm denying" -Luke

1. I would clarify Luke's statement— eating animals is an invisible dominant ideology

The challenge veganism poses to carnism is at the root of the negative stigma around veganism. Vegans threaten to upset the comfortable carnist status quo, so they are ridiculed in media4 and treated in person with puzzlement or irritation. Indeed, MacInnis and Hodson (2015:726) found that vegans are perceived the same or more negatively than common prejudice target identities such as LGBTQ+ and Muslim; only drug addicts were evaluated more negatively than vegans.

The vegans I know do not seem to be phased, though— there is a spirit of resistance and resilience in veganism. Despite the difficulties with his family noted above, Luke grins when we discuss debating carnism with non-vegans. In

6. *Earthling Ed: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVRrGA-cUc7cblUzOhI1KfFg*
7. ComicSkeptic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcV-R2OVxPYw
8. *Your Vegan Fallacy: https://yourveganfallacyis.com/en*
9. Cognitive dissonance explained by CosmicSkeptic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnykmsDetNo

the vegan supremacy group chat, the group frequently deconstruct comments with carnist fallacies with relish despite the uphill battle they face. On r/vegan, commenters rally around success and debate stories. In vegan spaces both on and offline, vegan solidarity thrives. For me, veganism has given me new strength—the motivation of doing something good beyond myself. To save animals and limit my environmental footprint has given me the willpower to change my diet, to convert my parents and partner, and to reflect on the voiceless suffering of animals every day. By resisting carnism, vegans offer the world defiance, and in turn their community gives them strength.

"I love talking to other vegans because I care so much about this. Around all my non-vegan friends I have to like, tamp it down, but it's like, I LOVE IT, it's a facet of my identity that I love and wanna [sic] talk about because it feels like just by living my life, I'm doing something good" -Kiera

Vegan Unity as a Dream for the Future

The dream of veganism is alive and well. Vegan communities, online and in-person, flourish and grow larger every year. *Vegan supremacy* grows every semester as more students turn to a vegan diet. Some estimates suggest veganism saw a 40% increase in 2020 in Britain (Anthony 2021). Internet campaigns like Veganuary (going vegan for January) break new records every year (Anthony 2021), and Earthling Ed's YouTube videos frequently hit over a million views10. Speaking with Kiera, Luke, and other vegans only reaffirmed my love and confidence in veganism. Kiera expressed her joy at getting to discuss the subject:

Being a vegan can be lonely, but the vegan community is resilient and welcoming. In each of my participant interviews, I asked the same question; "Is the future vegan?".

Luke: "I think so. At some point, whether it's acceptable to kill animals will become a political question, and that can't come soon enough".

Daniela: "I'll be vegetarian or vegan again at some point in my life. And I really do hope that eventually, someday, everyone in the world is vegan".

Kiera: "H*LL YEAH IT IS"!

Drawing Conclusions

Through speaking with Kiera, Luke, and Daniela, and engaging with other vegans online and in my life, I have grown to understand the community and the meaning of 'vegan' at a deeper level. Veganism is concerned with creating a more just world— one where animals and the environment are protected, and carnism no longer rules without question. Through my research, I found the identity connected to this vision as best understood through anthropological and psychological lenses. Language and role performance within vegan circles and in external dialogues decide what 'vegan identity' is. This identity is amplified in online vegan spaces, creating cemented vegan identity and vernacular. The challenge veganism poses to carnism and the status quo means vegans are often demonised, but many vegans embrace this with defiance. Despite fighting an uphill battle, the vegan community remains

resilient, and I hope, like Kiera, Luke, and Daniela, to see veganism gain popularity and respect for the sake of the billions of animals suffering, this very moment, at human hands.

Reflecting on the time spent with my participants, I now see veganism as shaped not only by its formal definition but by collective meanings co-created in vegan spaces. As we act out our vegan identities, we shape the future of the community and the movement. We share not only an ethical conviction, but a culture and identity that passionately challenges dominant carnist society. Carnism may live the minds of both omnivores and vegans, but vegan identity grants confidence to reject it.

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