

The Vegan's Dilemma in Social Activism: Communication and Conflict among Vegans, Semi-vegans, and Omnivores

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Abstract

This study investigated how vegans formulate their communication strategies to promote ethical consumption in the context of social interaction with other vegans, semi-vegans, and omnivores. Vegans generally adopt two types of communication strategies: delivering either a critical or a positive-tone message to non-vegans. They consider the reactions of both non-vegans and fellow vegans when choosing their communication strategies. Critical messages often lead to backlash from non-vegans and are generally ineffective in gaining their support. In contrast, non-strict messages are more likely to be positively received by non-vegans but are viewed negatively by vegans with stricter attitudes. There is a tension between vegans with pure motives and those with flexible attitudes or semi-vegans who follow a vegan-like diet. Social interactions among vegans, non-vegans, and semi-vegans complicate the promotion of veganism, leading vegans to experience a dilemma in choosing their communication strategies.

Introduction

As various social problems become increasingly serious in the modern age, consumers are expected to contribute solutions through daily purchase behavior rather than a mere pursuit of their private utility (e.g., Carrigan et al., 2004). Examples include supporting developing countries through fair trade and switching to electricity with low environmental impact. In addition to governments, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit organizations, and enterprises, consumers are required to contributing to solving social issues through ethical consumption.

One way to promote widespread ethical consumption is to provide incentives (e.g., Asensio and Delmas, 2015). Incentives for ecofriendly consumption include fees for the use of plastic bags and subsidies for the purchase of electric automobile. Meanwhile, famous influencers who practice ethical consumption represent another important means to encourage ethical consumption as they provide information to other consumers and exert a positive influence on them (Johnstone and Lindh, 2013). In recent years, social networking services (SNS) have been widely used to promote ethical consumption, with social movements using SNS being referred to as “social media activism” or “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). How, what, to whom, and through which media platform information is provided are crucial in enhancing ethical consumption.

However, promoting ethical consumption is not easy and may sometimes lead to backlash from consumers receiving the message. First, ethical consumption implies the loss of convenience and economic benefits currently enjoyed through unconstrained consumption. In other words, ethical claims can trigger psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966; Clee and Wicklund, 1980; Spelt et al., 2019). Second, claims promoting ethical consumption may be interpreted as criticisms of the audience's consumption style. They may lead to negative affect among the audience and a tarnished view of oneself as a moral person (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017).

Ethical consumers in promoting their consumption lifestyles consider whether their messages lead to a backlash. Feinberg et al. (2020) argued that social activists face “the activist's dilemma”, in which extreme protest tactics may attract more media coverage, thereby promoting awareness of the cause, but may simultaneously erode public support. Although moderately toned messages are more likely to be accepted by audiences, they do not directly reveal their causes. Menzies et al. (2023) assumed that vegans may also face a

similar dilemma in advocating veganism and explored the reactions of omnivores to disruptive or non-disruptive protests.

Based on this argument, the current study aims to clarify how social interactions, especially communication and conflict, develop between ethical consumers and those who do not engage in ethical consumption. More specifically, it investigates the social interactions not only between vegans and non-vegans but also vegans and other vegans or semi-vegans. Veganism refers to “a philosophy and way of life that seeks to eliminate, to the extent practicable, all exploitation of animals, cruelty, food, clothing, or use for any purpose.”¹ It is ethical in nature as it calls for the de-exploitation of animals and can reduce the environmental impact of animal agriculture and fishing. However, veganism is opposed to a common lifestyle based on animal sacrifice, and it often provokes emotional opposition from non-vegans, as reflected in the term “vegaphobia” (e.g., Cole and Morgan, 2011). In this study, semi-vegans refer to those who maintain a lifestyle that is similar to that of vegans but not perfect. They include, for instance, lacto-ovo vegetarians, who do not eat meat and fish but consume dairy products and eggs; and flexitarians, who focus on reducing their intake of animal products but are flexible according to their circumstances.

Even if the complete de-exploitation of animals is difficult to achieve, reducing their sacrifice is an effective response to environmental problems (e.g., Helmer and Hu, 2019). Although veganism is now better understood, conflicts between vegans and non-vegans remain widely observed. This article describes the other side of the vegan’s dilemma: while some vegans try to promote veganism in a peaceful and moderate tone to avoid negative reactions from non-vegans, they are also concerned about receiving criticisms from fellow vegans with regard to their communication strategies. Thus, vegans face different types of audiences, namely, their fellow vegans, non-vegans and semi-vegans, which complicate their social activism. For veganism to be widely and correctly understood, efforts must be exerted to clarify why conflicts arise among vegans, non-vegans, and semi-vegans and identify which methods of communication are effective. By focusing on the interactions among these players, we can more accurately understand the issues surrounding vegans.

2. Existing literature

The existing research on vegans has adopted a variety of approaches, including a focus on the motivations for becoming vegan in psychological studies (Janssen et al., 2016) and on the philosophical background of veganism (Bigo et al., 2021). This section introduces (1) the negative reactions of non-vegans toward vegans and (2) the conflict between vegans and semi-vegans.

2.1 Antagonism of non-vegans for vegans

Most of the existing research on veganism has focused on vegans in Europe and the United States. Although veganism is spreading in these countries, studies have shown that vegans still experience strong negative feelings.

One reason for the critical and negative reactions to veganism is that it denies the common lifestyle founded on the premise of animal sacrifice (McDonald, 2000). Veganism criticizes the widely shared assumption that sacrificing animals is acceptable for the sake of human life and thus provokes feelings of guilt, an uncomfortable emotion for many people. People want to view themselves as moral persons (Bastian and Loughnan, 2017; Lowell, 2012); thus, vegans’ assertions lead to negative reactions and are perceived as a threat to the beliefs of non-vegans.

Another reason for the negative reaction to veganism is the perceived difficulty in changing a lifestyle that depends on animal sacrifice. Owing to taste preferences for animal products and their availability, many people face difficulties in switching to a diet that omits animal products (Lea, Crawford, and Worsley, 2006). It is

¹ Definition by The Vegan Society (<https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism>)

especially difficult in a situation in which a diet with animal products is culturally valued (Nilsson, 2019). Even if one understands that veganism is an ethical ideology but finds implementing a vegan lifestyle difficult, one will maintain a negative reaction to veganism to justify one's current non-vegan lifestyle.

Communication issues between vegans and non-vegans hinder their understanding of each other and their development of close relationships (Greenbaum, 2012; McDonald, 2000). Menzies et al. (2023) argued that disruptive activism by vegans gives non-vegans the impression that vegans are different people, leading to a negative attitude toward vegans. As a strategy to avoid such conflicts and protect each other's face, some vegans, for example, emphasize health benefits rather than animal ethics as a reason for avoiding animal products (Greenbaum, 2012). However, health reasons for becoming vegans tend to be regarded as selfish by vegans, as they are not for animals. Thus, some vegans hesitate to promote vegan diets from a human health standpoint.

2.2 Interaction between vegans and semi-vegans: horizontal hostility

Some existing studies have discussed the characteristics of the relationship between vegans and semi-vegans. Vegans sometimes criticize the semi-vegan lifestyle because of its incompleteness. The relation is described as horizontal hostility (MacInnis and Hodson, 2021; Rosenfeld, Rothgerber, and Tomiyama, 2020; Rothgerber, 2014). Horizontal hostility refers to the hostile feelings of one minority group toward another minority group that belongs to a similar but differentiated social category and is closer to the mainstream (White and Langer, 1999). This concept focuses on the fact that minority groups, which are more likely to be socially stigmatized, value their social identity as minorities and therefore have negative feelings toward minority groups that belong more closely to the majority group. This hostile relationship is also observed between vegans and semi-vegans.

In terms of dietary style, omnivores are mainstream, whereas vegans are in the minority and tend to be stigmatized. However, vegans strongly espouse the ideological values of veganism. From a vegan perspective, vegetarians who consume dairy and eggs or flexitarians are closer to the mainstream and are subject to negative feelings from vegans. Vegans' negative emotions are also directed toward vegans and vegetarians who are motivated by health factors and not by the issues of animal rights (MacInnis and Hodson, 2021; Rothgerber, 2014). The motive for being healthier is deemed as self-regarding by vegans with pure motives. Vegetarians or semi-vegans whose dietary style is closer to the mainstream feel inferior to vegans, and this feeling creates tensions that could weaken the solidarity of the entire population, including vegans and semi-vegans (MacInnis and Hodson, 2021).

As pointed out in this section, vegans, as social activists, have a dilemma in promoting their causes. Specifically, a straightforward expression of their causes directly conveys their advocacy, but it could lead to backlash. Moreover, omnivores more easily accept moderately toned promotion (e.g., vegan diet is good for your health) than direct advocates while some vegans criticize such promotion strategies as not revealing important issues. The current study aims to clarify the characteristics of the interactions among vegans, semi-vegans, and omnivores and how vegans adopt communication strategies influenced by these interactions.

3. Methods

This study employed an interview method to clarify how vegans, semi-vegans, and omnivores interact with one another and how vegans formulate their communication strategies. Interviewees were selected through SNS (X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook) and through referrals by some of the interviewees.

The analysis was based on 22 interviews conducted from 2020 to 2022. The interviews were recorded using video call software such as Zoom and then transcribed for analysis using MAXQDA software. This study used initials to anonymize the interviewees in quoting their dialogue.

4. Fact Findings

Based on the findings from the interview survey, this section describes the characteristics of the interactions

observed among vegans, semi-vegans, and non-vegans, as well as the communication strategies employed by vegans.

4.1 Negative reactions of omnivores toward vegans

As existing studies have shown, omnivores react negatively to vegan claims. Although a growing number of people view veganism positively and are reconsidering their consumption behavior, such a reaction is hardly common. As veganism is at odds with common consumer behavior and the claim implicitly recognizes omnivores as unethical people who accept animal sacrifice for their lives, it tends to invite negative reactions.

Negative reactions include expressing health concerns about the vegan diet and straightforward criticism of veganism. Health concerns seem to stem from the perception that the vegan diet is nutritionally deficient and from the desire to affirm one's own dietary and ethical beliefs. Non-vegans also attempt to highlight logical inconsistencies in vegans' claims. For example, they ask, "Is it okay to eat vegetables from a field where insects are being exterminated?" The anticipation and experience of these non-vegan reactions influence vegans' communication strategies.

These reactions from non-vegans are reflected in the interview data obtained in the study.

ON (a vegan): I don't disclose that I'm vegan either, but some people know that I don't eat animal products. They worry about whether I'm getting enough nutrients. These concerns are unnecessary for me. I get into all kinds of arguments, but in the end, I always end it by saying, "I'm just not that greedy for food." (March 4, 2021)

BU (a vegan): Actually, I told my ex-husband that I couldn't eat meat anymore. We discussed this in detail, but he believed that meat is necessary for health. It was impossible for him to give up eating meat. He also told me that not eating dairy products and eggs is a religious matter. (February 15, 2021)

The statements by the interviewees show that a typical response from non-vegans is to point out that a vegan diet is difficult to sustain and is nutritionally deficient. As noted in ON's statement, the health concern has a nuance of criticism of veganism, and ON negatively described the concern as "unnecessary." As mentioned by BU, framing vegan arguments as religious issues indicates that non-vegans tend to regard veganism as an ideology that lacks rational reasoning.

Vegans are often criticized and slandered by non-vegans, especially on SNS, in which anonymity is guaranteed. Most vegans interviewed for the study had experienced being attacked by non-vegans on SNS.

IM (a vegan): When I posted that I wanted to raise my child as a vegan on Twitter (now X), I was slammed. It was the first time I was called abusive, and they commented that abusive parents should disappear. I was so scared. (March 9, 2021)

BU: In the past, attacks on vegans on SNS were extremely harsh. Nowadays, the situation has improved. I used to get tired of engaging in every fight that came my way on SNS, but now I just let it go and block those who attack me. It just takes up my energy, so I've stopped fighting. (February 15, 2021)

Vegans commonly experience negative reactions in the form of questions, criticism, and slander both online and offline. Therefore, vegans cannot easily disclose their veganism or build social relationships with non-vegans. They thus value their relationships with vegans and find meaning in their existence in the vegan community.

4.2 Interactions between vegans and semi-vegans: moral hierarchy and horizontal hostility

This section discusses the interactions between vegans and semi-vegans, such as vegetarians who adopt vegan-like lifestyles. As existing studies have pointed out, vegans and semi-vegans are perceived as having different identities mainly because of their consumption, even though both are on diets similar to those of omnivores. In addition, because these diets emphasize the elimination of animal products, vegans, who are the strictest in this respect, are perceived to be at the top of the moral hierarchy. Furthermore, vegans have horizontal hostility toward semi-vegans who follow a less strict diet, whereas semi-vegans have a sense of inferiority toward vegans. Vegans and semi-vegans are aware of these reactions from other vegans, and their perceptions influence their communication strategies.

A Sense of Being Monitored

While vegans receive resources such as emotional support and useful information from the vegan community, they also have a sense of being monitored by other vegans. For example, those who define themselves as vegans but not strictly follow veganism are subject to criticism. These people are harshly criticized by vegans because their attitudes undermine the values of veganism.

Some vegans describe mutual scrutiny in the vegan community as follows:

IM (a vegan): I think some vegans say, "Absolutely, honey is also excluded in the vegan diet." Meanwhile, some less strict vegans eat something with honey and say, "Oh, this has honey in it." In Facebook groups, some strict vegans say, "If you eat even a little bit of animal product, you're not a vegan anymore, so get out of the community." I thought to myself, "If you're saying that, then I shouldn't call myself a vegan because I'm still using seasonings that contain animal products." (March 9, 2021)

ON (a vegan): Among vegans, of course, some define vegans strictly, but others create a gray zone, like me. I believe the scariest thing is that strict vegans attack those who make up the gray zone. If they do, those interested in veganism and want to try it in the future will hesitate. I think this is the worst thing you can do. (March 4, 2021)

LB (a vegan/semi-vegan): I live a mostly vegan lifestyle, but to be honest, there are some situations in which I hesitate to call myself a vegan. I can't say I'm a vegan, after all. Sometimes I'm a vegetarian when I eat out, and I eat fish a few times a year, so I'm not a vegan at all. So if I say I am a vegan, vegans will be offended. (June 6, 2022)

Those who point out the laxity of other vegans' practices have been described as "vegan police." As ON stated, such scrutiny contributes to veganism being practiced correctly, but it also discourages those who aspire to be vegans but are not fully committed. Even those who live a mostly vegan lifestyle and rarely eat animal products, such as LB, avoid calling themselves vegans for fear of being criticized by other vegans. Thus, flexible vegans avoid publicly calling themselves vegans because they are aware of not only the negative reactions from non-vegans but also the potential criticism from stricter vegans. If only strict vegans are active in vegan activism, omnivores may believe that vegans are different from them and that converting to veganism is nearly impossible. Less social identification with vegans is a major reason behind omnivores' rejection of and disinterest in vegan arguments (Menzies et al., 2023). Therefore, a strict attitude toward veganism is not necessarily effective in promoting it among omnivores.

Horizontal Hostility

As veganism deals with the issues of animal life and death, vegans cannot easily accept the idea of

consuming animal products even in small quantities. Therefore, vegans criticize semi-vegans who are not full-time vegans but try to reduce their consumption of animal products. For example, the Japanese media refer to a non-strict vegan diet as *yuru-vegan*. *Yuru-vegan* is similar to a part-time vegan or flexitarian. This term is often criticized by vegans because it is a combination of two contradicting words: *yuru* (non-strict) and *vegan* (in principle, strict dietary style). ON and TW offered relevant insights.

ON (a vegan): Regarding “*yuru-vegan*,” I was kind of annoyed. What is a “*yuru-vegan*?” Are they pescatarian or ovo-vegetarian? But I guess “*yuru-vegans*” want to use the word “*vegan*.” If it reduces consumption even a little, then I now think it's fine.

TW (a vegan): There's an idea that only vegans who are completely committed to veganism can define themselves as vegans. When I used the term “*yuru-vegan*,” I received much flak on SNS. Vegans believe that the word “*vegan*” includes the word “*strict*” and they consider it as nonsense. I know some ex-vegans who said, “I can't do it perfectly, so I will quit it.” I think it would be better if more people called themselves vegans because it would raise awareness of veganism and encourage more people to become vegans.

As TW pointed out, although attempts to promote a proper understanding and practice of veganism are important, they force semi-vegans to distance themselves from the community and hesitate to disseminate information about veganism. The number of people classified as “*yuru-vegan*” may be more likely to increase than the number of strict vegans. As more people adopt this type of diet, the vegan market will expand, and the exploitation of animals may decrease overall. However, the vegan community does not always evaluate non-strict diet styles positively.

4.3 Vegans' communication strategies

As with other forms of ethical consumption, veganism must be promoted through vegans' positive influence on non-vegans, which can in turn promote behavioral change. Vegans consider the following points when communicating with non-vegans: promoting a correct understanding of veganism, influencing people to reduce the exploitation of animals, and forming a positive impression of vegans (or avoiding negative impressions). The importance of these factors varies from one vegan to another. Such variation leads to differences in their communication strategies.

The communication strategies employed by vegans are categorized into negative-tone messages and positive-tone messages. The former one intends to criticize non-vegan lifestyles and make a strong impression of the devastation of animals subject to exploitation. The latter one is to bring value-neutral information related to veganism and send positive content that emphasizes enjoyment, such as an introduction to vegan cuisine or its health benefits. If vegans want to convey directly the ideals of veganism, the messages are likely to be highly critical of animal cruelty. Meanwhile, if vegans are concerned about the negative reactions from non-vegans receiving information, they may emphasize the benefits of being vegans. Reactions from other vegans also influence their communication strategies. Emphasizing the health benefits of a vegan diet instead of describing animal sacrifices, for instance, is subject to criticism from strict vegans.

Some of the vegans interviewed in this study described their intentions regarding communication strategies with non-vegans. For example, OI, UL, and BO pointed out that they changed their communication strategies from sending critical messages to sharing more positive content as they experienced negative reactions from non-vegans.

OI (a vegan): Especially in the beginning, most vegans become righteous people. They post images of animals being killed in slaughterhouses on SNS. They also show these images to their families and force

them to tell them why they eat them. I felt like I had to tell my friends about these issues. I realized, however, that at first, I was forcing them to give more information and pushing them into a corner. I now believe that it's important to provide the right information to the right person at the right time. It's better to take the approach of disclosing information only when others are interested in it. I guess it's more like waiting. (September 27, 2020)

UL (a vegan): I learned that people won't listen to you if you are forcing your ideas on them or if you are looking at them from a superior perspective. If people see it and are interested, I'll talk to them. (April 16, 2021)

BO (a vegan): The more strongly I argue, the more people stayed away from me. Therefore, I think that it's better to continue sending messages without pushing them. I think it's better to not try to make people understand. It can only be changed by the timing of people. I just keep sending messages, hoping that they will reach people who will listen to me and keep sending them out. In the past, I wanted people to understand, so I took the stance of forcing things down their throats. (March 2, 2021)

BO also described the process of changing communication strategies through an e-mail exchange:

(In the beginning of my conversion to veganism) I became angry and closed-minded toward people who continued to eat animal products. In my case, I realized that nothing good can come from dwelling in such despair. So when I posted the truth on SNS, I did so with as little emotion as possible. (May 12, 2021)

At the beginning of their conversion to veganism, vegans are more likely to be impacted by issues surrounding animal rights, and they are in the early stages of acquiring a new identity as vegans. At this stage, they tend to convey messages that have a strong element of criticism toward those around them. Therefore, as pointed out in existing research (Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019), non-vegans feel that vegans' claims are being imposed on them, leading to a backlash.

TW adopts the communication strategy of promoting the positive aspects of veganism by introducing vegan cuisine rather than emphasizing animal ethics.

TW (a vegan): When I came across vegan food, I found it interesting. I love it, and I want people to know about it, but there are a lot of people who don't like the idea of talking about animal ethics. I've purposely focused only on food in the hope that people will consequently learn about other vegan issues. This is a point that makes vegans angry. They criticize me for only talking about food. (September 28, 2020)

TW is concerned that non-vegans feel psychological resistance to a message that strongly addresses the issue of animal ethics. Therefore, TW adopted a policy of conveying a more positive message. TW was also aware of reactions from other vegans. TW had also experienced criticism from other vegans when she encouraged "yuru-vegan" on SNS. When disseminating information about veganism, vegans are concerned about how non-vegans perceive the information and how other vegans react to the messages. Therefore, we can infer that when vegans care about reactions from other vegans, they hesitate to send out moderately toned messages that do not directly feature animal ethics to non-vegans.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This study investigated how vegans formulate communication strategies to promote ethical consumption in the context of interactions among vegans, semi-vegans, and omnivores. The communication strategy is a choice

between sending a critical or non-strict message to non-vegans. When vegans try to be strict about veganism and are concerned about the reactions of other vegans, they will choose to send critical messages. The awareness of mutual surveillance and horizontal hostility in the vegan community makes sending non-strict content about veganism difficult for vegans. Conversely, if vegans are concerned about hostile reactions from non-vegans or if they value the spread of a vegan diet and the overall reduction in animal sacrifice, then they will choose non-strict message. This choice is the vegan's dilemma in the context of communication strategies.

Although this study has identified how vegans formulate their communication strategies, it does not examine what type of communication promotes veganism or contributes to reducing animal sacrifice. As many vegans in this study converted to veganism after watching documentaries about animal suffering, messages with a strong critical nature are likely to contribute to increasing the number of vegans. However, such strictly toned messages lead to psychological reactance from non-vegans or make them feel that vegans are different from them. They also hinder the development of a sense of social identification with vegans. For veganism or vegan-like diets to spread widely, efforts must be exerted to influence and change the behavior of those who do not have a strong interest in animal rights issues. In this regard, positive-tone messages may be effective. As critical and positive-tone messages have different functions, vegans should not criticize the senders of these messages. The vegan and semi-vegan community, as a whole, needs to explore effective ways of communicating if they intend to reduce animal sacrifice instead of increasing the number of pure vegans.

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