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Article

Identity Reformation Through Vegan Communities

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Abstract

Through content analysis of three relevant research essays, this study examines how vegan communities contribute to the reformation of the cultural identity of vegan-identifying persons. Jessica Greenebaum's (2012) research on identity and authenticity studies the different ways in which people classify themselves, and how they negotiate and reform their cultural identities. Elizabeth Cherry's (2006) research on *veganism* as a cultural movement emphasizes the importance that a strong social network has on maintaining a vegan lifestyle. Finally, Mary Jane Collier's (2015) article on identity and communication identifies norms, symbols, and meanings unique to the vegan culture and community. I hypothesize that ethical concerns are the main force behind adopting a vegan lifestyle. I want to further understand the role that community plays in forming a vegan identity, and, overall, to affirm that community is essential to maintaining, and thriving in, a vegan lifestyle. Vegan individuals, who are able to connect with other vegans, adhere more strictly to a plant-based diet. In comparison, vegans who do not partake in any social organizations or vegan networks are more likely to adapt the definition of veganism to fit their lifestyle. Community and networks play a considerable role in accountability, and they allow people not only to define themselves as vegan, but also permit others to identify as vegan, too.

Identity Reformation Through Vegan Communities

Veganism appears to be on the rise as of late in restaurants, among dieticians, and on labels of packaged goods. Merriam Webster defines a 'vegan' as a person who does not eat or use animal products or by-products (vegan, n.d.). However, there exists both controversy and confusion surrounding the term; it seems that everyone who holds an individual belief on veganism has a different understanding of what it means to him or her. Through personal experience, I have found that some consider themselves health vegans, in which they eat a whole-foods plant-based diet solely for health reasons. Others, who consider themselves environmental vegans, do not consume meat for the purpose of environmental preservation. People generally differentiate ethical from environmental vegans because the majority of ethical vegans have made a deeper connection to the animals and refuse to eat food that does harm to other beings.

My basic assumption is that community is essential to the maintenance of vegan identities. Recent research in sociology and communication studies generally supports this view; Jessica Greenebaum (2012), a sociologist at Central Connecticut State University, argues that ethical vegan values are stretched to every area of your life. However, vegans do not partake in any events that cause animal exploitation; they neither support industries that test on animals nor do they buy products that promote animal abuse (p. 130). Her research supports a community-based approach to better understand how vegans identify themselves, and how community affiliations affect the types of organizations in which they participate. Sociologist Elizabeth Cherry (2006) also investigates how vegans function in regard to a social network. Cherry's analysis further confirms that community is imperative to maintaining a vegan identity (p. 157). University of New Mexico's Communications Professor Mary Jane Collier's (2015) recent article on identity and communication offers further insight into the vegan culture; how the clothes they wear, the language they speak, and even the food they eat, combine to create their cultural identity, on an individual and communal level (p. 54). Following a literature review of current research on vegan identity, the ways in which vegan communities shape an individual's cultural identity are revealed.

Literature Review

Elizabeth Cherry (2006) from the University of Georgia is the author of "Veganism as a Cultural Movement: A Relational Approach." For this article, Cherry used ethnographic interviews to better understand those vegans who are not associated with a vegan movement organization. Her focus on the difference between the definitions of veganism pose a contrast between those in a "punk" vegan network and

the lone, "non-punk" outsiders. Punk vegans are those affiliated with an organization, while non-punks remain unaffiliated (p. 159). Cherry affirms that, while culture and networks are essential to maintaining a vegan lifestyle, "unaffiliated vegans vastly outnumber vegans affiliated [with an organization]" (p. 157). Her research identifies differences among various meanings of the term "vegan", and how these varying definitions have a significant impact on a vegan's cultural identity.

Greenebaum (2012) draws upon her background in the politics of food cultures to discuss a range of differences in identity, morals, and lifestyle amongst vegans. In her article, "Veganism, Identity and the Quest for Authenticity" (p. 143), she interviewed sixteen ethical vegans to investigate how each negotiates veganism in relation to an animal-based society (p.130). Her research shows that those inclined towards a vegan lifestyle are more likely to adopt a vegan diet based on animal rights rather than for health reasons. She makes the distinction between three types of vegans:

> A health vegan eats a plant-based diet to lose weight or to improve physical health. However, they do not incorporate veganism into other aspects of their lives … An environmental vegan is concerned about the environmental impact of the meat industry. An ethical vegan is one who adopts a vegan diet for moral, ethical, and political reasons. (p. 130)

Greenebaum believes ethical community affiliations are often embraced by vegan-identified individuals who seek a more authentic identity.

Although her research is not focused on vegans in particular, Mary Jane Collier (2015) explores the negotiation of identity through communication. In her article, she calls attention to the diverse elements that make up cultural identity, such as symbols, meanings, and norms (p. 53). She argues that, "all cultures…are influenced by a host of social, psychological, and environmental factors" (p. 55). Her recognition of the wide-ranging cultural elements, which constitute cultural identity, guides this current analysis of the impact that communities of affiliation can have on vegan individuality.

Content

Cherry (2006) reports that, while there are an estimated 1.7 million vegans in the United States, only a small portion of them participate in organizations (p. 156). In her interviews with twenty-four vegans, Cherry asked who was affiliated with an organization or social movement, and determined that only two of the twenty-four participants interviewed were affiliated with a vegan organization (p. 156). She observed

that half of the respondents strictly adhered to a collective definition of veganism, and refused to stray from its guidelines (p. 161). "The other half created and abided by personal, idiosyncratic definitions of veganism, which were considerably less strict and often included dairy products or honey" (p. 156).

As mentioned above, Cherry (2006) used the terms punk and non-punk to differentiate between affiliated and unaffiliated vegans. Punks are more collective, and strictly adhere to the definition of veganism, while non-punks are more subjectively constructed, and alter the definition of veganism to fit their lifestyle (p. 160). Due to the discrepancy in the definition of veganism between groups, Cherry argued that, "maintaining a vegan lifestyle is not dependent on individual strength, subcultural norms, or collective identity. Instead, maintaining a vegan lifestyle depends upon having strong social networks that are supportive of veganism" (p. 161). Cherry considers the punk subculture to be a largely vegan-based community, because punk networks tend to hold more abstract political ideas, and it was through these groups that many of her research participants reported learning about veganism. (p. 162).

Several of the punk vegan participants stated that through listening to veganism-focused bands, they then went to concerts carried out by vegans and learned more-in-depth information about veganism. It was this sense of community that helped them make the transition to a vegan lifestyle (Cherry, 2006, p. 162). Cherry observed how one of her participants experienced a kind of lenient (or lapsed) veganism when she binged on cheese with another vegan friend. Based on observations like this one, Cherry states that, "in order to maintain vegan practices, it is indeed important to have other vegans in one's social networks, but there can also be a cultural difference in the type of support found in those social networks" (p. 165). Cherry's research shows that veganism works better, and is more sustainable, as a cultural and communal movement (p. 167). Community involvement helps people to better adhere to the vegan lifestyle, and their shared values make it easier to commit to veganism for life (p. 157).

Self-identification as a vegan, as Jessica Greenebaum (2012) argues is, "a public declaration of one's identity, morals and lifestyle" (p. 129). Her research shows that people become vegan for a combination of health, environmental, and ethical reasons, while vegetarians are more likely to become vegan due to ethical reasons alone. Rather than a merely descriptive difference, however, she highlights how these characterizations are culturally rich and value-laden (p. 130). In light of Cherry's (2006) research, Greenebaum emphasized how stricter vegans are more likely to have a cohesive vegan network to encourage them to remain in the vegan lifestyle. In her research, she defines

impression management as, "a way in which one portrays oneself to others in social interaction" (p. 131). It is clear through her findings that all her research participants believe in animal rights, but each type of vegan—ethical, health, and environmental—differentiate themselves from one another. The majority of participants, however, reported turning to veganism for ethical reasons.

For her qualitative interviews, Greenebaum (2012) found participants who were confronted with consumption of products that contradicted their beliefs. Cindy, one of the vegans interviewed, mentions "the inability to be 100 percent 'pure' [is frustrating]" (p.141). Cindy struggles with how to navigate products sold by companies that support or conduct inhuman practices, such as animal testing or utilizing animal products in their commodities (p.141). For the most part, ethical vegans still identify themselves as pure vegans because they remind themselves that they are attempting to do minimal harm, but are aware they cannot negate it completely (p. 142). Her research helps us understand that veganism is more than a diet—in fact, veganism is at the heart of every choice a person makes. Rather than there being a steadfast "exact" way to approach veganism, people are able to navigate veganism in a personal way and opt for the best choices they can make based upon circumstances.

Collier (2015) discusses how symbols and meanings are essential to our cultural identity. In terms of veganism, common symbols include: the "V" that denotes a product is vegan; a small rabbit that signifies that an item is not tested on animals, or the use of green lettering or packaging. These symbols are essential to maintain veganism as a viable consumer group where vegans can gain a sense of community and coherence. Norms, as "patterns of appropriate ways of communicating" (p. 53), may be seen as symbols, but they also govern what clothes are worn and how an individual self-identifies as a vegan. For example, at a restaurant, if an individual orders a dish that is labeled vegan, it is assumed that the dish has no animal products or byproducts in it. This is because a normative definition has been constructed and followed by those members of a broader community who all embrace vegan values.

Collier (2015) also argues that the way in which organizations lead to characteristic organizational cultures (p. 55) is fundamental to veganism when discussing communities and social networks. It is clear that a community ensures there is a framework for shared values of its members, and provides a network of people, norms, and practices, which help the individual adhere to ethical values. She states, "cultural identities are negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication" (p. 56). Her statement about identity focuses again on the importance of community,

and ties into her idea of avowal—the self we portray—and ascription as the identities others attribute to us (p. 56). Her distinction between individual, relational, and communal identities applies significantly to veganism, and, in particular, within the identity management that takes place based upon a person's particular situation (p. 58).

Conclusion

Through a content analysis of recent research, it is clear that vegan communities play a substantial role in shaping and reforming vegan identities. Although the definition of veganism can vary from person to person, it is primarily through communities and organizations that vegans come together and create their communal identity. Whether they refer to themselves as an ethical, health, or environmental vegan, the labels act to inform and reform both their self-concept and the community. As a result, the shared use of labels indicates how the community facilitates a collective identity in the way individuals identify themselves.

Therefore, Greenebaum's (2012) and Cherry's (2006) research support the claim that the majority of people who transition to veganism do so for ethical reasons. It is clear that veganism stretches beyond our basic needs for nourishment and shapes our core beliefs. Greenebaum's (2012) research found that vegans who affiliated themselves with a community or organization were able to more closely adhere to the definition of veganism, and were less likely to make exceptions to their diet or lifestyle. Cherry's (2006) research also concluded that people are more likely to explore veganism when they are already part of a more alternative sub-culture, such as punk music culture. Collier's (2015) research showed that a cultural framework is crucial to maintaining a person's identity. It becomes clear that vegan communities play a significant role in shaping individuals' cultural identities.

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