

# Managing Impressions: “Face-Saving” Strategies of Vegetarians and Vegans

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## Abstract

Goffman's concept of impression management, front stage/backstage, and face work are used to explain how the participants in this qualitative study engage in promoting veganism and vegetarianism to omnivores in daily interactions. The participants often feel silenced by stereotypes, misinformation, and conflict. They believe that this persistence of stereotypes is a psychological defense mechanism by omnivores to mask feelings of guilt. To manage this tension and present this cause in a positive light, vegetarians and vegans engage in “face-saving” techniques to protect both parties from attack and alienation. These include rejecting “in-your-face” confrontations and adopting preventative “face-saving” strategies such as avoiding confrontation, waiting for an appropriate time, focusing on health benefits, and leading by example.

## Keywords

Vegetarianism, Veganism, impression management, face-saving techniques

## Personal Reflexive Statement

*I turned vegetarian in 1990 and vegan in 1996. The ethical decision to adopt a vegan lifestyle has created serious discord with family members and, to a lesser extent,*

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*friends. Over the last 22 years, I have altered my interactions with omnivores and noticed that my approach changes based on which identity I am presenting to my audience—a family member, friend, professor, or activist? This observation initiated the research project. In addition, I teach and do research in the fields of Animals and Society and the Culture and Politics of Food. My past publications has focused on the inconsistent treatment of dogs as a commodity and loved companion. My present research is on vegans and vegetarians living in a nonvegan and nonvegetarian world.*

## Introduction

Although only 7.5 million (3.2%) Americans are vegetarians, with 1 million of those people (0.5 percent) identifying as vegan, vegetarianism and veganism have become more prominent in our culture, particularly in their dietary and culinary aspects (Humane Research Council 2010; *Vegetarian Times* 2008).<sup>1</sup> Leading causes of this change are new healthy eating movements, which are promoted in books and blogs. Some of these omnivorous authors who reduce (but do not eliminate) their meat intake for health reasons appropriate the terminologies and identities of vegetarians and vegans and identify as a semivegetarian or a flexitarian (Associated Press 2004; Falconer 2010). Books and blogs also emphasize new ways to identify eating patterns, such as “vegan(ish)” (Clark 2009) and “vegan till 6” (Bittman 2009; Parker-Pope 2009).

This newfound interest in healthy eating is an exciting opportunity for vegetarians and vegans to teach others about the diet and ethics of the lifestyle. This cultural change is important since both vegetarians and vegans were, until recently, stigmatized and alienated from the mainstream. As Iacobbo and Iacobbo (2006:157) state:

At a glance, vegetarianism appears not to be a subculture, as meat-free cuisine is a trend, cookbooks clog the bookstore shelves, and fast-food restaurants advertise meat-free burgers. But that belies the reality that not eating meat still sets people apart from the dominant culture, and as a result vegetarians have created culture: customs, products, media, arts, events, business, and social and activist groups.

Although people find vegetarianism and veganism interesting, it is mostly tolerated as long as it is being presented as a diet that does not include a moral agenda.

The acceptance of vegetarians hinges on an unspoken “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy whereby meat eaters show tolerance unless vegans start talking of the slaughter of animals, or insisting that human health problems are derived from devouring meat, drinking milk, and eating eggs. Vegetarians, and especially vegans, whether or not they are outspoken or activists, experience discord of varying degrees from the dominant culture. (Iacobbo and Iacobbo 2006:110)

Vegan bloggers and activists agree that omnivores (and some vegetarians) are comfortable talking about vegetarianism and veganism as long as the conversation

focuses on diet, lifestyle, and personal choice. While vegetarianism and veganism is viewed as a personal choice and a comment on eating animals, being a carnivore or an omnivore is not perceived as a remark about the social construction of eating animals (Adams 2008, Joy 2010). Adams (2008:44) claims that meat eaters never have to think about eating meat until they come face-to-face with a vegetarian.

Meat eating is not perceived as one of two choices: meat eating or vegetarianism. Since it is not seen as one of two choices, meat eaters rarely have to define themselves as meat eaters or acknowledge that they make a choice in their diet. The result is that the meat eating is unmarked. A meat eater usually does not see himself or herself as a meat eater until a vegetarian makes an appearance.

Joy (2011:29) argues that this fact is due to carnism: a “belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate.” Carnism becomes internalized through the objectification, deindividualization, and dichotomization of animals—a defense system defined as the “cognitive trio” (Joy 2011:116). Interestingly, once vegans urge others to think ethically and politically about their carnist eating habits, they often become defensive and expect vegans to respect their own carnivorous choices (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA] 2011; Vegan Soapbox 2009; Your Daily Vegan 2011.).

As a result, vegetarian and vegan activists debate the best way to discuss their diet and lifestyle to omnivores. Should they promote vegetarianism and veganism for ethical, health, or environmental reasons? Should they emphasize all of these reasons? Should they encourage radical or gradual change (Ball 2006; Best 2009; Budlong 2010; Dawn 2008; Francione 2009; Friedrich 2006; Maurer 2002; Torres and Torres 2005)? Sociologists analyzed the strategies and tactics of animal rights groups and conclude different results. Jasper and Poulsen (1995) and Jasper and Nelson (1992) argue that “shocking visual images are perhaps [the movements] most powerful tool” since the shocking images encouraged the activists’ own life transformation. Mika (2006) found risks involved in using moral shock tactics and claimed they are ineffective for nonactivists as they put blame on individuals for being complicit in the abuse of animals. Munro (2005) also claims that nonconfrontational approaches that emphasize education, rather than shock, are more likely to get a positive response from omnivores.

This article adds to the academic discussion by exploring how 26 vegetarians and vegans discuss their diet and lifestyle to meat eaters. I was interested in the conversations they have with others about their dietary choices. Do the discussions revolve around the desire to spread information about vegetarianism and veganism, or is it a cautious response to queries? Is it their goal to proselytize and convert omnivores to vegetarianism and veganism? Do they feel the meat eater enter the interaction with curiosity, in self-defense, or with an agenda to mock and ridicule the vegetarian or vegan (Adams 2010)? In which circumstances do the vegetarian and vegans approach omnivores and which scenarios do they avoid? How do they attempt to

portray themselves in the process and what are people's reactions to their presentation of self? What tactics do they use in intimate interactions with friends, family, and acquaintances?

## Impression Management Strategies

I use Goffman's analysis of impression management, front stage/backstage, and face work to explain how the participants in my study engage in promoting veganism and vegetarianism to others. According to Goffman, rituals of social interaction reflect power dynamics among individuals, as they strive to create and maintain a particular image of the self in a positive light. However, the way one sees oneself is not indicative of the way others see them. The identity of vegans, and sometimes vegetarians, can become "discreditable" if they discuss veganism as a politic and ethic within the context of animal rights rather than merely a diet or lifestyle (Goffman 1963). The chances of a stigmatized identity increase if the vegan approaches the subject with a fervor that makes the omnivore angry and uncomfortable. Therefore, the vegans and vegetarians are expected to present themselves as a "disciplined performer" with "self-control" (Goffman 1959:216) to have a successful interaction.

According to my participants, it is critically important to represent vegetarianism and veganism in a positive light in order for their audience to listen and accept what they hear. As a result, they engage in both *front stage behavior* by carefully constructing strategies to manage their presentation of self as a vegan or vegetarian to omnivores and backstage behavior where they react to omnivores, privately and among their peers to vent frustrations, interpret reactions, and strategize future face-to-face interactions (Goffman 1959). Participants in the study refer to past experiences to describe how aggressive defense of moral boundaries damages this capacity to save face. Thus, they engage in preventative facework strategies—they either wait to be approached by others or avoid the conversation altogether, choosing to avoid hostility or wasting their time with a difficult audience.

## The Research Project

This article investigates, using in-depth qualitative research, how vegans and vegetarians explain their cause to omnivores in their daily interactions. This study is part of a larger qualitative study on veganism and vegetarianism, consumption, and social movements (Greenebaum 2012). The volunteers for the study were recruited using the social networking site Meetup.com. Meetup.com is a Web site that connects people based on location and interest ranging from community service to happy hour. According to their Web site, Meetup.com has over 10 million members and over 90,000 groups (Meetup.blog/Meetup.com). Users of meetup.com are more likely to be aged 25 to 55, have more education and higher income than average (Chappel 2011). There were a few benefits of using meetup.com. It was a quick and convenient way to find participants, and it enabled them to choose to

be involved in the study without pressure. I e-mailed organizers of various vegetarian and vegan groups asking for permission to recruit volunteers for a study on vegetarianism/veganism and consumption. In the post, I identified myself as a vegan and an academic. According to the participants, this disclosure encouraged recruitment and helped create trust and rapport.

Using Meetup.com enabled me to target individuals in different parts of the country. I focused my search in metropolitan locations in the United States that have thriving vegan communities. The majority of the volunteers resided in Portland, Oregon, the greater Hartford, Connecticut area, and the metropolitan areas of New York and New Jersey. I also recruited one volunteer from the workplace, who resided in Hartford, Connecticut.

I interviewed 26 people: 18 identified vegans, 7 vegetarians, and 1 raw food vegan.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the participants were a homogenous group. Twenty-three of the respondents were white, one was South East Asian, one was Latino, and one was Caribbean black. The ages ranged from 27 to 63 years; 54 percent of them were in their 30s and 40s. Eight were single, 12 were married, engaged or living with their significant other, and 6 were separated or divorced. Seven of the participants were men and 19 were women. Twelve of them had children. All had a high school diploma and three quarters held a 2-or-4-year postsecondary school degree. All but two were employed. The length of vegetarianism and veganism ranged from 10 months to 28 years.<sup>3</sup> Most of the vegan participants first adopted a vegetarian diet before they became vegan.

Some of the interviews were face-to-face while others were conducted over the phone. The choice of interview process was based on availability, location, and the intent to include a broader geographical area. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 80 min, averaging 60 min. I used a reference guide of questions to help focus the interviews, yet all the interviewees had the opportunity to discuss issues that I may not have addressed. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and all names were changed.

I tape-recorded and transcribed all the interviews. I then systematically coded categories during and after data collection using a standard system as utilized by Taylor and Bogdan (1984). I then analyzed the data using grounded theory and an inductive approach, which means the concepts and theories emerged from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

### *Typical Encounters and Backstage Reactions*

To explain the front stage strategies used by vegans and vegetarians, I first explain the reasons for the frontstage/backstage performances. I highlight a few typical encounters and conversations that my participants have with omnivores. I then explain how the participants interpret each scenario. This process highlights backstage behavior, which Goffman (1959) defines as the space where individuals are not being evaluated by an audience and people are free from the judgment and

interpretation of others. Exposing this backstage behavior is important, as it reveals their thoughts, prejudice, and negative reactions toward omnivores and prepares them for their front stage interactions with omnivores. This backstage behavior enables the interviewees to prepare the “face-work” needed in future encounters to make sure that the presentation of self remains intact and that one’s identity does not become discredited or stigmatized (Goffman 1959, 1963).

Almost all of the vegans and vegetarians told stories about how families and friends react to facts about the origins of food sources. Leah recalls a conversation she had with her stepmother about dairy cows and laying hens. Although her stepmother is a vegetarian and does not eat meat due to the abusive practices, she refuses to believe this is the case with dairy and eggs.

My stepmother is a vegetarian, and she fights me tooth and nail. She says, “Maybe in America dairy and eggs are cruel but they are not cruel in Europe; animals aren’t treated the same way.” And I say, “Cows still have to get pregnant to get milk.” And she says, “That’s just not true.” [Leah, vegan]

Leah has to remind her stepmother that to produce milk for human consumption, cows must be impregnated constantly. Although there is an abundance of information about the dairy industry, her stepmother is unaware that in order to produce mass quantities of milk, calves are weaned too early from their mother, males become veal as they are useless to the dairy industry, and dairy cows are injected with hormones.<sup>4</sup>

Sam (vegetarian) claims that people are often surprised to learn about the origins of food.

Most people think a chicken is not the same [as] chicken in the grocery store. They think what’s in a grocery store came from the grocery store as opposed to a farm. [I also] think that most meat eaters don’t see a relationship between eating meat and the actual animal. [There are] meat eaters who eat steak a couple times a week and say, “Jeez, I’m an animal lover. Right. I love all my pets.” They are seeing a steak as a steak [and not an animal].

On one hand, these vegetarians and vegans believe that people are not aware of how our food is produced since the industry hides information and denies access to facilities (Foer 2009).<sup>5</sup> Marketers and advertisers have done a great deal to produce and ingrain the image of the “happy cow” on the small farm in our minds. However, they point out one can easily find undercover investigations on the Internet, if inclined. Cindy (vegan) believes that people do not want to know what they are eating and participating in by eating meat and dairy.

I find more often than not, they don’t want to know. People just don’t want to know that what they are doing is wrong. There are plenty of opportunities in this day and age to

find out what is going on. It takes three minutes [to search the internet]. They just don't want to know.

Stephanie (vegetarian) concurs, "I learned along the way that the majority of people have no idea how the animal gets to that plate. They are just completely ignorant about that. And when I start talking about it they just tell me to shut up." Many of the participants were told at some point during their tenure as vegetarian or vegan that they were "wrong," "biased," or "making it all up." According to Adams (2001), this is not surprising since when a vegetarian gives facts they are "experienced emotionally by the omnivore." "It is experienced as an emotional statement because its content prompts feelings within the nonvegetarian, feelings the nonvegetarian does not want to be aware of." (Adams 2001:94).

The vegetarians and vegans in this study interpret the omnivore's hostile reaction as a combination of denial, ignorance, and guilt. This assessment is simultaneously a judgment toward omnivores and an attempt to place omnivores' negative and hostile reactions in contexts. This backstage reaction enables the participants to air their grievances, put their biases in check, and prepare positive tactics for face-to-face interactions.

From the perspective of vegetarians and vegans, the only ethical response to the abuse of animals on factory farms is to eschew meat (go vegetarian) or all animal products (go vegan). Therefore, the participants conclude that omnivores do not want to learn about factory farm conditions, as it would require them to make difficult changes to their lifestyle to offload the guilt. Mark (vegan) explains this perspective,

How many people have you talked to who say, "I don't want to hear it, I don't want to hear it" because they can't. If they hear it, they will change, and they don't want to change because it is a big sacrifice. Being vegan is a big sacrifice. So many people don't want to know about it because they will change. And they don't want to have to change.

Eating connects us to family, religion, and ethnicity. It is also an informal and formal activity and a major way we feel pleasure and satisfaction. Foer (2009:263) adds, "Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity. For some, that irrationality leads to a kind of resignation. Food choices are likened to fashion choices or lifestyle preferences—they do not respond to judgments about how we should live."

Since many of the vegans in the study have felt alienated from mainstream society, they recognize the threat of standing out and being rejected by omnivores after adopting a vegan lifestyle. Jonathan (vegan) states, "when you become vegetarian or vegan, you kind of alienate yourself and I don't know if people can deal with being alone." According to Leah (vegan), the marginalization takes place in two ways. You marginalize yourself and others marginalize you.

When you decide to be vegan, you choose to in some ways marginalize yourself. There are assumptions about where you stand politically, but there are also assumptions about

how you marginalize yourself and how you don't take part of other things. So you don't get invited to other things as much because there's an assumption that you are not going to go along with it or you want to go along with it. In addition to having people not invite me, I've also cut my social circle down. My partner has a lot of non-vegan friends and I don't like to go their events. I don't even like to go to my partner's mom's house because I won't have anything to eat there.

If one has a community of like-minded friends, the transition is much easier; however, a new social group often must be sought out. The participants believe this may be a reason why omnivores continue to deny the facts of the food industry.

The participants interpret the omnivores' denial as a way to ward off feelings of guilt. If denial is a mechanism to protect the self, then vegetarians and vegans personify the guilt. Carrie (vegan) explains a typical encounter she experiences:

I think I make them feel guilty. And over the years had people say to me, "Oh I ate a hamburger yesterday, and I thought about you, and I felt guilty." They kind of have an idea that it isn't good for them; that animals suffer. They probably don't have any idea of the extent of the suffering, but they have some idea. And they know in their heart that [veganism] is a good idea but they just for whatever reason are not ready to do it, so they don't want to be around [me] because it brings up a lot of feelings for them.

Carrie believes that deep down these people are uncomfortable eating meat, and when they talk to her they have to think about their actions. Jason (vegan) exposes another twist in an example of dining out with omnivores. Most people, he claims, want to be let "off the hook" and not have to think of themselves as being "bad."

I am not a psychologist or a psychiatrist but it's obvious that they are using you as a mechanism to offload their own guilt. It's classic. When you go out with people, [they ask] do you mind if I eat meat? Don't ask me that question of course you know I mind if you eat meat. I'm not going to give the edification of saying don't worry about it because that's all they want [to hear] is "oh don't worry about it."

In her statement, Sarah (vegan) highlights the heart of the matter.

I think deep down inside no one wants to kill a cow or wants to kill a pig but it's hard to make that step. . . . So by saying I'm a vegan or a vegetarian it reminds them that they are not making the best choice on something. And even though I say I don't care what other people eat, it doesn't affect me, *I have to defend myself and protect them at the same time* to avoid having them give this negative feedback to me. So I think it's kind of reminding them of something they don't want to hear about. [Author's emphasis]

Sarah points out an interesting point that is at the core of the face-saving techniques. She feels responsible for making others feel comfortable around her while at the same time she is protecting herself from verbal attacks. Sarah's comments also

highlight the usefulness of exposing backstage attitudes and analysis. The backstage observations reveal that vegetarians, vegans, and omnivores mutually judge each other and are both reactive to each other's positions. As Adams (2001:70) states, "the response of someone who feels judged is to judge another. This displaces the focus. It is reactionary." It is important to acknowledge and interpret the reactionary responses of everyone involved in the interaction in order to prepare productive future front stage behaviors.

## **Front Stage Persona and Face-Saving Techniques and Tactics**

Since the vegetarians and vegans have a perception that they appear to others as judgmental, they must respond in a manner that will repudiate that assessment. "If a person is to employ his repertoire of face-saving practices, obviously he must first become aware of the interpretations that others may have placed upon his acts and the interpretation that he ought to place upon theirs" (Goffman 2003:9). If their goal is to convince more people to adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet and lifestyle, they must do it carefully in order to "save face" and protect both parties from attack and alienation. Thus, the front stage personas of my participants highlight the strategies used to "save the face" of everyone involved in the conversation. These include avoiding confrontation, waiting for an appropriate time, focusing on health benefits, and leading by example.

### *Avoiding Confrontation*

Since the vegetarian and vegans believe that the reactions of omnivores are displays of their carnivorous guilt, using a confrontational approach will be ineffective. The "issues" of eating animals will get lost in the translation, and the vegan or vegetarian will be highlighted as the problem instead (Adams 2001). Some of the participants admit that they used to be preachy about their beliefs, but later changed their approach. Carrie (vegan) points out that this is a normal response when one first starts to learn about animal exploitation in the food industry.

I was kind of a "Born Again Vegan," the first couple of years and it didn't go over well. . . . I was so horrified by what I saw and learned—I just couldn't wait to tell everyone else so they would get it too. But what I found out was that most people weren't interested. They didn't want to know how their food got to their plate. They just didn't want to know. I was simply naïve at first.

She considers now that she was naïve in thinking that the "in-your-face" tactic would be an effective approach to change the beliefs and behaviors of meat eaters.

Since Cindy (vegan) wants to avoid being perceived as a stereotypical activist, she takes a more gentle and gradual approach.

[I do not want to be] the crazy animal rights lady telling everyone that what they are doing is wrong. I'd rather show people by example. Trust me, quiet example is not my modus operandi. I am more of a "in your face" kind of a person. It's actually really hard for me. I try to hit a middle ground. I sort of hint at some of the things: "If you knew. . .," which gives them a chance to say "I want to know." "But it doesn't force it down their throats."

Jason (vegan) also agrees that the stereotypical activist approach is not effective.

Some people think if you give people information and you yell and scream at them enough they are going to realize how rational it is to be vegan. That's not how humans operate. You can't push them to a cliff. It's all gradual.

Not only have many come to the conclusion that being confrontational does not work, many of the vegetarians and vegans feel it is harmful. They cite examples of people becoming defensive or hostile, creating a list of excuses, and nothing is accomplished.

Some participants cited examples of omnivores starting fights by hurling counter arguments to the tenets of veganism. Leah (vegan) calls this the "defensive omnivore bingo" game (see: <http://vegansaurus.com/post/254784826/defensive-omnivore-bingo>).

Have you seen omnivore bingo? I swear it's the funniest thing. It's essentially all the things that meat eaters say after you tell them what they are doing to [animals] is cruel. I basically heard, like every other vegan, the whole omnivore bingo: that caveman used to do it, look at my canines, my canines are clearly for cooked meat. Those arguments are hard because you'd rather talk about something else.

My participants claim that these types of confrontations are not only annoying and a waste of time, they are designed to dismiss and invalidate the vegetarian arguments. Thus, the vegan or vegetarian must remain neutral or change the conversation in order to control the scenario and "save face."

### *Appropriate Timing*

Many of the vegans and vegetarians have decided to wait for people to ask them questions rather than waste their time initiating a conversation. Jonathan (vegan) says, "if somebody says to me, 'I'd like to find out more, then yeah, I'd gladly tell them. But you can't change someone's view over one dinner conversation, especially if they don't want to hear about it to begin with.'" Matt (vegetarian) agrees that the time and place to discuss the matter is crucial.

I let people come to me. I find the topic usually comes up when we are eating. It's not really a table discussion because you are going to start grossing people out and so I try

to deflect and a lot of times I say lets talk about this when we are done eating because I'm going to ruin your meal.

Kim (vegan) approaches people through compassion and education. She started an animal sanctuary and makes jewelry with animal rights messages. She believes these give her great opportunities to teach others. Carrie (vegan) also teaches about veganism in a manner that empowers them, rather than overwhelms and depresses them.

I think what worked really well for us was giving them something that they can do that would make a difference. [Inform them] that what they ate the next day would make a difference. I don't judge them or say you have to be this or that. Some people would say, "Well, I don't think I can be a vegetarian." So, I say, "well, how many hamburgers would you say you eat a week?" "Four." "Can you eat three a week?" All right you are going in the right direction, that's great. Every step [is great]. We would try to be really supportive and it seems to work very well.

Most people perceive vegetarianism, and specifically veganism, to be a difficult life-style. The task seems overwhelming and unbearable. Therefore, most advocate small steps as to not scare people away. This includes introducing new foods to omnivores, which are often perceived as being tasteless, boring, and gross. Stephanie notes that since many people have a flight or fight response to "fake meat," she introduces them to these products slowly.

[When you put] replacement meat in front of someone, you see all their senses come out. They tense up, they're scared, and they are reluctant. It's so bizarre to me that eating flesh is more relaxing to them by nature. I mean its absurd to me. If I don't tell people or if I don't bring it up or if they just want to take a bite and not really ask or I don't say anything about what is in it or whatever. They will take a bite, try it, decide if they like it, and then ask more questions about what its made out of or if they can have the recipe, or that type of thing. I think [taking a] different direction is really going to make the biggest difference.

After trial and error, the vegans and vegetarians in my study found that being gentle and guiding is more useful than being brisk and demanding. Promoting education over confrontation enables all involved in the conversation to "save face."

### *Focusing on Health Benefits*

Another "face-saving" strategy recommended by some of my participants is to focus on the health benefits of vegetarianism and veganism. After all, the healthy eating craze has introduced the mainstream population to vegetarianism. Scott (vegan) tells people:

You should be vegan for selfish reasons—to avoid all the shit that happens to you, as a meat eater. Don't even think about the animals or their welfare—think about your own welfare. Shit happens to meat eaters! I've seen it first hand. I have been an emergency worker for all these years [and have seen] fire and medical emergencies. I volunteer at [a] cancer hospital and I see people eating away. They are basically disintegrating before your eyes. They are missing [body parts] carved off because it's cancerous. They should become vegan for no other reason [than health]. Don't even think outside of your body, be selfish, realize that you are going to benefit in ways you couldn't imagine.

Ben, a raw food vegan, agrees with this strategy, as he believes most people are fundamentally selfish.

You can sell [veganism by telling] them that they will age slower, and they will have healthier lives; that they will be more attractive to the opposite sex, or something like that. That's really where you would make the bigger difference and get people to much more enthusiastically embrace a vegan lifestyle.

While he agrees with the principles of the animal rights movement, he finds the tactics to be more problematic than helpful.

I certainly lean towards the animal rights. I'll put it like this, I used to think the people in PETA were maniacs and now I view their motives as pure [but] I am able to convert people to vegetarian and vegan diets solely by using the health argument and leave the animal rights aspect of it alone.

This approach works as a face-saving technique for my participants since they can avoid the animal rights issue altogether.

### *Leading By Example*

Finally, the participants in the study encourage others vegetarians and vegans to lead by example. Matt (vegetarian) states:

Leading by example is the best way. The more and more people in the limelight who are successful and live that way, the more people will follow. The majority of humans are followers, they are not leaders. The more examples they have of people who are confident in themselves I think is the best way to really change people's opinions. I feel when you try to force things down people's throats, it can either work or they take the opposite stand. They put their guard up. I have a number of friends who've become vegetarian or vegan or at least eating healthier or being more conscious about it [because of me].

Matt (vegetarian), a former martial artist (and a former vegan) believes that most people are followers not leaders. If you seem healthy, strong, and happy, others will want to emulate you.

One of my goals when I was competing [was to counteract the idea] that vegans are weak, frail, or not strong. I do mixed martial arts and I wanted to be one of the first champion vegans in competition. So one of my goals was trying to prove that I may be a vegan but I can still break two baseball bats with a round kick and fight guys three times my size and beat them.

This was also the case for Scott (vegan), a firefighter.

I just ran the New York City marathon earlier this month. So that's an indication of [my] health. I don't mean to brag. When I took the job 22 years ago I said I have to be in shape. I owe it to whomever I've been called on to help. I never said to myself I couldn't get to this person because I wasn't able to climb the stairs or I couldn't drag him. So I have always, from the beginning trained to be healthy. I've only improved health-wise since I became a vegan 24 years ago, without a doubt. I went from 163 lbs. to a 179 lbs. and I'm simply a bigger and hopefully a better version of who I was at 24 years old.

Scott claims he has become stronger and bigger, not weaker, since he's become vegan. Being athletic is congruent with their presentations of self as strong, vegan role models.

Appearing professional is another tactic in the presentation of self. Ben (raw food vegan) agrees that many vegans appear casual and unprofessional and is making it his mission to cultivate a professional appearance and image as a Chiropractor and raw food vegan.

One of the things that I'm actually planning to do in my practice is having a very Western appearance to my clinic, wearing a white doctors robe, wearing a shirt and tie, having almost a conservative demeanor and a normal haircut. [I will] present an alternative path of nutrition through a model that doesn't make people think of hippies.

If vegans are perceived as wheat grass-drinking hippies, people are less likely to keep an open mind about veganism. According to Stephanie, people respond negatively when vegetarians and vegans are associated as "PETA freaks."

[I've had more success] when [omnivores] getting to know me and my lifestyle and [see] I'm not this stereotypical vegetarian. I think that intrigues people and they start talking to other people about [how they] know this vegetarian and she is not xyz. I think it does [attract] more people this way because if they just hear vegetarianism on the news or [a controversial PETA stunt] everyone just thinks, "oh it's crazy PETA freaks." So they don't even tune into what the cause is. They just tune it out.

Since some people have a knee-jerk reaction to PETA, it is important to create a positive impression though a front stage performance that challenges this representation in order to impress and influence others.

Many participants state that the final and best way to lead by example is to emphasize the ease and joy in eating vegetarian and vegan. Vegetarian options are standard in most restaurants and vegan options are becoming more available. Supermarkets carry multiple varieties of nondairy milk yogurt and cheese (soy, rice, almond, hemp), mock meats, tofu, and tempeh. Introducing and sharing tasty, vegan or vegetarian foods always leads to a positive encounter. Michelle loves to cook and takes pride in cooking for her omnivore boyfriend.

I can veganize anything. In fact, I used to only buy vegan cookbooks; I have a ton of them as you can see. I was kind of afraid that I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have a vegan cookbook. Now I buy any cookbook I want. For ex. I bought this beautiful cookbook from William Sonoma . . . I was thinking that this is such a point of pride for me because I know I can make anything in this book and I proceeded to make the most fabulous cream of mushroom soup [for my boyfriend] using mimic cream instead of the real cream and using what are called soy curls instead of the chicken that was called for in it. It was fabulous; I tell you there was no compromise whatsoever. [My omnivore boyfriend] loved it.

Leading by example was defined as being one of the most effective techniques that could be used to encourage people to adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet.

## **Conclusion**

As spokespersons for veganism and vegetarianism, these individuals cannot risk social foibles. If their friends and family feel threatened or insulted, then they will immediately reject the message. As social beings most of the participants did not want to risk antagonizing and potentially losing friends. The backstage activities enable them to analyze, think, and decompress so that they can engage in positive front stage behavior.

Initially, many of the vegetarians or vegans used traditional tactics of confrontation, but they found that it was not an effective way to get people to listen to them. Aggressively defending this identity created boundaries that left them feel isolated. They created strategies that proactively protect relationships with omnivores using techniques that "save face" for all involved in the vegan encounter. Thus, "in trying to save the face of others, the personal must chose a tact that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others" (Goffman 2003:9). Most of the participants found non-confrontational methods to be more effective, especially since they believe that most people feel guilty or deny reality so that they can avoid feeling guilt. Furthermore, they used the self to show others by example a healthy and happy lifestyle.

Food is a primal, personal experience as well as an active, social activity.

People scour over recipe books in hopes to find creative and tasty dishes. Religious, cultural, and national rituals often stir food choices. Food is used to create connections with family and friends as well as boundaries from others. The dinner

table can be a place that creates warmth and positive memories, or it can be a space for division—a battlefield for family drama. Food choices are made for convenience and necessity due to busy lifestyles and affordability. Sometimes, food choices, like the ones made by my participants, are determined by political and ethical belief systems.

Eating is also a passive, unconscious activity; something one does as they sit on the couch and watch television. As my participants believe, most meat eaters do not think about the foods they eat. In fact, the system makes it possible, even necessary, to not think about the production and quality of food, particularly food that comes from animals. Carnism (Joy 2011) makes the choice of eating meat invisible, normal, and natural.

This article adds to the sociological research on impression management, social interaction between two ideologically opposed groups, and the national discussion on food ethics. The participants in my study ask others to examine the foods they eat and their reactions to vegetarians and vegans. The fact that the participants face resistance and change their style of communication to save face and maintain relationships highlights the power and depth of carnism in the American society.

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### **Notes**

1. Accurate statistics are difficult to obtain since they are self-reported claims. Many people who self-identify as vegan or vegetarian are actually not, according to the accepted definitions of the U.K. Vegan Society ([vegansociety.com](http://vegansociety.com)).
2. A vegan is a vegetarian who does not eat dairy or eggs (in addition to meat, poultry, pork, fish) and usually does not eat honey. All but one dietary vegan in my study did not wear leather. For more information, please see (Greenebaum 2012).
3. I recognize that this is a wide time range and that someone who is vegan or vegetarian for 10 months is going to have a much different experience than someone who has lived this lifestyle for 28 years.
4. For more information, see Eisnitz 2007; Joy 2010; Marcus 2001, 2005; Foer 2009; Singer and Mason 2006; Williams and DeMello 2007.

5. Proposed legislation in 2011 to ban and criminalize animal abuse investigation (Sulzberger 2011).

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