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To cite this article: Jessica Greenebaum & Brandon Dexter (2017): Vegan men and hybrid masculinity, Journal of Gender Studies

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1287064>



Published online: 08 Feb 2017.



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Vegan men and hybrid masculinity

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ABSTRACT

If eating meat is equated with 'masculine traits' of emotional stoicism, strength and virility, do vegan men threaten the concept of a stoic and domineering view of hegemonic masculinity? This research explores how 20 vegan men explain veganism in relation to patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity. We argue that vegan men engage in hybrid masculinity by modifying values associated with veganism and femininity to align with traditional masculine standards. By doing so, vegan men contest the narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity but fall short of challenging gender inequalities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 January 2016
Accepted 17 January 2017

KEYWORDS

Veganism; food; men;
masculinity

Research on men and food mostly focuses on the connection between meat eating, hegemonic masculinity and corresponding systems of oppression and misogyny. Since they do not eat meat, non-vegans often portray vegan men as feminine. This study answers several questions regarding how vegan men express masculinity. How do vegan men respond to being depicted as feminine? Do they create strategies to align themselves with dominant ideals of masculinity or do they actively combat the domineering view of hegemonic masculinity? We found that while hegemonic masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, the vegans in our study do not reject associations with femininity. We argue that vegan men engage in hybrid masculinity by modifying values associated with veganism and femininity to align with traditional masculine standards. By doing so, vegan men contest the narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity, but fall short of challenging gender inequalities.

Men, masculinity and meat

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of research on men, masculinity and food that highlight strict gender roles and a distinct gender binary in the Western world (Aidan & Ciclitira, 2011; Buerkle, 2009; Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2010; Earle & Phillips, 2012; Gough, 2007; Heinz & Lee, 1998; Julier & Linderfeld, 2005; Nath, 2011; Newcombe, McCarthy, Cronin, & McCarthy, 2012; Rogers, 2008; Roos, Ritva, & Katriina, 2001; Rothgerber, 2013; Sobal, 2005; Spencer, 2014; Veri & Liberti, 2013). An emerging theme in the literature is that men use food as a means of subscribing to and reinforcing the norms, expectations and behaviours of their gender. By equating meat eating with 'masculine traits' of emotional stoicism, strength and virility, food consumption becomes a performance by which men are able to assert their dominance as hegemonic men in patriarchal culture (Adams, 1990; Aidan & Ciclitira, 2011; Buerkle, 2009; Heinz & Lee, 1998; Julier & Lindenfeld, 2005; Nath, 2011; Rothgerber, 2013; Sobal, 2005; Thiel, 1994).

An example of research in this area comes from Buerkle's (2009) study on the consumption of beef as a performance of masculinity with a focus on Burger King's 'Mantham' advertisement. The 'Mantham' commercial encourages men to eat hamburgers as a form of rebellion against the cultural domestication and softening of men. This concept of 'retrograde masculinity' is constructed in opposition to the 'metrosexual' man – he who engages in a performance of masculinity that impersonates aspects of femininity. Hence, 'men eating meat, especially beef, constitutes a masculine performance that specifically excludes and rejects femininity' (Buerkle, 2009, pp. 81, 82).

Rothgerber (2013) explored society's association of a lack of compassion or remorse for animal consumption with concepts of masculinity. He found that while women described feelings of *remorse* for eating meat, men defended their *right* to eat animals based on health, hierarchy and religion. These men believed that caring for animals was a sign of weakness and femininity. 'Denial of animal suffering is congruent with male norms of stoicism, toughness, and emotional restriction. Masculine men are not supposed to relate to the less fortunate, to display sensitivity or empathy, or to discuss their feelings' (Rothgerber, 2013, p. 366). When men eschew meat and animal products from their diet and lifestyle, they subvert what is perceived as the 'natural order' by opting for 'women's food'. Thus, men who abstain from the practice of consuming meat are perceived as rejecting a crucial aspect of hegemonic masculine behaviour and their masculine identities are challenged (Rogers, 2008; Rothgerber, 2013; Potts & Parry, 2010).

Based on Rothgerber's findings it is no surprise that vegetarianism, a diet that refrains from eating meat, is commonly associated with women and femininity. Refusing to eat meat due to compassion for animals is antithetical to the current hegemonic definition of masculinity. Veganism, a diet and lifestyle that abstains from eating animal flesh, dairy and eggs, takes this compassion towards animals to an even greater degree.¹ As a result, vegan men often threaten the concept of a stoic and domineering view of hegemonic masculinity.

For example, when Arian Foster, an American football player, announced on twitter that he adopted a vegan diet, sports media panicked. Brady and Ventresca (2014) conducted an analysis of the reporting by various media outlets. Brady and Ventresca (2014) found that the media relied on discourse of 'renaissance masculinity' to both explain Foster's veganism and reinforce the connection between meat and manhood. By focusing solely on healthism and nutritional justifications for his choice to adopt veganism, while silencing any political or revolutionary ideas, sports media was able to portray Foster as an original, one-of-a-kind, 'renaissance' man while maintaining traditional ideals of masculine norm.

Men, masculinity and veganism

There has been little research on the effect of veganism on the perception of masculinity. Thomas (2016) conducted four psychological experiments to explore the gendered perceptions of vegetarians and vegans. Participants were randomly assigned to read a vignette about a man or a woman and asked to rank their personality qualities, including masculinity and femininity possessed, based on their described diet. The vignettes in the first two experiments compared vegetarians to omnivores and vegetarians to vegans. They found no difference in perceived masculinity between vegetarians and omnivores. However, study #3, which compared vegans to omnivores, did find that vegan men were projected to be less masculine. To explain why, the vignettes in Study #4 distinguished between men and women being vegan out of choice, or due to health issues. Thomas found that vegan men were seen as less masculine if they were vegan by choice. This was not an issue for women. Therefore, Thomas concludes, 'choosing veganism, not veganism itself, is associated with lower levels of masculinity' (Thomas, 2016, p. 85).

It is not surprising then that Johnson (2011) found that veganism was promoted to men by emphasizing health benefits, more specifically sexual virility and physical fitness. Johnson analyses two books, Freedman and Barnouin's *Skinny Bastard* and Joseph's *Meat is for Pussies*, and magazines targeted to men (Men's Health, GQ, Men's Fitness and Esquire) to explore the representation of veganism in popular media texts. Her research questions '[whether] male vegan representation is a new form of masculinity

or if it upholds the same rhetoric as hypermasculine meat-eaters. More specifically, does vegan marketing appeal to male vegan consumers using the same hypermasculine rhetoric employed by the meat industry?' (Johnson, 2011, p. 5). Johnson's content analysis found that although the magazines presented veganism as a healthy diet, it was not promoted as manly (Johnson, 2011, p. 29). To counteract the stigma associated with veganism, both books *Skinny Bastard* and *Meat is for Pussies* reinforce traditional ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. They do this by accentuating physical fitness, using aggressive language that supports ideas of male domination, emphasizing heterosexuality and the sexual conquest, and stressing individual health goals over animal rights, which are associated with women and femininity.

This portrayal of vegan men is defined as 'hegan', health conscious vegans who uphold the ideals of hegemonic masculinity *despite* being vegan (Johnson, 2011; Pierce, 2010; Quick, 2011; Wright, 2015). As Wright (2015) states,

[The hegan] differentiates certain male vegans from others and, more problematically, from their female counterparts [which] further enforces the notion that veganism is a feminine endeavor and that men's choice to undertake such a dietary option must engender a masculine empowerment that allows the choice to be different from veganism as practiced by women or certain other men-Birkenstock-wearing anemic hippies. Hegans, therefore, are something other than merely vegan; they are so ultra masculine as to be able to be vegan and to make that dietary choice manly as well. (p. 126)

The hegan may be a carefully crafted response to the stigma and backlash vegans encounter. For example, scholarship shows that non-vegans often engage in a discourse of 'vegaphobia', which ridicules and misrepresents veganism to discredit and marginalize radical animal rights ideology (Cole & Morgan, 2011). This stigma ranges from being defined as 'killjoys' by non-vegans (Twine, 2014) to being the recipient of vicious online attacks for identifying as a 'vegansexual', one who prefers sexual relationships with those who share their cruelty-free vegan values (Potts & Parry, 2010).

Does the portrayal of vegan men as ultra masculine enable them to maintain culturally appropriate norms of masculinity when they adopt veganism as a lifestyle? Is the hegan archetype an accurate portrayal of vegan men? We explore how 20 vegan men, of various race, ethnicities and sexual orientation explain their diet and lifestyle in relation to patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity. These men do not share a universal experience of masculinity as they hold different positions of race, socio-economic class sexual and gender identities. They also adopt veganism for various reasons, including health concerns and/or ethics.² Therefore, one should not make the mistake to presume that these men, regardless of dietary and ethical lifestyle, meet hegemonic standards of masculinities. Yet, if eating meat is a way of identifying and doing hegemonic masculinity, what does this mean for vegan men, as an aggregate? Do vegan men seek to disassociate themselves with women and femininity in order to maintain hegemonic masculine privilege? Do they feel it necessary to engage in other hypermasculine activities as compensation, or do they attempt to redefine what masculinity means to make it consistent with a vegan identity?

We argue that the vegans in our study do not embody the hegan archetype; in fact, they reject many of the values upheld by hegemonic masculinity. In many ways, they expand the definition of the qualities that men can exhibit by embracing values and traits associated with women and femininity, embodying a hybrid form of masculinity.

Hybrid masculinity is one type of alternative masculinity that focuses on the ways that men actively challenge and reinforce hegemonic ideas of manhood. Hybrid masculinity extends Connell's (1987, 1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity to explain gender hierarchy and gender inequality (Anderson, 2009; Bridges, 2013; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Cottingham, 2014, 2015; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993, 2007; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2012; Sumpter, 2015).

While hegemonic masculinity is often thought of as an 'ideal type' of masculinity, it is actually '... a way that men position themselves through discursive practices' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). The hegemonic standard is constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities and femininities. 'Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a

patriarchal social order works' (Connell, 1987, p. 183). This concept also explains that although most men have power over most women as an aggregate, most men do not have access to power, due to possessing a devalued race, class and/or sexual identity status (Connell, 1987, 1995; Johnson, 2005; Kimmel, 2012).

Hybrid masculinity symbolizes 'the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and-at times-femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities' (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246). Masculinity is always in flux, always changing with cultural shifts. As Demetriou (2001, p. 348) states, 'It is its constant hybridization, its constant appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures'.

For example, in his study on male cheerleaders, Anderson (2009) found that cheerleaders did not always overcompensate by distancing themselves from women cheerleaders in order to retain aspects of orthodox (i.e. hegemonic) masculinity. In fact, many of them rejected misogyny and homophobia. Research on men who work in the feminine field of nursing found that male nurses use a hybrid of both hegemonic and alternative strategies to negotiate their sense of masculinity (Cottingham, 2014, 2015; O'Connor, 2015). They do this by promoting masculine traits of rational and technical skill, career autonomy and the breadwinner role while simultaneously highlighting the desire to work in the feminine field of care work.

Based on the work of Chen (1999), Cottingham (2015, pp. 78, 79) found that men who work in nursing engage in compensatory strategies and 'emphasize other facets of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. hyper-heterosexuality, physical strength, or technical expertise) as proof that they are truly masculine'.

Similar to Cottingham's research on male nurses, we analyse three ways that men rebrand values of veganism and femininity to align with traditional masculine standards, creating a hybrid vision of masculinity. Specifically, we focus on how men refashion three aspects of veganism that have been associated with femininity to correspond with masculine ideals: compassion towards animals, dieting for health and involvement in animal protection organizations. In addition, we suggest they unintentionally reinforce gender inequality by emphasizing strength, control and personal empowerment as masculine, by regarding compassion to be an act of courage and rebellion in a society that socializes men to be stoic and uncaring and by asserting men's crucial role in bringing legitimacy to the vegan movement. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014) state, 'hybrid masculinities work in ways that not only reproduce contemporary systems of gendered, race, and sexual inequalities but obscure this process as it is happening to correspond with masculine ideals' (p. 247).

Methods

Using multiple outlets, including the social networking site Facebook, adult men who self-identified as vegan were recruited for interviews. The first author e-mailed the organizers of various vegan groups on Facebook and asked permission to recruit volunteers for a study on men and veganism. Facebook groups enable people who share common interests to create a virtual community of like-minded people. The author also contacted individuals who were followers of certain vegan Facebook groups with specific communities for vegan men, vegans of colour and vegan athletes in hopes to make the sample racially and ethnically diverse. Other participants were acquaintances of earlier interviewees or were found through the author's personal and social networks, making this research a convenient sample. The goal was not to produce a representative sample, but to locate willing participants in a convenient fashion.

We conducted 20 interviews. Some of the interviews were face-to-face, while others were conducted over the phone in an effort to reach a more geographically diverse group of participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 76 years old, with the median age being 39.5 years old. Fifteen men identified as white or Euro-American, 2 identified as black or African-American, 2 identified as South Asian or Indian American and 1 identified as 'other'. Nine were married, one was part of an unmarried couple, two were divorced, and eight have never been married. Five men had children and five men identified as part of the LGBT community including one who identified as a trans-male. All of the men had some education past high school: nine men were college graduates and eight men had graduate degrees. The participants

earned a wide range of incomes. Nine men earned between \$25,000 and \$49,000, two men earned between \$50,000 and 74,000 and seven men earned over \$100,000. Finally, nine men have been vegan for 1–4 years, five men have been vegan for 5–9 years and six men have been vegan for over 10 years.

The length of the interviews ranged from 20 to 60 min. We used a reference guide of questions to help focus the interviews, yet all the interviewees had the opportunity to discuss issues that we may not have addressed. Some questions were revised after reviewing the first few interviews. The main questions of relevance to this analysis focused on the experience and viewpoint on being vegan as a man.

Confidentiality and anonymity were assured via consent forms, and all names were changed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy before being systematically coded into categories during and after data collection using a standard system as utilized by Taylor and Bogdan (1984) (not in bibliography). Data and codes were then analysed using grounded theory and an inductive approach, thus the concepts and theories emerged from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Compassion makes me courageous: rebellion through veganism

Veganism is linked to women and femininity due to the stereotyped belief that women are inherently more nurturing and care more about animals (Adams, 1990; Gaarder, 2011; Herzog, 2007; Luke, 2007). Men, on the other hand, are expected to feel, or at least express, indifference and apathy towards animals, particularly animals raised for food (Luke, 2007, p. 15). In fact, nine of the participants specifically noted that being typecast as compassionate makes veganism socially acceptable for women. Tom explains:

People often look at [vegan women] and say 'oh, that's nice,' or, 'of course, she's so sweet or she's such a kind person, she's such a sensitive woman,' and 'of course, that makes sense' or 'oh, how sentimental.' Maybe they'll look down on it in some way, but yet again it's a form of their sexist idea about women being these very gentle, emotional creatures.

Tom continues:

I think they are naturally encouraged to embrace their own inherent empathy in ways that men are not. I think that women are always taught that they can be sensitive even if they are 'hysterical' so it is this double-edged sword. We expect women to be emotional and yet we often in our culture chastise them for this behavior or belittle them for this behavior. But it does encourage them to stay more emotionally open and attached to their own inherent sense of empathy and compassion and kindness.

Versed in gender politics, these men understood that the link between women, femininity and compassion is often used against women. Even though compassion, kindness and consideration towards animals are antithetical to patriarchal masculinity, many of the men embraced their compassion towards animals. When asked questions about their definition of masculinity the men expressed a range of attitudes about what it means to be a man, reinforcing the idea that vegan men construct their own hybrid masculinity. The responses both resisted and reinforced hegemonic masculinity, challenging a simplistic binary understanding of masculinity. Even though all of the men viewed themselves as men, three main themes were unveiled. First, they questioned traditional tenets of hegemonic masculinity. Second, they claim their attitudes towards masculinity are different from other men, specifically non-vegans. Third, although veganism did not shape their definition of masculinity, it strengthened their identity as 'good' men.

These men understood that gender was a social construction and that people learned gender through culture and socialization. However, they also described gender as *passé*, focusing on human traits rather than gender traits. As Liam states, 'What does it mean to be a man? I don't know, it's the same as what it means to be human'. William and Owen agree:

I don't have a hard and fast definition of what masculinity would be. I really think it speaks to a social construct that definitely developed for a reason but I don't think of it as something that necessarily needs to exist now. (William)

I feel that masculinity is whatever men do. You know, it's different from person to person and I think that the social construct of masculinity certainly has a cultural meaning, but I don't really think about masculinity myself in terms of my own identity. Not to say that I don't think of myself as masculine, I just don't think of masculinity when it comes to identifying myself. (Owen)

Logan questioned the value of traditional masculinity, which he defined as 'toxic masculinity'. He promotes a hybrid masculinity that blends the feminine with the masculine.

I think that being a man is largely a social construct and it's one that is pretty toxic in our patriarchal culture. So, it's something that has a lot of that baggage about violence and aggression and competitiveness and things like that. (Logan)

If traditional masculinity is toxic, what traits do they value in themselves and others? Logan expands his definition:

So, the qualities that I try to pursue of being a good person are shared by men and women, like being kind and open and sharing. I think most people see being a man as a set of virtues like strength and independence and things like that. I think that those virtues can be expressed by either gender. (Logan)

These quotes exemplify aspects of hybrid masculinity. On one hand they question the values of traditional masculine traits as well as the gender binary, which exalts qualities associated with masculinity over femininity. On the other hand, their attempt to place themselves outside this construct of gender ends up reinforcing gender privilege. Only those not structurally affected by gender inequality have the luxury to not think about themselves as men (Johnson, 2005; Kimmel, 2012; McIntosh, 1997). Although studies show that vegan men experience microaggressions (Potts & Parry, 2010; Twine, 2014) being vegan did not damage their sense of self. While most of the men state that their sense of masculinity was not defined by their veganism, they did claim that it strengthened their sense of self, and in effect, reinforced their masculine identity.

[Being vegan is] a bolster to masculinity ... Caring about other animals and about what you put in your body and the environment is not a feminine [trait]; I think it can be a masculine trait. (Alex)

To me, part of masculinity is being true to yourself. There's no reason that you can't be a strong male in that often stereotypical view and still be compassionate towards other people, be compassionate towards animals, [and] be conscious of our environment. (Josh)

I guess my idea of [a man] is someone who stands tall, someone that is strong in the face of fear, someone that protects [others.], someone that is a good person instead of a nice person. A nice person will be good to everyone but a good person will stand up for what is right ... I think it's about being strong for the people that you love and being the hero and not assuming this idea of society that everyone has. I don't believe that eating meat makes you a man, I think it's your values, not the food you eat or the position you have. (James)

James rejects the slogan that 'real men eat meat', believing instead that possessing strong values and sticking up for others and 'being a hero' for a cause is masculine. He incorporates a variation of the traditionally feminine trait of compassion into his view of masculinity, shaped by veganism. In these instances, compassion did not challenge their masculine identity; it reinforced it. Identifying as vegan and standing up for what they believe, despite the stigma, was a sign of strength, confidence and masculinity.

According to Joe, 'One thing that vegan men have in common is a certain indifference to peer pressure in terms of masculinity'. Brayden, Owen and Max expand on these ideas. Brandon became vegan because it was a form of rebellion.

Veganism is a form of rebellion ... Part of being a man is having confidence or just the personal fortitude to be who you are ... and being comfortable enough to chart your own path ... And it's okay if everyone around you is like hiding their emotions and doesn't cry, isn't the tougher person the one who actually breaks from that? If you're going along with the crowd you're not being tough. (Brayden)

Being vegan as a man is a manifestation of toughness ... If you can completely give up on all those luxuries and live without eating the foods that you like ... is its own sort of toughness ... it's their way of asserting their strength. And they need to do that more so than women because they need to justify their decision and maintain some resemblance of toughness or those qualities that are typically masculine. (Owen)

To be a man, for me, it's to be able to own your power and have your feelings and not be concerned about what other people think of me ... To be vulnerable, to be open with no apologies is to be a man. (Max)

Once again, one way these men reinstate hegemonic masculine status was using their vegan identity to highlight not having to conform to societal expectations of men.

At first glance, the compassion expressed by vegan men appears to be a statement of non-conformity to the rules of gender. Some of the vegan men place a higher value on feminine and/or human traits which are deemed 'good'. Others rebrand the feminine trait of compassion to match masculine ideals. In actuality, all of these men implicitly incorporate and reinforce certain hegemonic ideals of masculinity by emphasizing individualism and non-conformity, toughness and heroism. Nonetheless, this discourse begins to complicate the way we interpret gender behaviour.

Busting the 'protein' myth: strength through veganism

Since masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity, then 'masculinity is presented through what is consumed, whereas femininity is presented through what is not consumed' (Turner, Ferguson, Craig, Jeffries, & Beaton, 2013, p. 6). As such, eating large quantities of meat is often defined in contrast to socially constructed, feminized 'dieting' behaviour of eating salads, yogurt and other light fare. Since the stereotypes of femininity require women to be concerned with health and body image, women are encouraged to eat less in order to maintain a small frame (Adams, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Brumberg, 1997; Sobal, 2005; Veri & Liberti, 2013; Wolf, 1991). Six of the men in the study specifically stated that people associate veganism with femininity as women are framed as hyper-vigilant about diet, health and body image.

Most men expect women to eat light or have a certain type of diet like salad and just eat more of a vegan diet ... So I can see how a man can look at another man who is vegan with raised eyebrows [more] than a woman. (Bill)

A common trope of hegemonic masculinity is that men need to eat meat to satiate hunger and to be strong, virile and healthy. As Susan Bordo (1993) states: 'Men are supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively, and manliness is a frequent commercial code for amply portioned products ...' (108). Men's freedom and expectation to eat large quantities of food, particularly animal protein, is contrasted with an emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987, 1995) that requires women to restrain and control their hunger and desire. Thus, Gough's (2007) study on the representation of men, diet and health in newspapers found that men who express an interest in healthy eating must construct a narrative that maintains normative masculinity. So how do these vegan men reconcile their masculine identity when veganism is coded as feminine and associated with diet and health? They challenged the hegemonic idea that men need animal protein, to feel and to remain big and strong. They do this by emphasizing how veganism improved their physical fitness and highlighting the professional athletes that dominate their sport. In fact, two of the men claim that their vegan diet actually made their bodies stronger and gave them more athletic endurance.

Over the last 10 years, I've worked out a decent amount, so I've got a little bit of muscle mass at least, and that might make it more difficult for a guy to like call me feminine ... People might have views about veganism that they might question, but I don't ever get the vibe that people are like, say questioning my masculinity or something as it relates to veganism. (Matthew)

There's definitely that whole protein conception thing, like, if you're a man, you need more protein to build your manly muscle mass, and as a vegan, you can't get as much protein therefore you're going to have problems being a man, which is just a combination of like false ideas. I'm vegan and I have more muscle mass than I had before I went vegan, and I have a lot less fat on my body too. (Jackson)

The vegans in our study successfully challenge the notion that animal protein is required to obtain optimal health and physical fitness. Even though the men in the study were not professional athletes, eleven men cited the recent emergence of vegan athletes as a major source of decreasing stigma towards the vegan men (e.g. ultra runner Scott Jurek, ultra man competitor Rich Roll, mixed martial arts and Ultimate Fighting Champion fighter Mac Danzig). They felt that vegan athletes served as living proof that one could retain a traditional semblance of masculinity while opting out of consuming meat and dairy. In fact, James argued that the creation of new plant-based proteins and shakes by vegan athletes has been one of the most effective tools to bring veganism into the mainstream culture.

Now things like plant-based proteins and plant-based meat replacements for vegan bodybuilders can come out and vegan energy bars for men that like to go on long bike rides or the athletic bars geared toward men. It's a whole area of marketing and I think it helps normalize it as well because you see these meaty-looking men with huge arms eating vegan. It makes it more normal like maybe someone that eats meat in the same situation is like, wait a minute this guy looks like a man by my standards so I don't have to eat meat to look like this guy. (James)

These vegan men highlighted famous vegan athletes in order to challenge the image of the weak and emasculated vegan and validate the vegan movement.

[There has been] some professional football players, of late ... who have promoted veganism. They're helping to change the public perception of veganism from your granola-eating hippie to – I guess they're showing how diverse a vegan can be. That you can be an artist, a hippie, a professional fighter, but I think they're showing that there's a lot of diversity in the movement and I think they are also showing that you can be tough and just as strong as anyone and still be vegan ... So it's good to have these ripped, traditional men and I think it's harder for somebody to not take it seriously, to delegitimize veganism when you've got people who are obviously ripped and promoting veganism. (Matthew)

Vegan athletes do more than just legitimize veganism – the achievements of famous athletes validate and reinstate hegemonic masculinity for other vegan men. Athletes make veganism trendy and encourage others to adopt veganism in order to achieve peak athletic accomplishments. The vegan men in my study are neither professional athletes nor are they actively hitting the weight bench. However, being in good physical shape and having muscles gives these men a 'pass' from having to deal with the stigmas often associated with veganism and masculinity. More specifically, they align themselves with hegemonic masculinity by cashing in on the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1987, 1995) by continuing to value masculine traits of strength, and athleticism.

Men legitimize veganism

As stated earlier, compassion towards animals is ridiculed precisely because it is a stereotypical feminine trait. It is not surprising then that veganism and animal rights activism is associated with women and femininity. Research on animal rights activism found that although women were the backbone of animal rights organizations, making up 75% of the activists and 70% of the donors (DeMello, 2012), they are not taken seriously because of their emotions. Men, however, are deemed necessary to bring legitimacy and credibility to the movement (Einwohner, 1999; Gaarder, 2011; Groves, 1997; Kruse, 1999; Luke, 2007). In the process of courting men to the movement, leaders alienate and silence women activists (Luke, 2007; Wrenn, 2016). Groves (1997) quotes Charlotte, an activist who states, 'I guess it's because whenever anything is given credibility, unfortunately it is usually led by a man or a man is in the starring role' (p. 145).

This was underscored when the vegan men in the study discussed the influence men have had in making veganism popular. While most were not familiar with the politics of activism, the participants recognized that women are often not treated seriously in a patriarchal culture, while white, middle-class, heterosexual men are treated with more importance and significance.

I hate to say it but I think society as a whole takes what men say more seriously than women, for whatever reason. Not that I ever thought this way myself, but if you hear knowledge from a man, if you are a guy, you may be more open minded to receiving how animals are treated and how it effects the earth, basically. (Daniel)

I think people see it as something that's legitimate, real, and valid. When you see a man that's vegan it's like, 'Oh wow, okay.' It's a thing, it's a thing; it really is. It's not just a woman's diet or something. Yeah, I think men broaden the conversation and make it more real. Not that women don't make things real, but I think when you see men in a vegan restaurant, you know, you joke about it. (Max)

While they attempt to disassociate themselves from sexist attitudes towards women leaders and activists, they do believe the culture-at-large respects the voices of men. They believe men will more likely become vegan once they see that masculine men are thriving as vegans.

I think that's a part of it for sure. I think there's also that as more men do it and come out as vegan, more men will start to see it as not being abnormal and not being strange. Because men, for all intents and purposes, want to be part of a group, and they don't want to be seen as other. (Brayden)

What men bring to this movement is that you can still be a man and be concerned about the well-being of say, animals. I think that's probably the main thing that they bring to the movement. (Matthew)

These quotes indicate a form of hybrid masculinity. They criticize the fact that women hold a lower position in the gender hierarchy of the vegan and animal rights movement. However, men's visibility in the movement gives veganism more credibility. Non-vegan men are more likely to be encouraged to accept or consider becoming vegan when they see other men demonstrating masculinity within the context of veganism. Whether desired or not, they still benefit from masculine privilege, when men legitimize veganism.

Discussion

Vegan men exemplify the importance of expanding our understanding of masculinities. The discourse on veganism, gender identity and gender hierarchy highlight the complexity involved. We argue that vegan men embody hybrid masculinity by rebranding veganism from its feminine associations as something that is fundamentally masculine. On one hand, vegan men foster a gentler version of masculinity: challenging and rejecting stereotypical thinking of masculinity and femininity. To promote veganism as manly they incorporate and redefine values associated with femininity, in order to align with many of the prevailing notions of masculinity.

The vegan men in our study also reject many of the values of traditional masculinity and favour principles associated with femininity. Yet at the same time, the same men assert that veganism is the ultimate expression of masculinity because it requires courage, self-control and resolve to feel and express compassion and empathy for animals.

Those we interviewed all challenged the idea that one needs to eat meat to be strong and healthy. They bust the protein myth by insisting that a vegan diet made them strong, gave them more energy and maximized their stamina. However, by focusing on strength, power and athleticism, they remain complicit to the hegemonic notion of men, masculinity and muscles.

Finally, the men reject sexist attitudes that devalue women's commitment to activism and animal rights. Simultaneously, they reinforce gender stereotypes and gender hierarchy by emphasizing the important role that men have in bringing legitimacy to the vegan movement.

Vegan men exemplify hybrid masculinity by expanding and altering the traditional definition of masculinity, yet they do not fundamentally change it. Ultimately, our findings reinforce Bridges' and Pascoe's (2014) theory that hybrid masculinities fail to erase structural changes in gender identity and gender hierarchy. Although vegan men end up benefiting from masculine privilege and the patriarchal dividend, we suggest this is not done in a manipulative or sinister way. Unlike hegemonic masculinity, they emphasize what men and aspects of patriarchal masculinity can bring to the vegan movement without disparaging women and femininity. Our goal is not to make any grand claims on masculinity. This project emphasizes that masculinities change over time, across culture and have various meanings among subgroups of populations. It also highlights the limitations of our understanding gender as a binary that distinguishing women from men, and hegemonic masculinity from subordinated and/or marginalized masculinities.

This study is only an introduction to the topic of veganism and masculinity and there are limitations of our data and analysis. A larger and more diverse sample may have led to different perspectives and the ability to make an analysis on masculinity that centred on racial/ethnic identity, social class and sexual orientation.³ Thus, we encourage future research to further explore the experience of vegan men of colour and men outside the north-eastern United States.

In general, we call for more comprehensive studies on veganism in social science research. Vegans and vegan men, in particular, remain a minority as the cultural norms of meat consumption and speciesism remain as the dominant framework. Veganism can be, and is being, advertised as a vehicle to a healthier lifestyle (Campbell & Campbell, 2006; Norris & Messina, 2011; Robbins, 2012). It is also a philosophy that often emphasizes a more kind-hearted and peaceful world.

Notes

1. The definition of veganism, as coined by Dr. Watson in 1941, is an ethical lifestyle and philosophy that opposes the exploitation of all animals. Ethical vegans refuse to purchase or consume any products that rely on animals for its production, based on the moral belief that non-human animals have inherent value, and that cruelty towards non-human animals does not outweigh the potential benefits to human animals. This differentiates from vegans who are motivated to adopt a vegan diet as to maximize health. For more information, see Greenebaum (2012).
2. See Harper (2010, 2012a, 2012b) for a discussion on veganism as a form of decolonization of the body. Harper is a leading scholar on the intersection of race, class, gender and veganism.
3. Ibid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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