

Animals are Friends, Not Food: The Turning Point to Go Vegan

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Abstract

The proportion of individuals desiring to follow a vegan diet has increased in recent years. There was an increased interest in veganism among Thai people, and in 2018, about 7 millions of Thai people identified themselves as vegans. A group of Thai vegans joined the online social media that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, opinions and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. It is true that the life situations that influence individual diet and lifestyle behaviors can be varied. Then, what is the turning point for adopting and maintaining a vegan lifestyle? What are the perceived consequences of becoming a vegan? What are the ways to motivate others to become a vegan and what are the received responses? In answer to these questions, the online qualitative research with “Vegan of Thailand” Facebook fanpage members was performed and this study paper was written.

Keywords: Vegan, Plant Based Diet, Online Social Media, Facebook, Thailand

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Introduction

In the conventional world it is traditional advised to eat some types of animals and their products, such as eggs and milk. This is a belief system that enables people to eat certain animals, such as cows, pigs and chickens, while caring for domestic pets, like dogs and cats, as “carnism” (Cook, 2015). While the carnist ideology is largely ingrained due to traditional consumption of animals, the media and institutional system also serve to reinforce its dominance. Those who choose to retreat from the carnist norm, and refrain from eating animal products, thereby challenge tradition and institutional wisdom (Bosworth, 2012). Vegans, those who seek to exclude all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food provide a challenge to the carnist framework, largely manifest through their dietary choices.

Nevertheless, the proportion of individuals desiring to become a vegan has increased in recent years. There has been an increased interest in veganism all over the world, including among Thai people. There were 1.1 million Thai vegans in 2009, and the recent data shown in 2018 that there have been about 7 millions of Thai people identified themselves as vegans. Although, the number of Thai vegans nationwide has yet to be established, the media indicate that this number is positively on the rise, especially in the Vegetarian Festival (ThaiPost, 2018).

The Vegetarian Festival (The Nine Emperor Gods Festival) is a nine-day Taoist celebration beginning on the eve of 9th lunar month of the Chinese calendar, which is observed primarily in South-east Asian countries like Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, Southern Vietnam, Indonesia and also Thailand. The festival is celebrated all over Thailand, during which time Thai people keep a strict “vegan” diet with the aim to bring good luck to individual as well as to the community. Many people across Thailand and especially those of Chinese ancestry stick strictly to “vegan” food for the purposes of spiritual cleansing and merit-making (Chaopreecha, 2019). Therefore, the reason for eating vegan food during this 9 day festival stems from the religious belief among Thai people. During this period it is normal to see many yellow flags all around Thailand and that means the vendors are selling “vegan” food. The foods are available in most areas and even 7 eleven have special selection for the festival.

Research indicates that vegans tend to cite moral and ethical concerns regarding animal welfare as the key motivation for pursuing veganism (Charles, 2014; Doyle, 2016; Griffin, 2015; Mann, 2019). Additionally, research on vegan support the environmental benefits associated with vegetarianism and veganism, based on the premise that animal farming contributes to emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, which contribute to human-induced climate change, as well as land degradation, deforestation and water usage (Beverland, 2014). The study of Connon (2018) showed positive attitude change after watching the documentary “Cowspiracy” for attitudes toward vegans and the environment. There were statistically significant results between attitudes toward veganism, the environment and animal welfare based on political affiliation.

Another significant reason for the interest in a vegan diet is its reported health benefits. There have been several studies documenting the nutritional and health status of vegans. Health vegans adopt a vegan diet for similar reasons that those who choose a vegetarian diet based on health concerns do: to lose weight (Delucca, 2014),

combat cancer, diabetes, heart disease or high cholesterol. A prominent example of a health vegan is ex-president Bill Clinton who claims to be following a vegan diet after having quadruple bypass heart surgery and an angioplasty procedure (Martin, 2011). Famous documentary films, such as *Forks over Knives* also promote the health benefits of following a plant-based diet as opposed to one that incorporates meat, dairy, and eggs (Christopher, 2013). Recently, *The Game Changers*, James Cameron, Lewis Hamilton and Arnold Schwarzenegger's vegan Netflix documentary (*The Game Changers*, 2019) promotes “holistic veganism” that, while encompassing personal health benefits, also promotes animal rights advocacy and environmental consciousness.

To be concerned, there is no official research regarding Thai vegans and their life in multi-faceted understanding of this World hottest food trend. The current study thus, aims to explore the following questions: What is the turning point for adopting and maintaining a vegan lifestyle? What are the perceived consequences of becoming a vegan? What are the ways to motivate others to become a vegan and what are the received responses?

Methodology

A focus question of this research was “What is the turning point to go vegan?” The answer itself is a challenge, given individual’s varied life experiences and beliefs, along with its knowledge exposure practices. Given this individuality, this study employed a qualitative approach, where the main mode of data gathering was twenty-nine individual online interviews. The questions were designed to allow participants to share their unique life experiences and reflect on how their dieting practices are turned to go vegan.

“Vegan of Thailand” Facebook Fanpage was selected as a media platform to access Thai vegan participants. It is one of Thailand’s largest online vegan communities with over 10,000 members joined the group. The participants comprised of 21 female and 8 males Thai residents ages ranged from 21 to over 60 years. Twenty-four participants identified themselves as vegans who abstain from meat, eggs or dairy and five participants were called themselves vegetarians who abstain from meat while still consume eggs or dairy or both on a regular basis. The length participants had been adopted and maintained their eating practices spanned 1 to more than 10 years. Sixty-two percent reported they were primarily vegan for moral reasons, 35% for health reasons and 3% for religious reasons. Every participant had attended at least some high school and college; 55% had earned their bachelor's degree, 31% had an advanced degree, and 14% were in high school.

It is said that researcher values and predispositions are to some extent inseparable from the research process, and therefore that potential researcher bias must be managed by being self-aware, looking for factual data, and being open to different interpretations of the data. As the researcher is a vegan and a member of “Vegan of Thailand” Facebook fanpage, I attempted to take a role as an “outsider” who freely opens to absorb a multi-faceted understanding of the research topic. This helped yield more elaborate discussions and greater insight into the data from the participant’s own unique story.

What is the turning point for adopting and maintaining a vegan lifestyle?

Animal Slaughter VDO Clip that Completely Change the Way I Eat

In recent years, video clips and documentaries on food and ethical eating have become more popular, in part due to streaming services like YouTube or Netflix where food documentaries that do not enter movie theaters found a home. Most of the participants in this study (18 from 29) had accessed to facts and pictures surrounding animal slaughter and food ethics. After watching animal slaughter video clips, they feel compassionate.

I feel pity to the slaughtered animals. They are like us to afraid of death, they frantically struggled when killed (Male, more than 10 years vegan).

Typical vegan video clips or documentaries either share hard-to-watch graphic details about animal slaughter or focus on making a strong argument as to why veganism should be considered a better lifestyle or both. Many participants said after their eyes were opened to the inherent cruelty in animal-use industries, they immediately cared about what they eat, where their food comes from, and how it was processed. This is the turning point for them to go vegan by completely changing the way they eat.

You Are What You Eat: Vegan Food for the Better Health

Many participants (11 from 29) also weigh in on the health benefits of veganism. The power of the media as a means to educate about food choices and the realities of consuming animal products illustrates how scientific information on vegan food can have a strong impact on its audience.

I was sick due to the shock of galactose cysts in my uterus. I found the information from the media, informing about the benefits of eating vegan to cure the disease and it's work. So, I'm healthy now and continuing to not eating meat, eggs or milks (Female, more than 10 years vegan).

Vegan documentaries such as *What the Health* or *Forks over Knives* are a food documentary that the participants in this research study mentioned. These vegan documentaries reach out to individuals who might be interested in veganism but do not quite know yet what a vegan lifestyle looks like. The audience of the film focuses on people who find themselves in the initial stage of challenging their food narrative and seek a comprehensive introduction to veganism. By listening to vegans tell their stories; the viewer of the documentary can begin to understand how most people came from a place where they find themselves now and how veganism is a lifestyle that positively affects their health.

What are the perceived consequences of becoming a vegan?

I am a New Me in Social, Physical and Spiritual Being

The participants spoke in terms of comparisons between their past non-vegan and current vegan lifestyle, and in terms of a personal consequence with a past and a present. This turning point and engagement involves a process of belonging with the online vegan community as different from mainstream society. In choosing to join a vegan Facebook group, the participants gained solidarity with a new in-group, grew through learning about food, however some of them also experienced disconnection from non-vegan society. In particular, some women experienced some degree of disconnection with non-vegan relatives and friends based on annoyance of non-vegans toward the reasons behind their transition to veganism.

For most participants, veganism is a lifestyle that has positively changed how they fit. It appeared that they have gained a sense of control over their body shape, health and eating practices. The participants, especially women explained that this has helped them improve the way they take care of themselves and therefore cured the diseases they suffered in the past.

The participants also revealed that by being exposed to veganism, they were able to act on their compassions and make profound connections between animal lives and the cruelty behind them. Being a vegan helped develop a passionate emotional connection to animals and a disgust for animal cruelty. It was clear for most of the participants that this emotional connection had become part of their new self.

What are the ways to motivate others to become a vegan and what are the received responses?

I Said Share Not Scare

The participants see value in sharing knowledge that focus on the holistic benefits of following a vegan diet. They reported that they motivate non-vegans with a range of content through personal social media channels, ranging from videos of animal treatment at factory farms to pictures of beautiful vegan food. While vegans see video clips and documentaries that expose the animal slaughter in the modern food production system as valuable educational materials, it is not always the case that this is the type of cruelty information disseminated to non-vegans. Participants reported that they have shared the clips to their family and friends via online social media. However, the received responses were not always a positive practice. A small amount of non-vegan associates, specifically their family and make an interest to the information and attempted to reduce their consumption of meat, while their friends on Facebook either ignored or un-followed their page.

Conclusion

While there is a distinction between those who adopt veganism due to moral concerns, and those who eat a plant-based diet for health reasons, it should be borne in mind that it is possible that individuals' reasons for turning to veganism may change

over time. One might initially take up veganism, based on ethical reasons, and later become more aware of the health benefits underpinnings of their ethical vegan.

Vegans see value in promoting the vegan lifestyle. However, in sharing beautiful vegan food, as well as information, vegans do not always aim to foment a vegan conversion among recipients. They have an understanding of individual choice. They acknowledge that they are ready to share with the people who are ready to receive. They do not want to cause suffering for anyone who has to endure listening to what they want to say, even though they can see how great it is. Yet, still wish to trigger a person to question their food habits and to challenge the current food ideology.

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