

'It's the Outline of a Pig and then it has the Words Underneath, "Vegan for Life"": Vegans and their Tattoos

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationships between vegans living in Australia and their tattoos. While tattooing has become an increasingly popular part of mainstream consumer culture, vegans often identify their tattoos in terms of major life events (of which catalysts to become vegan and vegan transition are but one), marks of remembrance or aides-mémoire, and tools to signal to other vegans and begin conversations with non-vegans. Defying simple classification, many of the tattoos sported by vegans are overlaid with multiple meanings. While some aspects of tattoo culture are found within this subset of tattooed people, practice behaviours such as ingredient checking shape tattoo acquisition practices, while the notion of veganism as an 'final state' has implications for the way tattoos are commonly seen as marking the ongoing flow of life events. Significantly, a high proportion of vegans' tattoos express vegan themes implicitly or explicitly, with a significant minority seeing them as part of practices of activism and/or proselytisation. I conclude that this practice is non-trivial and represents an important political practice for many, but certainly not all, of my research participants.

Keywords: veganism, food, media, ethnography, tattooing, activism, consumerism

Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship between vegans and their tattoos. It grew out of an observation made in a different project: vegan activists appeared to be quite disproportionately tattooed, and many of these contained explicitly vegan themes (Chen). Following an unsuccessful search for literature, the gap in scholarship prompted this inquiry.¹

At one level, this may appear inconsequential. It is widely observed that, in countries like Australia, tattooing has moved from a fringe practice with negative associations (criminality, class prejudice, gendered readings (Kuwahara 5)) to a mainstream choice, particularly among people entering adulthood after the 1990s. One in five Australians has at least one tattoo (McCrinkle Research). Further, observers of trends in both veganism and tattooing have identified them in terms of consumerist agency: a growing political consumerism in veganism (Jallinoja et al.) and, for tattooing, a form of emerging mainstream consumption (O’Hanlon 3) with a corresponding shift from deviant ‘folk art’ to an expanded commercial practice (Barron iii). This reflects Magnus Boström et al.’s observation that political consumption – ‘market-oriented engagements emerging from societal concerns’ (3) – is a multileveled phenomenon, but one connected to moving consumption practices from the private to the public realm, and increasingly mainstreamed. The research provides insight at the intersection of these points of inquiry, but also raises wider questions about the social meaning and significance of vegan tattoos to their wearers.

Following a discussion of research method, this paper introduces the research participants who shared their life narratives. The paper then talks about what a ‘vegan tattoo’ is, and examines the acquisition, wearing and social function of vegans’ tattoos. Going beyond simply talking about what vegans’ tattoos ‘mean’ (a common clichéd interaction), the paper places these tattoos in their biographical context. While members of a sub-community, the research participants are far from homogenous, but within the diversity of experiences, the analysis presents connections around the role that tattoos play in marking life events (of which veganism is often an important one); dietary maintenance; activism and the promotion of veganism; and issues associated with time – permanence of the tattoo, but also veganism as a way of life.

Method²

The paper was created with the assistance of 37 Australian residents who participated in ethnographic interviews. The focus of these was to capture the narratives of current and former vegans who had, or desired to have, ‘vegan tattoos’. Ethnographic studies explore people’s lived experience (Crang and Cook). The way the interview is conducted and what it covers are quite variable, but often undertaken in a natural setting, producing thick description.

As such, the research is ontologically-based in the practice of self-description of behaviours, motivations and feelings by research participants, with the researcher focused on asking questions, interpretation, and synthesising 37 very different narratives to shed light on the topic in question. This follows Kyle Fruh and Emily Thomas’s conceptualisation of ‘narrative identity’ as a process where we craft our identities through understanding our histories as stories, with elements and events marked out as special or meaningful in the retelling (90). Tattoos can become an explicit part of this narrativization ‘in ink’.

Participants were located via distribution of flyers at vegan businesses, and at stalls set up at vegan markets in Sydney and Brisbane. Approximately half were conducted in situ at markets, with the remainder by telephone with people in regional Victoria and New South Wales, as well as the Gold Coast, Wollongong, Newcastle and Melbourne. The conversations varied considerably in length, averaging about half an hour. The interviews were transcribed prior to analysis. Analysis identified common and divergent themes. The highly personal nature of some of the narratives collected led to the researcher’s decision to employ pseudonyms for all participants, with names selected from an online list of common baby names.³

The Participants

Reflecting the gendered nature of veganism (Jallinoja et al. 163), 32 (86%) of the participants identified as women, the remaining five men. The group represented a spectrum of mainstream gender conformity, with three participants self-identifying as queer. Participants were aged from 18 to their early 70s.

Each interviewee had a different path to becoming a vegan. Some reported this as a long process of dietary and/or ethical change, others as rapid (many reporting ‘instantaneous’)

conversion. Long-term vegans tended to report extended periods of vegetarianism followed by transition. For some, this transition to veganism refreshed their commitment to living with regard to animal well-being (for example, Hally). More recent vegans tended to transition rapidly through periodic meat abstinence to vegetarianism and then veganism, with only a small subset moving straight to veganism. One participant, Frieda, was a former vegan living as an omnivore.

These biographical narratives reflect animal welfare as the primary motivator for veganism among most participants. A minority did come to veganism through concerns about personal health (one, Dalton) and the environmental impact of animal agriculture (three: Evonne, Fae, and Tara), but the majority focused on concern (often expressed as ‘love’) for animals. For many this was embroidered with personal and planetary health as a second-order concern or ‘bonus’ benefit. Some saw welfare, health and the environment as part of a holistic vegan political solution (such as Cal).

Participants varied in the length of time they had identified as vegan: the longest 26 years, and the shortest four months. While the majority identified their veganism as a significant part of their identity, not all felt this way, with some seeing this as a secondary aspect (for example, to that of a queer person in the lives of Caitlin and Hally). A summary of participants is provided in the table below.

Table: Research Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Approximate years as a vegan	Has pre-vegan tattoos?	Approximate number of tattoos
Abbey	Female	2	Yes	3
Aaron	Male	1	No	1
Bambi	Female	6	Yes	3
Caitlin	Female	3	No	2
Daisy	Female	0.33	Yes	9
Earlene	Female	0.66	Yes	2
Fae	Female	2	No	1
Gabriella	Female	15	Yes	3
Hally	Female	10	Yes	16
Ida	Female	3	No	3
Jacki	Female	4	No	5
Baldwin	Male	23	No	2
Kallie	Female	2	No	2
Cal	Male	15	Yes	3
Lacey	Female	2	No	2
Mabel	Female	2	Yes	3
Nadia	Female	3.5	No	2
Octavia	Female	2	Yes	2
Paige	Female	2.5	No	1
Quinn	Female	3	No	1
Stephanie	Female	9	Yes	3

Pseudonym	Gender	Approximate years as a vegan	Has pre-vegan tattoos?	Approximate number of tattoos
Tara	Female	1	Yes	2
Ursula	Female	12	Yes	5
Val	Female	10	Yes	1
Wanda	Female	26	Yes	3
Xela	Female	5	Yes	4
Caleb	Male	5	Yes	3
Yolanda	Female	7	No	6
Zandra	Female	10	No	10
Avis	Female	2	Yes	7
Brooke	Female	5	No	1
Cynthia	Female	3	Yes	2
Dulcie	Female	3	Yes	5
Evonne	Female	2	No	1
Frieda	Female	1	Yes	8
Dalton	Male	2	No	2
Gwendoline	Female	2	Yes	3

Participants' Tattoos

The vegans and former vegan interviewed averaged just over three tattoos each; however, this is an approximation, as their tattoos ranged from very small, single-colour images, to large, multicolour tattoos acquired over many sittings (and sometimes with different contributors). For some, it was difficult to determine the number of tattoos they had, as some were part of

ongoing projects and were not clearly delineable. Some tattoos were complete and finalised, others were subject to revision and modification for a range of reasons (aesthetics, changing life circumstances). A minority (seven, 18%) had just one tattoo. Some were extensively tattooed.

Participants determined their own criteria for inclusion in the study (there was no decision rule applied to determine if the participants met a set definition of ‘vegan’, nor what a ‘vegan tattoo’ was). Overall, participants identified three characteristics that made their tattoo vegan. First, near universally, was the use of vegan ingredients within the tattoo itself (vegan ink) and in the post-tattooing care regime (during the healing process). Secondly, a subset (approximately half in each case) of participants identified explicit or implicit vegan content in their tattoo(s) as significant in their participation in the study, and/or identified the tattooist or context as important in designating the tattoo as vegan. As illustrated in the figure, these overlapped in participants’ experiences.

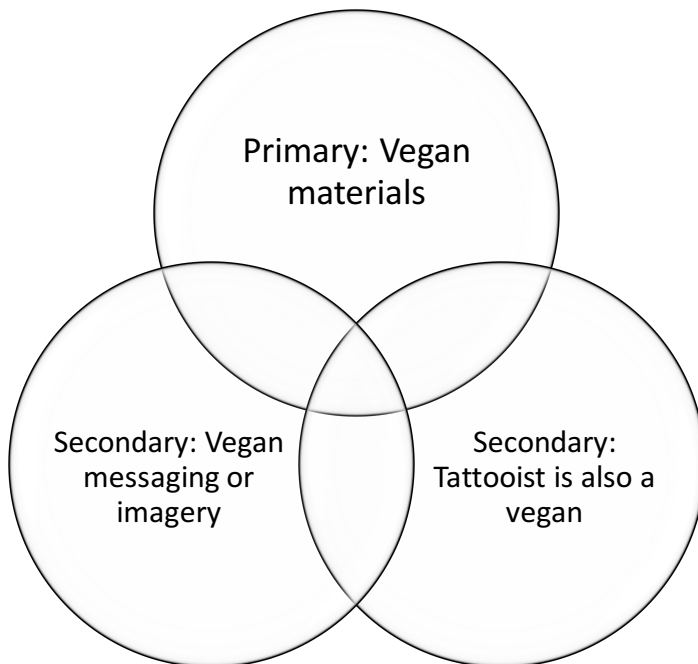


Figure: What makes a ‘vegan tattoo’

Part 1: Acquisition

Context

Getting tattooed reflects particular decision-making around motivation and realisation. Like the choice to live as a vegan, tattooing is a project of the self. As Caitlin observed:

... my body is marked in those ways I haven't chosen: scars, stretchmarks, it is marked by the way people in public look at me and men in public touch me and things like that. But a tattoo is a way that I choose to mark my body. That feels really good.

Looking at tattooed people broadly, Lee Barron has identified an array of motivations, including exhibitionism, permanence, sensation seeking, undertaking an ordeal, group affiliation, social subversion, aestheticization of the body, self-determination, marking life stages, self-construction, the 'violation of God's handiwork', killing time, masochism, defiance of the (Freudian) father, marking commitment, and self-actualisation (20) – many of which are present in the participants' narratives. These motivations often influenced the context in which their tattoos were acquired.

Almost all participants acquired their tattoos through a commercial transaction. This can be subdivided into those who acquired their tattoos in the comparatively anonymous context of the 'tattoo parlour' (a mix of planned and walk-in acquisitions), and those participants most likely to identify their tattooist as an 'artist' and their tattoo therefore as art. The latter were more likely to have this done in a private professional context and report their tattoo as more likely to represent a 'collaboration', with some having extended interactions over design. Only one participant had a 'stick and poke' or 'home' tattoo performed by a personal acquaintance.

About half identified their tattooist as a vegan, most noting this was important in the process of acquiring their tattoos. However, this choice was for a variety of reasons, such as assurance that the ingredients would be vegan (trust), keeping money in the 'vegan community' and part of a social preference practice, or tattoos acquired at vegan events, such as fund-raisers commonly associated with animal sanctuaries. In some cases, this choice of tattooist and context served as a process of boundary marking and authenticity, where the insider status of the person who gives the tattoo is significant in the tattoo's narrative of acquisition.

This was the case for those participants for whom a vegan tattooist was important, but also for two of the sample who saw tattooing as signalling membership in the Australian queer community (Caitlin and Hally), where a queer tattooist might be more important than a vegan one.⁴ This choice of giver and place of receiving was also shaped by the individual's personal concerns about who has access to their body. For marginalised groups, this is particularly salient given their social vulnerability to observation, touch, and, *in extremis*, violence. Only the women in the study reported they explicitly received their tattoo together with others being tattooed (friends or family members).

Materials

The near universality of vegan materials in the tattoo is unsurprising given the community of interest as 'label checkers'. However, this question of vegan-suitable tattooing materials does highlight a different relationship to the elaborated body than in other studies of tattooed people. While Victoria Pitts-Taylor places tattooing in opposition to body essentialism – seeing the non-tattooed body as more 'natural' (26) – non-vegan inks were avoided by participants due to their contaminated nature. This naturalism carries over into tattoo content (see below). In citing concerns about the prevalence of non-vegan inks in tattooing, participants identified a range of ingredients in these products that make them unsuitable to use,⁵ whereas the actual ingredients of vegan inks was never defined by participants. Thus, even in the avoidance of animal-derived tattoo products, animals remain a referent.

The group further diverged from mainstream accounts of the perception of tattoos. While Frances Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe see tattoos as something imposed from outside (literally intruding into the body) (147), participants often identified their way of being as justifying, permitting, or necessitating the tattoos they acquired after becoming vegan. This is particularly true of the 40 percent (16) of participants who only acquired their first tattoos after becoming vegan. Of all the participants, however, a majority had acquired one or more tattoos before they had become vegans (21, 57%), an unknown number of which were likely to include non-vegan materials. This wearing of these is discussed in below.

Iconography

The subject matter of the tattoos that interviewees described as vegan was diverse, but certainly much less so than in the wider tattooed community. Iconography included explicitly vegan textual statements and symbols, pictures of companion, farmed and wild animals (including oft-neglected animals like insects and sea-life), animal prints, symbols associated with Eastern spiritualism and yoga (particularly ‘ahimsa’ (text), om and yin-yang symbols), natural scenes, trees, flowers and leaves, and an array of other images. Overall, explicitly vegan themes dominate textual tattoos, while naturalistic images and designs dominate non-textual ones.

It is often not possible to separate out the choice *to* get a tattoo with the choice *of* tattoo content. In many cases the proximate driver for the tattoo choice was associated with meaningful life events. These included educational or career success, major relocations and periods of travel, birth or maturation of children, and memorialisation.

Memorialisation took literal forms: tattoos celebrating the lives of loved ones, particularly (grand)parents (four participants: Avis, Ida, Mabel, and Ursula), companion animals (five participants: Cynthia, Bambi, Hally, Lacey, and Xela), as well the representation of invisibilized animals – particularly ‘production’ animals (seven participants: Avis, Frieda, Hally, Nadia, Val, Yolanda, and Zandra). This marking of the unvalued came through in several interviews, as both personal and more ‘abstract’ references. Following Breeanna Spain et al.’s discussion of ‘disenfranchised grief’ – recognising a loss that is not normally socially acknowledged – Hally’s tattoo of her cat reflected ‘wanting to memorialise him on my body, as animals usually are not memorialised, they’re seen as nothing’, while Yolanda recalled a significant trauma of seeing animals normally hidden:

I got stuck behind a pig [truck in traffic] and it was warm, and you could hear the pigs screaming. It was horrendous. And I was just really, really upset about it... So, I got a pig, just an outline of a pig on the back on my neck just as a memory to those pigs that were screaming in that truck.

This aligns with Shoshana Rosenberg and Megan Sharp’s observation about the role of tattooing in the queer-punk community as ‘alternative archives that thrive as outliers to traditional forms of punk participation’ (160).⁶ Tattooing, therefore, permits a ‘permanent’ record of those society deems not worth the effort of noting their passage.

The use of tattoos as forms of memory was evident in tattoos as personal reminders and/or affirmations, which half (18) of the interviewees cited as important in the motivation for and in their ongoing relationship with their tattoos (Abbey, Avis, Bambi, Brooke, Caitlin, Cal, Cynthia, Dulcie, Earlene, Frieda, Kallie, Mabel, Paige, Quinn, Val, Xela, Yolanda, and Zandra). These often provided motivation for life practices, either externally focused like Val ('the animal liberation one, I decided that I wanted something on my hands, I guess, as a reminder and a memory and a reason to keep fighting') or recognising internal struggles. Xela, in the latter case, reflected that 'I have grown up with issues of self-harm, and the more tattoos that I got that reminded me of the beautiful things in my life that made me happy, the less I was inclined to do so, because I wouldn't want to cause harm to these beautiful pieces of art that were on my body'.

Veganism also serves as an important life transition motivating tattooing. Abbey, for example, describes her quite extensive tattoo as an extended metaphor about vegan life transition:

... it is like my own version of the tree of life. So it's a tree that represents the solidness of its root, of where I come from, where I'm standing, the resilience of who I am, and it has a lot of colour at the top, and a lot of movement at the top, and that represents the changes in life, that represents how I can move, and I can be free, I can be colourful, but ... I have a strong foundation even though the top is really moving, it's colourful, and it's dynamic and everything, I have a good foundation as a person, and it has some leaves that are also in the air kind of flying out, and that means that we shed and we change, ... we change in life, and it's ok as well, but ... everything is kind of in there, but that's kinda what it represents for me, and being vegan ink and by a vegan person. It was really important for me because this is a big change for me, it's a change that I want.

This aligns with the biographical narratives of many of the participants who had previously had long periods of time as vegetarians, in that tattooed affirmations often served to 'refresh' or renew the participant's commitment to veganism.

Barron observes that 'tattoos play a vital role in the construction and maintenance of exact social boundaries' (20), and certainly about one-quarter (10) had the word 'vegan' or a vegan symbol as a tattoo (two planned). Vegan symbols were commonly adapted from the UK-

based Vegan Society logo or the approved product vegan trademark.⁷ This reiteration of a product designation that can be seen as a marker of political consumerism onto the body of the consumer is interesting, but reflects the significance of the Vegan Society (through the founder Donald Watson) as the originator of the word vegan, and the organisation's long-running role in the certification of vegan products.

While the decision about where to position the tattoo on the body is also shaped by the individual's personal concerns about who has access to their body, many participants with more than one tattoo identified tattoos that were designated as 'for' public consumption and those that are to remain private. Ursula, for example, clearly identifies her public identity with the word 'vegan' tattooed on her arm, but maintains a private memorial of her father's death (a broken heart on her thigh). The choice of explicit publicity was reflected in the 14 (37%) of the interviewees who saw their tattoos as tools specifically chosen for proselytisation (Baldwin, Daisy, Caleb, Cynthia, Dalton, Gabriella, Hally, Jacki, Nadia, Octavia, Ursula, Val, Wanda, and Yolanda). The interactions these generated are discussed in Part 2.

It would be wrong to imply that all the participants placed significant meaning into each of their tattoos, with considerable efforts taken to acquire them. Several participants talk about spontaneous tattooing decisions, with the personal importance of their vegan identity then playing a role in shaping what the tattoo would be. Daisy, for example, sums this up, noting that some are 'fun memories and from things that I have done, like I have a palm tree here just because I feel whenever you are anywhere where there's palm trees, it's a good time'.

This attitude did appear to vary over participants' life course, however, with older participants who had tattoos when young reporting the earliest as more often acquired 'for fun' (such as on holiday, marking maturation where the act of getting the tattoo was more important than its content, or with a friend or relative as a recreational activity), while later ones more likely to have more significant meaning, or be the result of careful consideration prior to acquisition. The later in life acquisition of the first tattoo, the more likely participants were to spend more time planning the tattoo and considering its reception.

Part 2: Wearing

The Embodied Vegan

The choice to wear a visible tattoo opens people up to public engagement on the question of tattooing and the subject-matter of the tattoo. This took forms identified in the wider literature on tattoo wearing, such as social tensions over tattoos within cultures where tattooing is historically uncommon (MacFarlane 2-3), which was something raised by the two Asian women in the study (Fae and Kallie) and the participant from a former Soviet nation (Nadia). In these cases, tattoos commonly still retain strong associations with criminality. In many cases parents were identified as obstacles to wearing visible tattoos, and some interviewees engaged in acts of concealment, a practice sometimes to prevent or delay disapproval from family members (something reported even in participants in middle-age and older; Caleb and Yolanda),⁸ or because of concerns that tattoos were not appropriate for their work (something seen in professional, but also other work contexts).

The small number of men in the sample were interesting in the way they embodied their veganism through and beyond their choices of tattoos. As Iselin Gambert and Tobias Linné and others (see, for example, McKay) observe, '[t]ropes of "effeminized" masculinity have long been bound up with a plant-based diet' (129), where the consumption of dairy and meat is seen as not only biologically necessary for health and vigour, but also as the foundation of a socially acceptable masculinity.

A majority of the men interviewed wanted to confound these negative stereotypes, following Laura Wright's discussion of the popularised term of '*hegan*' (emphasis added): men who resist negative cultural stereotypes about vegan men through reinvestment in the body via health and strength projects (107-29). Dalton, for example, began weight training and a bulking diet after transitioning to veganism, while Baldwin observed that his nexus of vegan and yoga practice reflected his underlying pacifism but co-existed with physical strength, stating: 'I am not what people think [of as] the weak puny little vegan. I am a yoga teacher ... mine's a strengthening class, a very strong class'. Similarly, Cal's transition was partially through interaction with a vegan who not only educated him about veganism's capacity to provide necessary protein and calcium, but embodied a positive role: '[He] was really energised, and this guy, he looked so fit and healthy'. A minority of men did not, however, perform this hegan

identity, demonstrating Jessica Greenebaum and Brandon Dexter's findings that men undertake a variety of responses to positioning their masculinity in relation to their veganism, including both reaffirming and rejecting hegemonic masculinity (345).

In accordance with the noted strategies men employ in justifying their vegan choices (as identified, for example, in Mari Kate Mycek's interviews with vegetarian and vegan American men), the men in my sample were proportionately more likely to avoid the term 'vegan', opting instead for appellations such as 'plant-powered' or 'plant-based'. This, however, was not a universal view held by men, with Dalton seeing the term 'plant-based' as associated with vegan food consumption for health and specifically not embodying the core of veganism as a concern for animal liberation. Mabel illustrated the difference between her use of the term 'vegan' and her son's use of the term 'plant-based':

My oldest son's 23. He is in the army, and he's vegan for health and strength. He's also a gym instructor, and he is what he would call 'plant-based'. He doesn't actually give a hoot about animals, but he doesn't eat the animal products because he maintains that he's stronger and healthier on a plant-based diet.⁹

However, no consensus around this terminology existed in the group, reflecting fluid designations in and around vegan practice (Chen 77). The three female participants who preferred the designator 'plant-based' did so because of associations of the vegan community as unfriendly and subject to in-fighting (Yolanda), or as a proactive response to the potential of negative responses to veganism by non-vegans with whom they interact socially or professionally (Kallie and Zandra).

Unlike the findings of Mycek (231), however, the men in my sample did not employ the type of 'rationalising' discursive tactics to maintain their masculinity while engaging in vegan dietary practices. Only two talked about their veganism in this way (Cal and Caleb). Contrary to this notion of masculinity-defining rationalising discourses around vegan choices, the three other men talked about their decisions often being led by visceral or emotional responses to animal suffering, with Dalton and Aaron discussing that the practices of slaughterhouses served as catalysts for change, while Baldwin recounted:

[my mother] always put the chicken on the table, I didn't see food anymore, I saw a dead bird on her table. Imagine seeing a pigeon in the gutter, you see a dead bird, don't

you? This is what I saw on her table, a dead bird. That was October 95. I haven't touched meat since.

The group's wide range of discursive practices in talking about their dietary and ethical choices reflects a diverse set of masculinities.

'Bearing' Animals

Given the subject matter of many of the participants' tattoos as either explicitly political and/or 'intimate' or personal narratives and memorials, the tattoos open their wearers to considerable emotional labour. Some participants reflected on carrying a psychic burden of inscribed suffering. In these cases, tattooing can be seen as a form of wearing-as-burden-bearing in a way that interpretations of political consumerism as combining civic participation with the 'pleasures' of consumer culture (Caruana et al. 2) does not capture.

An example of this was Hally, who had a complex response to a representation that served as a specific reminder of human cruelty, a cruelty that she captured in both the image of the tattoo, as well as the process of acquisition:

I have an octopus who's got hold of a human ... basically eating the human ... the reason I wanted the octopus tattoo is because I learnt about that they, you know, but it's so awkward, I don't want to talk about it. [They put] live octopus on barbecues. And I don't know, that's just ... it's awful ... yeah, it was also just an expression of my sadness and rage about what we do to animals. Yeah it's just ... because I also really hate getting tattooed, I like hate it, but it's fiery passion, I hate it, hate it. I cry. Like the whole time, I'm just like, 'I hate this, I want this to end!' So yeah, I don't know if maybe part of it's just like a selfish way of being about to just feel like you've suffered some tiny bit of pain, this ... what we do to animals.

The emotional risk of this type of wearing-bearing was moderated by many of the participants through the common designation of their veganism and vegan iconography as being '*for* the animals' [emphasis added], separating some from the acquisition of the tattoo as a personal act of consumption. This positive affirmation pre-interprets the various animal figures as positive targets of care and protection, rather than a memorialisation of Charles Patterson's 'eternal

Treblinka'. In her choice of design, therefore, Hally blunted the psychological cost of bearing through providing her octopus the agency it may not have in life via a 'kind of animal revenge'.

The importance of mental health was raised in a number of interviews, including discussions where participants identified the burden of 'knowing and seeing' as a vegan as negatively affecting them (Ursula and Yolanda), those who saw their veganism as positively improving mental health via an act of positive agency in the face of suffering (Ida and Nadia), and those who expressed concern that their veganism negatively affected the mental health of others (Yolanda). Ida's 'NEDA' tattoo – representing the National Eating Disorder Association – demonstrated a willingness of some participants to engage in intersectional dialogues through their tattoos about associated struggles. In this latter case, Ida draws out the topic of eating disorders within the vegan community. This is rarely discussed openly in the community because of the popular misconception of an association between these phenomena (for an evaluation of the tendency of eating disorders among vegans, see Hiess et al.).

Permanence

Veganism, like tattoos, was seen as a permanent state of affairs for the vegan participants. While five identified previous attempts at vegetarianism as children or young adults (Earlene, Ida, Stephanie, Ursula, and Val), veganism was almost universally presented as an endpoint in a 'life journey'. Gwendoline, as an example of this, saw herself as:

... vegan for life. I know now, I've made a connection between what I'm eating and where it comes from. And, I've seen the images of the dead pigs, the dead cows, slaughtered lambs, the dead chickens. I'm a massive animal lover ... I cannot go back, I can't unsee it.

This explains the high proportion of explicit vegan themes and messages in participants' tattoos since becoming vegan.

Considering the permanence of tattoos and veganism, several interviewees were asked about how they now feel about their pre-vegan tattoos, many of which have uncertain provenance. Interestingly – given the significance of vegan inks discussed above – most in this category were sanguine about this. Dulcie, for example, reflected on her pre-vegan tattoos, stating 'it is what it is ... it doesn't make me any less of a vegan', while others (Bambi, Gabriella,

and Octavia) saw these non-vegan inks as reflections of what they did and did not know at the time of acquisition, reconfirming their life journeys and serving as reminders of pre- and post-transition. This conforms with Pick's view that veganism is something 'incomplete and imperfect' and a very common articulation of vegan practice among participants of their veganism being subject to ongoing 'research' (Twine, "A Practice").

The psychic harm of tattoos that no longer reflected current dietary practice was only highlighted by Frieda, the one former vegan in the sample.¹⁰ She observed that while meat consumption quickly became renormalised for her, the reminder of her explicitly vegan tattoo (animals escaping a cage with the text 'animal liberation') was a source of upset:

I feel really hypocritical. Like I feel really bad ... I feel a bit shit about it. But I've been thinking lately that I want to go down that path of not eating meat again, because it's what I really strongly believe in. Yeah, but I feel a bit shit that I've been a bit of a hypocrite.

Given the high proportion of people who experience tattoo regret (33%; McCrindle Research), it is significant that none of the current vegans expressed regret about their explicitly-vegan tattoo content.¹¹ Further, following the documented high proportion of vegans who lapse (circa 84%; Humane Research Council 11) and the importance of tattooing in projects of becoming (O'Hanlon 3), this raises questions about the extent to which explicitly vegan tattoos might reduce lapsing. Eight participants explicitly saw their vegan tattoos as part of a life commitment (Brooke, Caleb, Dulcie, Dalton, Quinn, Stephanie, Wanda, and Xela), some acquired soon after becoming vegan, others marking 'vegan anniversaries' of between one (Daisy) and ten years (Ursula). On one level, Frieda's narrative speaks to these tattoos as active reminders to lapsed vegans. On the other, the capacity of participants to live with tattoos that become discordant with their current identities provides a counter-possibility of the potential of rationalisation of past decisions.

Interpretation and Interactions

Makiko Kuwahara has highlighted how visible tattooing changes the relationship between the subject's interiority and exteriority, projecting an internal depth onto the interface with society

(5). This is the case for many of the participants. In addition, the recent popularity of tattoos in consumer culture makes them more accessible topics of conversation. Removed from the status of deviant practice for most participations, some in the sample found their tattoos make them 'available' to touching, inquiry, and engagement with or through their tattoos. This places tattoos in a contested space of publicity, which did come as a surprise to some participants (for example, Caitlin and Paige).

However, the extent to which these 'commit the tattooee to a particular narrative' (Sweetman 69) is contestable. Deliberately esoteric tattoos provided means to control the degree to which others engaged with the tattoo (a choice made by Caitlin, Bambi, and Earline). Even if the tattoo was public, the participant's interiority need not be. For example, as a survivor of assault, one of Bambi's tattoos reflected sexualised violence, but in an encoded way to talk to women and not men. She observed that:

Women will ask about that. I think women have a natural affiliation, if they see a gun in a women's mouth they might have more insight into what that might mean, whereas men that ask me about it are like 'Whoa, that's very confronting. Why did you get that tattooed on yourself?'

This allowed her to regulate the level of engagement on this personal topic without having to resort to tattoo concealment.

Activism and Ink

Reiterating the link between tattooing, explicit vegan content and animal activism, a high proportion of participants (15, 41%) can be identified as activists (presently or former). Their activist practices ranged from 'secret' (illicit) practices (Zandra), animal rescue and sanctuary, through protesting and witnessing (abattoirs, circuses, rodeos, live export activities, duck hunting), to media-focused activities (participating in 'cube of truth' visual displays, supporting documentary screenings).

Further, within this sub-group, 13 had tattoos with messaging strongly associated with popular tropes in movement media, including specific statements such as '269' (from calf 269, a calf rescued by Israeli activists; six participants sported this number), 'animal liberation',

‘friends not food’, ‘But for them, it is life itself’ and ‘#wewillrise’ (from the film *Dominion*), specific images of animals of concern, and advocacy references (such as broken cages).

Generally, the participant is assumed in these images, but Val’s tattoos include one which places herself in this image of animals normally seen as ‘food’:

From the inner of my arm all the way up to my elbow is a whole bunch, there’s a lamb, a chicken, and a pig, and a cow and a deer being held by a woman, which is me.

The influence of movement media on explicit vegan tattoos was not surprising. The role of movement media was a very important influence in vegan adoption among the group. This included short-form (YouTube and Facebook) videos and long-form documentary in the process of transition.¹² Again, reflecting vegan practice acquisition, different media were important at different times: during transition, acquiring vegan knowledge-practices, sustaining commitment, and recruiting others. This reflects Waters’ findings of the importance of ongoing advocacy media in vegan and vegetarian transition, but also sustaining that transition over time (370).

For self-identified activists and non-activists, tattoos with explicit or implicit vegan messages were often seen as generative of positive interactions with others. Fourteen of the participants highlighted the role of their vegan tattoos in producing positive vegan-centric interactions with others (Caleb, Daisy, Dalton, Gabriella, Jacki, Nadia, Octavia, Paige, Quinn, Ursula, Val, Wanda, Xela, and Zandra). This varied from modest interactions and ‘consciousness raising’ to more extensive interactions about their underlying beliefs and practices. Publicity varied due to individuals’ desire for proselytisation, their social contexts (often the degree to which they regularly had interactions with others in ways that permitted bodily display), and the tattoo content. Zandra, for example, observed that her ‘269’ tattoo was a good conversation starter because its esoterism invited questions, while the corresponding story of rescue provides a narrative device to discuss animal welfare issues for farmed animals that has a positive outcome.

A smaller group reported negative responses, often a result of others’ interpellation of the type of ‘vegan’ the participant represented: commonly Richard Twine’s notion of the type of vegan who ‘transgress[es] normative scripts of happiness and commensality in a dominant meat and dairy consuming culture’ (‘Vegan Killjoys’). Ida, for example, recounted experiences where people she was talking with abruptly changed their libidinal disposition upon learning the

tattoos were vegan. This included interactions in person and on social media, reflecting the intensity of this reaction beyond simply avoidance of transgression at the site of personal interaction.

Baldwin, on the other hand, felt that a former vegan student avoided him after her (presumed) lapse from veganism. While not common, this should be anticipated. Partially, this reflects the types of cognitive dissonance that visible animal suffering produces (Bastian et al. 248), but this can be exacerbated in the face of individuals who are perceived as being more ‘hardcore’ in the way they align their bodily representation with ethical practice. Being a ‘serious vegan’ was seen by some participants and their interlocutors as necessarily involving activism, with an implicit sliding scale from non-confrontational activities to direct action. Hally, for example, highlighted how her duck hunting protest experience and related tattoo produced this perception in some people she interacted with, even though she herself did not feel this represented a heightened level of commitment beyond others in the community.

Conclusion

Vegans with tattoos are a diverse group. In having the opportunity of discussing their lives and life choices, this research has placed tattooing within wider life narratives that include veganism, but in a way that prevents easy summation. Vegan tattoos can be as serious in intent or casual in acquisition as those of non-vegans. However, the research has shown how veganism gets inscribed onto the bodies of the participants. Where veganism is of great importance to the individual, the tattoo can become the focus of this significance. In other cases, tattooing can be like any other act of consumption, involving ‘label-checking’ practices.

For some participants, their vegan tattoos represent an intensely personal form of memorialisation or remembrance. For other participants, it forms part of their identities as activists and/or exemplars of what vegan means to others. What the research identified is that, irrespective of their permanence, their meaning is not fixed. Pre-existing tattoos are reconsidered after vegan transition, and the way others encourage and engage with the tattooed form is not always predictable in advance. More than simply a narrative of popular or political consumption practices, the selection, acquisition, and wearing-bearing of vegan tattoos exist in a relational space of display, interpretation and discourse.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of extreme body modification and its relationship with human-animal identification, see Potts (131-154).

² The research design was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 2016/842).

³ Reflecting concerns about the gaze of the (cisgendered, male) researcher into the intimate, I did not to ask to view or photograph participants' tattoos, instead requesting descriptions only.

⁴ Caitlin was ambivalent about the role that tattoos played for heteronormative vegans, seeing heavy tattooing among this group as bordering on the co-option of queer coding.

⁵ The Vegan Society (UK) identifies the major non-vegan components of tattooing as glycerine, gelatine, bone char and lanolin.

⁶ Unlike in Rosenberg and Sharp's study, however, social media did not play an important role in the communication of tattoos for the participants.

⁷ See <https://www.vegansociety.com/your-business/about-vegan-trademark>

⁸ In some cases, parental responses to the tattoos were more positive than participants anticipated (Fae's father, for example, surprised her by getting a tattoo after her example).

⁹ Nadia recounts a similar story about her daughter's partner.

¹⁰ Attempts were made to recruit more former vegans in the study.

¹¹ Though one discussed the need to 'touch up' a tattoo she felt had poor execution.

¹² Commonly cited: *Earthlings* (2005), *Forks over Knives* (2011), *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014), *What the Health?* (2017), *The Game Changers* (2018), and *Dominion* (2018).

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