

## CONSUMER IDENTITIES: CARNISM VERSUS VEGANISM

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### ABSTRACT

*“I hate when people are hostile about others’ dietary choices! I have received a lot of stick for being a veggie, and it offends me sometimes. I would never dream of going up to a meat eater and just telling them that they are stupid or whatever, so I wish some people wouldn’t do that to me.”* Jen, Yahoo Group Discussion

A Google search for “hostility of meat eaters toward vegans” shows 145,000 hits, mostly discussion groups or blogs that deal with reactions of carnists to vegetarians and vegans. And Carol J. Adams (2001), in her book *Living Among Meat-Eaters*, identifies a dynamic between meat eaters and vegetarians that—though invisible—has a tendency to lead to “social interactions that can be painful and upsetting: conversations that become arguments; interactions that become confrontations; meals that exclude vegetarians; friends who sabotage them; nonvegetarian lovers who alienate them” ([http://www.caroljadams.com/book\\_livingamong.html](http://www.caroljadams.com/book_livingamong.html)).

Considering the hostility that is often displayed in carnist-vegan interactions, it is timely to ask why carnists often display such a high degree of aggression and resentment toward vegans. This is not to say that vegans do not get offensive when defending their dietary choices and life styles, but since carnism—“the belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate” (Joy 2010, p. 30)—is dominant in the U.S. culture, we will present a conceptual model that explains why carnists often feel the need to aggressively defend their belief system, specifically their food choices, when faced by vegans.

We first look at Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), which posits that societies that produce sustainable economic surplus embrace systems of social hierarchies that are arbitrarily based on group characteristics such as race, ethnic group, religion, etc. Group-based social inequality is generally created by assigning differential social values to groups within a social system and this disproportionate distribution of social value is morally and intellectually rationalized through legitimizing myths that “consist of attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies” (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths include, among others, sexism, racism, and speciecism (i.e., “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer 2002, p. 6)), which is the focal point of our research endeavor. Speciecism has been embraced by the dominant group in the U.S., namely carnists, and it is of interest to this group to maintain a status quo that promotes the belief that it is necessary, ethical, and appropriate to consume the meat of certain animals. Since food animals do not possess a voice, the subordinate group in our case is a proxy group, namely vegans who refuse to consume animal-derived products for ethical reasons and also view it their duty to further the interest of animals. Thus, the belief systems, values, and ideologies embraced by these particular vegans can be summarized as an animal rights orientation which acts as a hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myth poised to counteract speciecism. Since carnists have an interest in justifying the status quo, it is expected that they display high levels of social dominance orientation—which has been defined as an “individual difference orientation that expresses the value that people place on nonegalitarian and hierarchically structured relationships among social groups” (Sidanius and Pratto 1999); whereas vegans who are interested in toppling the status quo can be expected to display low levels of social dominance orientation.

It has been suggested that this motivational tendency to justify and defend the status quo is especially high in the face of a threat that challenges the “very foundation of our socioeconomic system” (Feygina, Jost and Goldsmith 2011, p. 327). Hence we turn our focus to system justification theory which posits that individuals are motivated—by a need for permanence and a sense of certainty—to perceive the social, economic, and political system in which they live as equitable, beneficial, and stable, and thus are prone to resist any challenge to that view by rationalizing the way things are and minimizing or denying any problems caused by the status quo. It is expected that the more benefit individuals derive from the status quo, the more passionately they are to embrace system justification (Feygina, Jost and Goldsmith 2011). Accordingly, we expect carnists to display higher levels of system justification tendencies than vegans, because it is the former’s way of life that is being challenged, who—as a result—exhibit a strong psychological need to defend and justify the status quo.

References Available on Request.