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Vegans and Vaccines: A Tale of Competing Identity Goals

Michael B. Beverland

KEYWORDS

Identity Consumption, Self-Authentication, Vaccination, COVID-19, Veganism, Goal Conflict

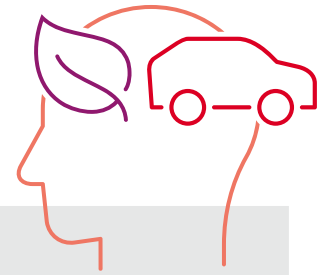
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The arrival of COVID-19, new vaccines, and conspiracy theories ✕ As COVID-19 shut down economies, ravaged nations, and forced many of us to live more isolated lives, policy makers placed their hopes on the arrival of vaccines. At the same time, conspiracy theories flourished online, suggesting the virus was little more than a hoax, or a variant of the flu, or was the product of various nefarious agents or powers. As vaccines began to roll out, not everyone was happy, with anti-vaccine activists engaging in online misinformation and public protests, identifying a range of imaginary dangers and in some cases, threatening medical staff with violence. Online, advocates of vaccines were quick to ridicule those resisting or rejecting vaccines, while policy makers discussed the possibility of compulsory vaccination, or aired their concerns over such measures as threats to a way of life. Subsequently vaccine passports became a requirement for engagement in many consumption activities.

General motives for resistance against vaccines ✕ For those resisting vaccines, the motives were varied, but often involved notions of identity, be it personal self-identity or collective “we-ness.” Consumer researchers have long known that consumption choices, including the uptake of vaccines, are motivated by how people see themselves or who they desire to be. However, what happens when consumers are faced with two competing goals? In the context of vaccine uptake, this situation is one many vegans face, particularly those identifying as ethical as opposed to dietary vegans, who seek to remove all exploitation of non-human animals from consumption. Unlike anti-vaccination protestors, many vegans felt torn between their personal beliefs about animal



BOX 1

Consumers' creative ways to deal with identity-goal contradiction

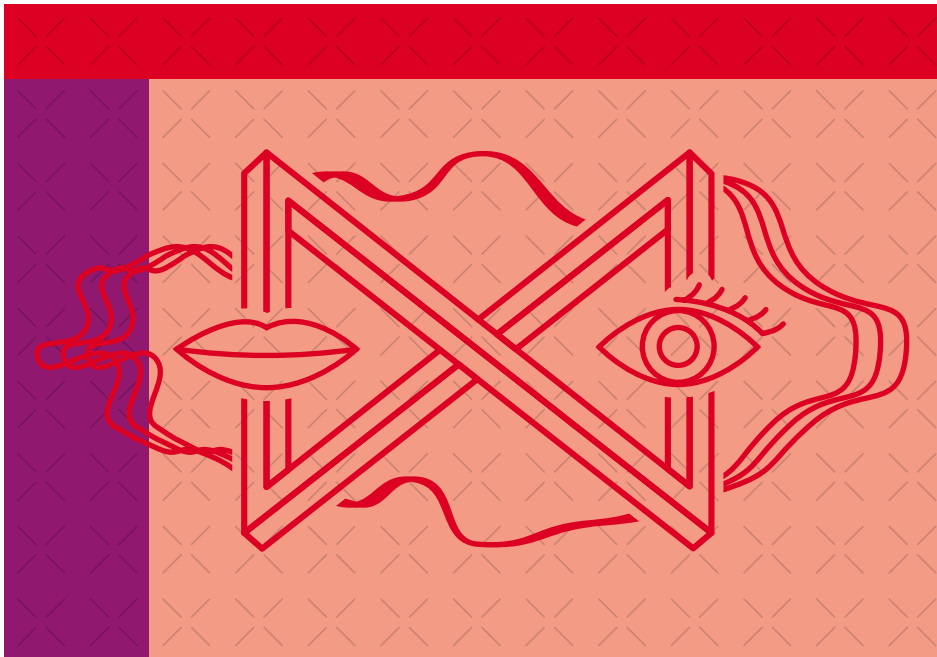
Conscious consumption is rife with tension, conflict, and paradox. As Arlie Hochschild writes in her book *Strangers in their Own Land*, consumers who express a love of nature may still hunt animals, drive an SUV, and support right-wing political parties who exacerbate damage to the natural environment. To be at ease with themselves, they use several strategies.

- > **Cherry-picking behavior** ✕ In my own research, I've identified that consumers create their own personal echo chamber, drawing on cues that reinforce their quest for self-authentication while ignoring or pushing back against those that undermine it. What matters is not so much whether consumers are consistent, but whether they are able to continue a felt sense of authenticity that enables them to sustain their identities.
- > **Finding ways to compensate inconsistent behaviors** ✕ In addition to this cherry-picking evidence, consumers can be remarkably creative when faced with contradictions between desired identities. One consumer I interviewed identified how their SUV was essential for their work as a skilled tradesperson (a source of personal pride). At the same time, he was well aware that for a committed environmentalist, this car was problematic. He, therefore, experienced a debt to nature and tried to address it through greener and more sensitive consumption choices elsewhere.
- > **Referring to collective ethos to justify individual behavior** ✕ Dealing with moral greyness is typical for consumers seeking to identify through conscious consumption and choosing between being oneself and fitting in involves more than simply denying the self in favor of the collective and vice versa. Much consumer research on fitting in has examined smaller collectives such as brand communities where fitting in is a function of learning a few simple, universally shared, rules. However, in the national context, the picture is different. Not everyone agrees on what being a "true" member of society represents. Those rejecting vaccines draw on a range of arguments entirely consistent with national identity including freedom, traditions, and protest. For example, New Zealand-based vaccine protesters argue they are following a tradition of skepticism and challenging authority that has long been part of local identity, and indeed is reflected in the image of a suffragette on the nation's \$10 banknote for example. This opens up a range of possible appeals to collective identity that can be targeted at different groups of vaccine-hesitant people.

exploitation and their desire to protect themselves and loved ones from COVID-19, as well as act as responsible members of society. Examining how such goal conflicts come about and how they can be managed in the case of vegans vs. vaccines can provide insights into overcoming similar instances of identity-driven tensions and subsequent behavior.

Why vegans are hesitant about vaccines ✕ First, vaccines typically have to be tested on non-human animals as part of official approval procedures. Since ethical vegans reject the notion that humans have the right to exploit non-human animals, they may reject vaccines at a philosophical level because testing still involves treating non-human animals as

objects of use. Second, vaccines often, but not always, contain animal ingredients, including gelatin, lactose, and blood from endangered horseshoe crabs. Although groups such as Animal Aid point out that COVID-19 vaccines are free of such products, ethical vegans may remain concerned about the presence of animal products in vaccines. Third, vegans are not one homogenous group. While many are happy to seek help from the medical sector, others may embrace alternative therapies, engage with conspiracies about medical science and/or government programs, and hold radical views regarding COVID-19 as "nature's revenge" for animal and environmental exploitation, to name just one among many others. All of these can create tensions for vegan consumers



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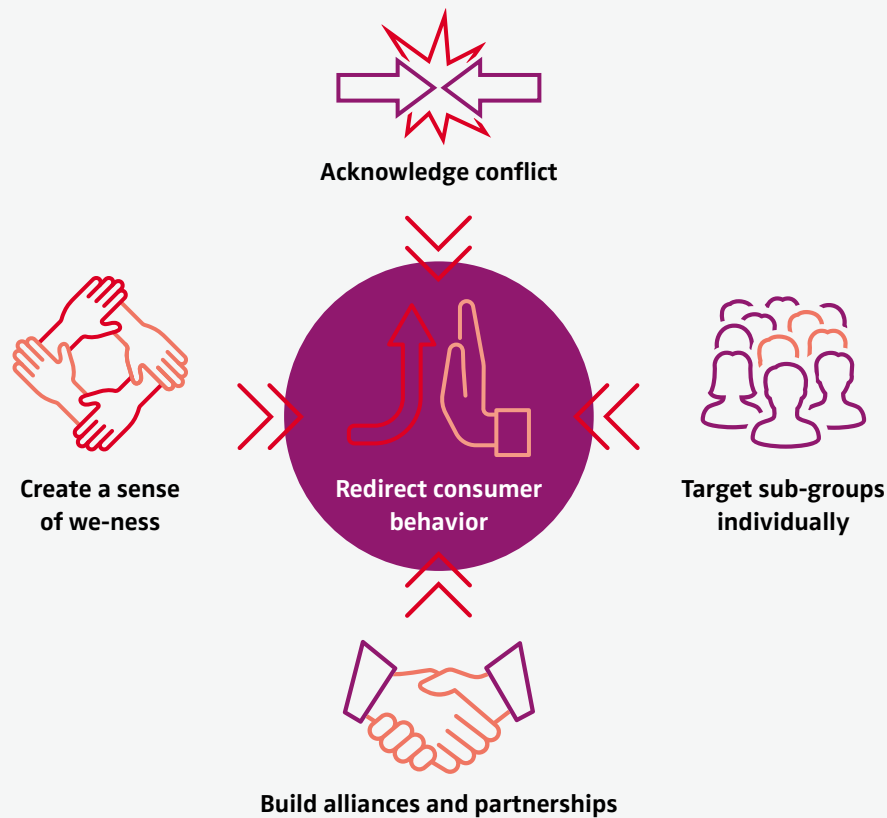
when faced with the difficult choice to protect themselves and their families, while also being authentic to themselves.

Consumers' desire to consume authentically can be tricky to realize ✕ Once material needs are taken care of, much consumerism moved to expressions of identity, including a desire to express one's true or authentic self. In the case of conscious consumption, this means our choices reflect our morals. However, while authenticity involves being true to oneself, it is also socially constructed and requires living up to particular norms or expectations of others. Therefore, being authentic involves both being oneself and fitting in. For ethical vegans, being vaccinated represents a mix of

self-protection and collective goals, like protecting one's family, and in identity terms, being a responsible member of society. The dilemma between being true to vegan values and protection gets even more critical, as accessing many of the services that make life worth living may require a vaccine certificate. This represents a more complex scenario than rejecting non-essential consumption involving animal-based protein, by-products such as leather, visiting zoos, and animal-based entertainment.

Strategies to help vegans bridge conflicting identity goals ✕ Helping vegans solve identity conflicts is critical as vaccine efficacy requires community-level herd immunity.

FIGURE 1 > Strategies to solve identity conflicts and redirect consumer behavior



Given that some anti-vaccination campaigners are co-opting veganism to avoid vaccination, such measures seem even more important. So, how can organizations attempting to promote vaccinations help vegans overcome this conflict? I recommend the following strategies (see also Figure 1).

> **Acknowledge the conflict** × Philosopher Gary L. Francione did just this when posting a detailed blog on Facebook to his network of followers. Identifying that vaccine use raised genuine moral challenges for vegans, he then went on to distinguish between ethical actions

and requirements of life, detailing how one could get vaccinated while also remaining true to vegan ideals. Other animal advocates have done the same, identifying the use of animal products in vaccines, but the importance of getting vaccinated so one can continue to advocate for improved practices and processes in the development of future vaccines.

> **Create a sense of we-ness** × New Zealand has successfully rallied its population to fight COVID-19 through an appeal to the “team of five million.” This phrase was

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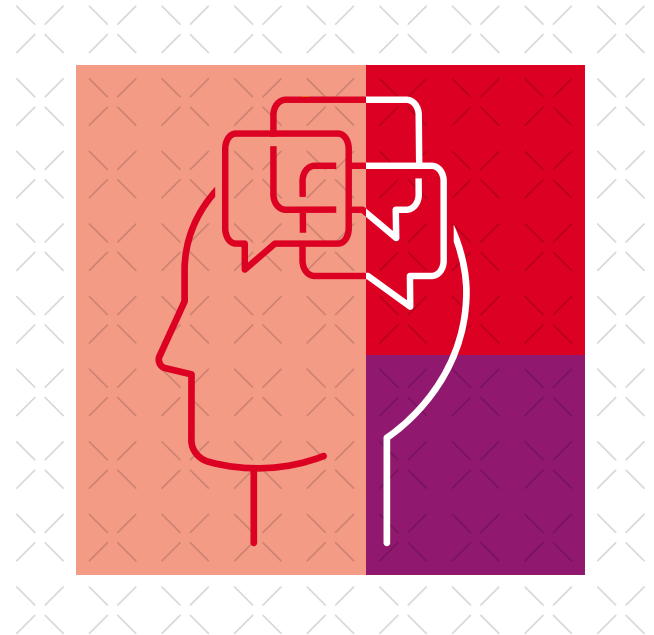
Tensions between individual and collective identity goals are typical of conscious consumption choices.



used to pull Kiwis together so they would comply with restrictions and get vaccinated. The use of the term “team” draws parallels with sports and past practices that helped raise funds for causes, reduce littering, and band together in times of difficulty. Everyday mundane national brands can also play a role. In Australia, bar owners came together to offer a free beer to the vaccinated, while hardware chain Bunnings has developed drive-through vaccination centers at their stores.

- > **Pick the low-hanging fruit** ✕ Not all self-identified groups are homogenous. However, understanding the relations between them is also critical. Getting dietary vegans to use vaccines in theory should not be difficult, but this group is not always viewed positively by ethical vegans. Each community will have those more minded to hear your message and engage in thought leadership than others. The aforementioned example of Gary L. Francione represents one case of low-hanging fruit – an informed group who are also open to explore the challenges of consuming consciously. Targeting each sub-group or tribe with specific materials will be critical, as will engagement with key insiders.
- > **Build partnerships between credible agencies and government** ✕ The National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, as an example, has developed a separate web page for vegans, providing details about the vaccines but also linking to statements from groups such as Animal Aid, the Vegan Society, and the Vegetarian Society who support vaccination.

Identity goal conflicts represent a chance to redirect consumer behavior ✕ Conscious consumption involves dealing with shades of gray and consumers have become adept at maintaining a sense of authenticity in the face of cries of hypocrisy from moral purists. Tensions between individual and collective identity goals are typical of conscious consumption choices, including decisions to consume sustainably and ethically. Even if an increased emphasis on self-realization is making appeals to the common good more difficult, solving



these tensions will be essential. In future, societies dealing with environmental and health-related threats will likely require even more adaptations from consumers that may conflict with personal preferences or traditions. ✕



FURTHER READING

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