

Social Media Use of Vegan Activists in Turkey

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to present the reasons vegan activists are in social media, their sources of motivation, the tools that they use, and how they interact with others. In this context, interviews with vegan activists who personally or collectively work for animal rights and use social media were conducted. The findings shed light on the social media usage and habits of vegan communities. These communities' (individual activists and members of known activist groups) aims are not common and they are considered—relatively—as minorities in Turkey.

According to the findings in the interviews, social media is the platform where vegan activists can make their voices heard. Research participants who are not members of animal rights groups use their personal social media accounts whereas members of animal rights groups use their group accounts along with their personal social media accounts. They mostly use blogs and social networks (especially Facebook and Twitter). Major purposes for their social media usage are to inform other users, to communicate with other vegans, and to announce upcoming activities and protests. In a nutshell, social media is being used actively by the research participants to promote the still-unfamiliar vegan movement.

Keyword:

Vegan, veganism, animal rights, social media activism, digital activism

Türkiye'de Vegan Aktivistlerin Sosyal Medya Kullanımı

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, vegan aktivistlerin sosyal medya kullanım amaçlarını, motivasyon kaynaklarını, kullandığı araçları ve diğer kullanıcılarla nasıl etkileşime girdiğini ortaya koymaktır. Bu bağlamda kişisel olarak veya bir grupta birlikte hayvan hakları için çalışan, sosyal medyayı kullanan vegan aktivistler ile görüşme yapılmıştır. Çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular vegan toplulukların sosyal medya kullanım alışkanlıkları ve hedeflerine ışık tutması bakımından önem taşımaktadır. Bu toplulukların (bireysel aktivistler ve bilinen aktivist grupların üyeleri) sosyal medya kullanım amacı aynı değildir ve bu topluluklar Türkiye'de – görece – azınlık olarak nitelendirilmektedir.

Görüşme sonuçlarına göre vegan aktivistler sosyal medyayı seslerini duyurabileceği bir platform olarak görmektedir. Vegan grup üyesi aktivistler hem grup hem kişisel hesaplarını, bireysel aktivistler ise kişisel hesaplarını veganlıkla ilgili içerik paylaşmak için kullanmaktadır. Sosyal medyada Facebook ve Twitter'ı yaygın olarak kullanırlarken hayvan hakları ile ilgili blogları

da takip etmektedir. Araştırma katılımcıları için sosyal medyayı kullanmanın başlıca amaçları; kullanıcıları bilgilendirmek, diğer veganlarla iletişim kurmak ve yaklaşan etkinlik ve protestoları duyurmaktır. Özet olarak, sosyal medya, görüşme yapılan vegan aktivistler tarafından iyi bilinmeyen vegan hareketi yaygınlaştırmak için kullanılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vegan, Veganism, Hayvan Hakları, Digital aktivistler

Introduction

With postmodernism, the use of animals for the pleasure and interest of human beings has started to be questioned explicitly. Thus, the kitchen cultures which place animal source foods at their core, the beliefs and laws which conceive animals as properties, the industry that enslaves animals as replaceable objects, have all begun being morally refused and the term “vegan” has become more frequently heard.

Although vegans are commonly defined as people who do not consume animal source foods or animal products, *veganism* is a term, which is shaped by diverse paradigms (Reznickova, 2010; Francione, 2012; Acton, 2011). Despite the fact that there are vegans who place health and ecology at the heart of this thinking, the principle reason of vegan movement is the argument defending moral responsibility for animals. The vegan movement comprises actions, which make the movement heard as well as ones which promote, discuss, re-conceptualise and popularise it. In contrast to the societies in which vegan product alternatives are easily available, social familiarity with the vegan movement in Turkey is limited. Together, cultural codes and habits, promotion of animal source foods by the health and food industry, and a dominant belief system which adopts the argument that animals are created for human use, can play a huge role impacting on this situation.

With regard to animal-related media content, the mainstream media mostly narrates a heroic tale or adopts a language which affirms the use of animals for entertainment. The vegan movement opens up a new field of activism for itself with the possibilities provided by the new communication technologies, thus reaching vegan or non-vegan people via different social media tools.

The basic questions of this study are, as follows:

How do the vegan activists define activism, what kind of contents do the vegan activists share online, and how do they interact with other users who follow vegan activists' social media accounts and blogs?

Ethical Veganism: Where Do Animal Rights Begin?

The word “vegan” is first derived from the word “vegetarian” by one of the founders of Vegan Society, *Donald Watson*, in 1944, and veganism was justified through ethical concerns for

sentient animals (Watson, 1944). Veganism is a social and political movement defending the rejection of the products or ingredients which are produced from animals, and the individuals in this movement are called “vegans”. At this point, it is important not to confuse ethical veganism with those who eat only vegetables for health-related concerns and with those who do not consume animal products for ecological sustainability.

According to Watson (1944), the civilisation which was built upon the exploitation of slaves in the past is now built upon the exploitation of animals. However, before mentioning animal rights, it is necessary not to forget that there is still a discussion about whether those rights exist or not. For Regan (2007), who states that animals have their own rights to life, freedom and bodily privacy, animals care for what they live through and they are the subjects of their own lives, whether humans mind it or not. It is not important if animals are aware of those rights; because the rights of children, mentally disabled people or slaves should be protected by other people. Wagner (2013) discusses how animals can get those rights while they do not conceive themselves as beneficiaries. According to Wagner, in the process of becoming foods, animals are non-animalised and these processes also non-humanise humans. Because these conducts are human-based, they must be stopped.

Adams (2010) who puts forward the relation between animal rights and woman rights in the face of patriarchal ideology also maintains that the animals on plate are conceived merely as “meat”. Language points out that lamb chops are in the dinner. In reality, it is the baby of a killed sheep. Similarly, every usage of animals, with the support of language, turns them into commodities. Regan (2007) holds that the processes which violate animal rights are procedures in which animals are turned into foods, clothes, performers, racers and are thus instrumentalized.

At this point, it is important to mention the principle of equal consideration which is frequently accented by Francione (2008). According to the principle of equal consideration, it is morally accepted that human beings cannot be regarded as the properties of other human beings. According to the principle of equal consideration for animal rights, the right of possession of animals is put into discussion regarding its moral justification. Francione (2007) defines the concept of right as “*simply a way of protecting an interest*”. The right to not being a property is one of the fundamental rights. Francione maintains that the interests of slaves are protected insofar as it is beneficial for others. However, the first moral step to take must be to give them the right to not being a property and it also applies to animals.

According to Francione (2012) the sentience of animals hinder one animal from having a hierarchically higher position than another animal. Singer (2013) also says that everyone experiences pain differently but animals may suffer as well as they can physiologically and

physically perceive. On the other hand, Singer's (2005) idea that an animal who lives without any pain and is killed without suffering can be eaten opens up the doors of speciesism.

According to ethical vegans, the difference regarding intelligence between humans and non-humans holds no importance (Steiner, 2009). Aside from this view, statistics show the extent of the situation for animals; in 2014, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Association provided official and estimated data with Meat Atlas, revealing that each year, 65 billion farm and coop animals and countless marine animals are killed for consumption by humans. Besides, according to the research conducted by The British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, globally, each year, an average of 115 million animals are used for animal testing (Taylor, Gordon, Langley & Higgins, 2008, p.336). It seems that in the movement for the prosperity for animals, the animal rights laws do nothing other than provide for the sustainability of the current system.

Vegans seem to be quite at peace with ecology while they go after their struggle for rights. Vegans are not perfect ecologists. However, in Marcus's words (2001, p.165-166) vegans take only a small bite from the limited sources of the earth. If all the human beings in the world became vegans, the sources could develop the products that could entirely feed everyone.

Vegan Activism in Turkey

Activism is the involved practice and various activities aiming at social, economical, environmental or political change in order to reach certain ends through protests and demonstrations organised by individuals or social groups. An activist is, according to the definition of Andrew X (2005), an expert of social change and is knowledgeable about the struggle for societal change, pioneering to realise this change.

Vegan activism is, similar to the other fields of activism, sustained through various actions such as boycotts or demonstrations. The words of Iacobbo and Iacobbo, "Millions of Americans are vegetarians, but most are not activists"¹ (Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 2006) also seem to apply to the ratio of vegan people and vegan activists in Turkey. One of the situations where vegan activism has become crucially visible both on the streets and on social media is Gezi Park Protests, which took place with the protests of organised, and non-organised individuals. According to a blog research, 29% of the people who participated in Gezi Park Protests define themselves as vegetarian/vegans (Vegan Türkiye, 2014). Another important event for veganism in Turkey is the I. Vegetarian/Vegan Pride Parade in 2013, and since it was broadcast on mainstream media, many people were introduced to the word "vegan".

¹ In the book, the word "vegetarian" is used in the place of "vegan", unless otherwise is stated.

The types of vegan activism are multiple. For instance, vegan anarchist prisoner Osman Evcan went for a hunger strike in 2011 because he was not served vegan food (Başkent, 2011). In order to support Osman Evcan's strike, there was established the blog <http://osmanayemek.tumblr.com/> and an online signature campaign was held; eventually Osman Evcan earned his right to receive vegan food. However, later he was sent to another jailhouse and a similar period again took place since this new jailhouse did not respond to his demand (Sosyal Savaş, 2014a; Sosyal Savaş 2015).

The street activities of the vegan activists in Turkey are most of the time very interesting. The Feast of Sacrifice protests since 2012 are one of them. On a day they pick up as vegan action day, Abolitionist Vegan Movement followers open a stand on the streets and talk about veganism with people (Abolitionist Vegan Hareket, 2015).

ALF (Animal Liberation Front) is known for its activities of freeing the animals in experimentation laboratories and dairy farms, and for the economical harm it gives to the ones who violate animal rights; and the ALF supporters in Turkey, with the snow masks they put on their faces, organise various street protests. ALF is frequently a target of criticism because of its – allegedly - violent protests and is regarded as a terrorist threat (Jarboe, 2002). Despite of all criticisms, ALF has many supporters in many countries and the first “open animal rescue action” of the ALF supporters in Turkey took place in İstanbul in 2014, by rescuing rabbits from a pet shop (Sosyal Savaş, 2014b).

In Turkey, there is Türkiye Vegan and Vejetaryenler Derneği (Turkey Vegan and Vegetarians Association) which runs as the representative of some international vegetarian/vegan institutions. Yeryüzüne Özgürlük Derneği (Freedom to Earth Association) which does not only aim at gathering vegans under a single roof, defends the rights of all the earthlings together, and adopts the responsibility for “creating a *counter* culture on the basis of the sensitivity for preventing ecological destruction” (YÖD, 2010). Apart from its associations, there is the project of founding a political party with the name Hayvanlara Özgürlük Partisi (Freedom to Animals Party) whose founding participants are all vegans/vegetarians. On the other hand, there are independent vegan activists who follow the judicial processes concerning the violation of animal rights and they actively support street activities.

Similar to many various movements, the vegan movement uses social media as a platform to make its voice heard. Its social media usage basically comprises of websites with user-centred content. From the blogs which are created for users to share their ideas and knowledge to Wikis; from the ones whose media elements are organised by the users to create contents to the websites with an aim for collaboration, all develop social media content (Lerman, 2007, p.1). Social webs are

those in which social media users like each other's contents, make comments and send messages to one another. Thanks to the hyper-textuality of social networks, users can reach different accounts and websites easily (Kahraman, 2010, p.14). In social webs, aside from individuals, groups can create their own accounts. Vegan activists share contents both individually and collectively via social media, and interact with other users.

Method

This research has been conducted with the scanning model which presents reality entirely as it is. In order to reach defined purposes, a semi-structured interview technique was used. The interviews took place both online and offline with 10 vegan activists. The participants of the research were identified with the snowball technique that is a purposive sampling technique. The interviews took between 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Two of the participants used nicknames to remain anonymous. The study is framed by the participants' ideas as they are, sometimes by quoting them in order to support the findings. In the context of the themes produced from results obtained, the subjects that form consensus or disagreement are discussed, while trying to attain reliability in the necessary arrangements. In this study it is aimed to find the answers of the questions about the vegan activists' activism perception, use of social media tools to interact with other vegan activists, and users.

Findings

In this research, most of the interviewees allow the usage of their real names and two of the interviewees' names are anonymised.

The Ideas of the Participants Regarding Veganism and Their Reasons To Be Vegans

All of the vegan activists, directly or indirectly, associate veganism with a practice of life which rejects the enslavement of animals and the domination of them;

"I am an ethical vegan. To me, ethical veganism is animal freedom. I mean, that is what I understand from veganism. I do not accept animal exploitation in any field of life. I defend that animals have their own rights to live." (Zülal)

"... It is one's completing the missing part of the puzzle, the animal part, in order to take a step against enslavement and exploitation. I define it as something like to start to speak against their exploitation and enslavement, and arriving at a consistency with a practice." (Güray).

"...I define the periods in which I was not a vegan as opportunist. That is, not being a vegan is indeed using the enslavement of animals as an opportunity." (Derya)

The major reason motivating the activists for being a vegan is that an awareness regarding animals is created. The strong empathy that is felt towards animals is another reason for the activists to become a vegan;

“I think animals suffer a lot. After a while I started to realise that I was not happy seeing these...” (Seda)

“... for instance I dive into the bottom of the sea as I swim. After ten seconds I strive to reach the surface, because I run out of breath. And then I say, whoever eats fish make those animals suffer in the same way. They die in a horrible way. Anybody wants to try, they should dive and see how they feel when they cannot breathe.” (Güray)

Ideas About Activism

Ideas about activism:

Vegan activists make different emphases on the definition of activism. However, the common idea is to inform other people and to prompt them;

“... I see it as to apply whatever I think into practice, and to take the necessary steps regarding the problems I identify, without remaining merely as a spectator.” (Seda)

“I define it as raising kind of an awareness among people. Relating to this raising of awareness, I define it especially in vegan activism as explaining veganism to people.” (Cem S.)

“It is, having knowledge about a certain subject, the totality of activities that are carried out in order to inform other people, too.” (Özlem).

The evaluation of the vegan movement in Turkey both in its positive and negative aspects enables the different experiences in the movement come to surface. A certain part of the negative aspects arises from the observation of the discrepancies among vegan activists;

“What makes me feel so uncomfortable, especially regarding to getting into certain groups... is that there is a kind of war among vegans.” (Derya)

There are also those who think that being in a vegan movement is perceived as a trend;

“...when it started as a trend, some celebrities defined themselves as vegans although they were not really vegans, and gave speeches like “I got stupid since I didn’t eat meat.”” (Zülal)

“...although there is participation in vegan groups, I actually think it is kind of a seasonal rupture.” (Cem Ç.)

The actualisation place of activism (SM activism vs. Street activism):

Four of the participants believe that activist actions can take place on the streets. Other participants give importance to social media for activism or think that it works as complementary to

street activism. It is interesting that in choosing social media activism, they mention social judgements;

“To tell the truth, I do not believe in the activism on the street. The reason is we, the Turkish society, do not have a positive look on street activities.” (Seda)

The words of one participant who uses social media only through the account of the group of which he is a part explain why he does not use a personal account;

“...The discourse on the Internet does not reach everybody and at the same time it leads to what Zygmunt Bauman calls *slacktivism*. I mean actually a kind of loose activism. It gives a sense of feeling as if one has achieved something. You are indeed doing something but it may also give a sense of completion, albeit the issue is out there. Animal exploitation is out there. All we do here is communication but for activism, communication is not everything.” (Güray)

The difficulties of being a vegan in Turkey:

The participants state that being a vegan in Turkey involves certain social and cultural difficulties as well as hardships concerning nutrition. Social difficulties are mostly related to non-vegan people’s criticism of vegan people, with a “blaming” tone. Next to this, it is interesting that the cultural difficulties are related to gender roles;

“...it looks really weird to people and it does not look like something masculine. I mean they find such a thing a bit feminine.” (Cem Ç.)

Concerning nutrition, the problem is the fact that vegan products are not easily available in Turkey.

Becoming a member of a vegan community:

Six of the participants are activists belonging to a community; four of them are individual activists. Individual activists participate in protests and events together with communities. Abolitionist Vegan Hareketi (Abolitionist Vegan Movement), Veganizm Özgürlüktür Grubu (Veganism is Freedom Group), İTÜ Veg and Ankara Vejetaryen - Vegan Grubu (Ankara Vegetarian - Vegan Group) are communities which work together.

The process of the becoming widespread of veganism in Turkey:

Most of the participants make emphasis on the importance of Gezi Park Protests in veganism’s becoming widespread and heard;

“According to Google search results, the number of the searches for the word “vegan” increases significantly during those times. Since then, it has increased consistently.” (Cem S.)

“It achieved visibility during Gezi. I mean the stalls there, and the social media. Well, did it work? No. If it had worked, for instance, there would have been no fireworks. Though did people say “there is something called veganism”? Yes.” (Enki)

“Again, according to the research by Vegan Turkey, I saw that it is highlighted during Gezi Protests. And the events which took place in certain days, the ones which are carried out regularly such as Bombalara Karşı Sofralar (Food Not Bombs).” (Büşra)

On the other hand, there are participants who think that Gezi Park Protests are not very effective in making veganism heard;

“For sure its visibility increased but it did not actually boom like LGBT movement there. Curiously, the destruction of a park is primarily related to nature and animals.” (Güray)

“There were friends who worked for this in Gezi Park, I do not look upon them at all. What they did was beautiful and important. But I know that the people participated in Gezi Protests pronounced demands for freedom and human rights... they identify themselves as leftists, they consider themselves as freedom fighters but when it comes to animals, they remain silent. I do not believe that Gezi made a real difference, I wish it did.” (Zülal)

Social Media Use Of The Vegan Activists

The tools and the span of being online:

In many of the interviews, the participants state that they connect to the Internet via smart phones and computers. Most of the participants spend 3 hours a day on the Internet. Some of them hold that they are constantly connected to the Internet, so they cannot maintain a certain timespan.

The reasons for being on social media with a vegan identity:

The most frequently stated reason for using social media with a vegan identity is “to recount veganism”. The fact that even the meaning of the word “vegan” is not commonly known explains this reason. On the other hand, there is a desire to reveal the common aspects of veganism with other leftist groups;

“...some anarchist groups, it can also be socialist groups. Or it can be religions. At least, I want them to take it into account, to discuss it and to face it.” (Derya)

The content that is shared in social web accounts:

The most frequently used social webs by the participants include Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The participants maintain that they share veganism-related content in their social web accounts. Half of the participants share content which has blood and torture, with censure or disclaimer;

“...the followers of the content that we share are not only non-vegan people. Vegans also follow this kind of things and I don’t want people to feel sorry by constantly being exposed to these. This kind of blood and violence content also repulses people. If possible, I censure it and share in that way.” (Seda)

“I don’t think it is nice to put blood without a warning. Therefore if there is a brutal violence image, I put a small warning. The mass that it goes to is different, though. Hence I do not adopt the idea that I would in no way share a bloody content. Some people might be convinced that it is indeed exploitation only through the most violent images.” (Güray)

Some of the participants do not share torture images because it would hinder a holistic approach to veganism;

“...anyone who sees that violence and is affected by it will begin to think that there is no problem with taking the eggs of the freely wandering chicken in the garden and eat them.” (Cem S.)

“They repulse the people to whom I want my message to reach, besides I take it as a disrespect to the animal which was exposed to that torture.” (Gülce)

When they are asked about the reactions of the non-vegan people to the shared contents, only four of the participants mentioned positive reactions. Negative reactions involve criticism to the content and starting a hare.

The target group of the contents:

The participants prepare content both for vegans and for everyone else. The elaboration of the target group of the contents is significantly interesting;

“For now, I prepare contents exclusively for people with a high level of education. The reason is they are the ones we should primarily win. First, I think their income level is most generally quite high. And that group is the one which dominantly participates in the consumer web. On the other hand, I have the idea that they can be more open to different opinions and to alternative life styles. Hence, currently, I prefer to prepare contents for the group with higher level income and to the undergraduate and graduate levels of education.” (Seda)

Organising common events and their announcement:

Almost all of the participants organise vegan events on social media and they enable participation in them. Food events, stand activities and demonstrations are the major ones. Facebook is a common space for announcing activities. Other than this, Twitter, blogs, e-mail and CouchSurfing are the leading tools for announcement.

The interactions of vegan community members among themselves on social media:

The interactions of the vegans among themselves on social media lead to both positive and negative situations. Unless they disagree with an idea on social media, vegans are regarded as benevolent and helpful people. However it is emphasised that their discussions are extremely harsh and fevered. It is also maintained that some discussions reduce the target of activism to individuals;

“For instance, as I have mentioned at the beginning, having a domestic animal. And else? Food industry. The discussions regarding whether food can involve trace amounts of milk or

milk products, or not. These are not decisions that a group can make, they are decisions which can be made only by individuals. The reason is, it cannot know what kind of conditions or worries I have.” (Enki)

The style of communicating with other vegans:

Facebook and Twitter are the most frequently used social media tools among the participants. Other than this, vegan meetings and e-mail groups are emphasised as alternative communication styles preferred by vegans. Almost all participants hold that there are vegan activists with whom they have met via social media, and interacted face to face.

The use of hashtags:

The participants use hashtags in order to reach a higher number of vegans, to access the recent news and to easily make their content widespread.

Reaching opinion leaders, political actors or pressure groups via the Internet:

Most of the participants reach opinion leaders, political actors or pressure groups via the Internet. These people prefer e-mail, change.org petition and sending messages to political actors via social webs. Three participants maintain that they never had such an effort.

The followed blogs and social webs related to vegan movement:

Among the participants, Hayvan Özgürlüğü Çevirileri (Animal Freedom Translations), Vegan Kedi (Vegan Cat), Vegan Türkiye (Vegan Turkey), Vegan Mutfak (Vegan Kitchen), Yerel Muhabir Ağı (Local Web of Reporters), Abolisyonist Vegan Hareket (Abolitionist Vegan Movement) and some foreign blogs stand out as the most frequently preferred blogs.

Social web pages such as Zülal Kalkandelen, Veganizm Özgürlüktür (Veganism is Freedom), Yeryüzüne Özgürlük Derneği (Freedom to Earth Association), Abolisyonistler (Abolitionists), Bir Gül'ün Mutfağı (The Kitchen of Bir Gül), Vegan Sidekick, Vegan Humour, Çalışan Vegan (Working Vegan), Vegan İstanbul and AVH are preferred.

Conclusion

This study seeks to explain how vegan activists use social media and how they exist on social media with their vegan identities. All of the participants share veganism-related news and information contents on social media. On the other hand, the announcement of events and protests via social media may be regarded as only one of the functions of social media for activism. The fact that the contents are often discussed among vegans leads to the consideration that social media, beyond being a channel for communication, is also a political environment which is open to other users to argue about animal rights.

Almost all of the participants have met other vegans via social media and have involved in face-to-face communication. It seems unavoidable for vegan activists, who are only a few in numbers, to use social media for finding other vegans and organising with them. The participants think that the other vegans on social media are collaborative as much as they are disputatious. These are new experiences for vegans, and it has an important impact on the mentioned discussions. It is necessary to be very attentive while mentioning vegans' relationship with ecology. Because people may have the wrong impression that in the situations where there is presumably no harm to ecology, vegans would approve the consumption of animals products. According to the participants, the fact that the focus of ethical veganism is animal rights must be highlighted.

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Appendix:

- Büşra Akman, Ankara Vegetarian Vegan Group, Ankara, 24 years old, Student, Vegan for 4 months (Büşra)
- Cem Çeboğlu, İstanbul, 43 years old, Teacher, Vegan for 1 year (Cem Ç.)
- Cem Soyer, Abolitionist Vegan Movement and İTÜ Veg, İstanbul, 25 years old, Student, Vegan for more than a year (Cem S.)
- Derya Apaydın, İstanbul, 24 years old, City Planner, Vegan for 2 years (Derya)
- Enki Aksan, İstanbul, 30 years old, Designer, Vegan for 2 years (Enki)
- Gülce Özen Gürkan, Abolitionist Vegan Movement, İstanbul, 33 years old, Teacher-musician, Vegan for 4 years (Gülce)
- Güray Tezcan, Freedom to Earth Association and Food Not Bombs, İstanbul, 26 years old, Student (PhD), Vegan for more than 2 years (Güray)
- Özlem Yağan, Abolitionist Vegan Movement, İstanbul, 40, Veterinary doctor, Vegan for 2 years (Özlem)
- Seda, Ankara, 28 years old, Business Administrator, Vegan for more than 1 year (Seda)
- Zülal Kalkandelen, İstanbul, 45 years old, Journalist-writer-translator, Vegan for 20 years (Zülal)