

## **Motives for Veganism and the Influence of Social Media**

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### **Author Note**

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## **Abstract**

Veganism is a lifestyle choice and movement that is becoming increasingly popular, especially with the use of social media. The number of persons deciding to go vegan is growing and the decision itself is being influenced by several factors. Whether they are intrinsic or extrinsic, the aim of this study was to identify which are the most common motives when it comes to this decision. Another objective was to analyze the influence of social media in following a vegan diet. An online questionnaire was conducted at the beginning of May 2022. The target group was represented by people who are following a vegan diet, 34 participants being considered in the results. Three motives were mentioned the most: animal welfare (76.5% of the respondents), health aspects (73.5% of the respondents) and environmental concerns (41.2% of the respondents). An open question revealed that aspects of well-being and health were considered as the main motive to follow a vegan diet (32.4% of respondents). The study also reveals several insights about the social media usage of vegans. They are mostly interested in food and health related content and use the platforms to inform themselves about veganism. The research findings imply that vegans who frequently use social media are often motivated by health-related factors. The study offers interesting starting points for future research about veganism.

*Keywords:* Vegan, Consumer Behavior, Social Networks, Lifestyle, Diet

## **Introduction**

The number of people around the world who follow a vegan or vegetarian diet or at least partially avoid animal products is rising. Veganism is a way of life that seeks to avoid all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals for food, clothing and other purposes (Kalte, 2021, as cited in The Vegan Society, n.d.-b). As part of a survey in 2019, the vegan food manufacturer and retailer *Veganz* asked 24,000 people across Europe about their diets. The percentage of respondents who completely avoided animal products was around 33.7% in the survey (Veganz, 2019). The growing number of vegans is also reflected in the increasing number of meat substitutes in supermarkets as well as in the offer of vegan dishes in restaurants. Veganism is becoming more and more relevant for consumers. Thus, this article focuses on the reasons consumers follow a vegan lifestyle and deals with the research question “Why do people go vegan?” Also, the increasing popularity of social media is an opportunity to understand consumers’ attitudes, experiences, and behaviors. Food bloggers, influencers, and celebrities are openly demonstrating their vegan diets on social networks. This development raises the question what role social media plays in following a vegan

lifestyle. The aim of the article is therefore to identify the motives for veganism as well as the role of social media in going vegan.

### **Literature Review**

Veganism has been a rising trend in recent years. The growing interest in an animal-free lifestyle is supported by the increasing availability of substitute products. Veganism stands for a comprehensive way of life that aims to avoid anything made by or with the help of animals. This includes food, clothing, and the use of animals for the purposes of anything (Kalte, 2021, as cited in The Vegan Society, n.d.-b). Consumer behavior to follow a vegan lifestyle can be understood through their motivations. Since the motivations people have for their actions can vary, recent literature addresses the different reasons that people motivate to choose a vegan lifestyle.

Janssen et al. (2016) classified different consumer segments according to their motivation to follow a vegan diet. They conducted face-to-face interviews at seven vegan supermarkets in Germany and used open questions to reveal the motives of the consumers for following a vegan lifestyle. Janssen et al. (2016) identified three main motives: animal-related motives, motives related to personal well-being or health and environment-related motives. Almost 90% of the interview participants mentioned concerns for animal welfare and animal rights and other ethical aspects related to animals as a motive to become vegan. The results showed that animal-related motives have the biggest impact on the decision to follow a vegan diet. The second most important motive was mentioned by 70% of the respondents and includes aspects related to personal well-being or health like taste, pleasure or weight loss. Slightly less than half of the respondents named concerns about environmental protection and climate change as well as the depletion of natural resources as a motive for their vegan lifestyle. Added to that, Janssen et al. (2016) found out, that most respondents mentioned more than one motive, indicating that many consumers are driven by the combination of reasons to pursue a vegan diet.

Similar results were observed by Kalte (2021), who found out that avoiding animal suffering is the most important motive for a vegan lifestyle. Kalte (2021) conducted a survey in Switzerland and more than 90% of the respondents stated that avoiding animal suffering is a very important motive, and 71% stated it as the main motive for a vegan lifestyle. Environmental concerns are the second most frequently mentioned motive for a vegan lifestyle. For almost 80% of the participants, the consideration of leading an environmentally friendly and resource-saving lifestyle was a very important factor. Results showed that individual health aspects are the third most important motive for the respondents. Therefore,

the motives are consistent with the research of Janssen et al. (2016), which also found that vegans are particularly concerned about animal suffering and in addition are mostly motivated by environmental and health concerns to adopt a vegan diet. Besides these results, Kalte (2021) analyzed the vegan lifestyle as a potential form of unconventional political participation. Overall, the author found out that political motives which include avoiding animal suffering, protecting the environment and reducing world hunger were dominant, as they were stated by almost 90% of the participants as the most important reason for adopting a vegan lifestyle.

Different findings were obtained in the study by Ngo et al. (2021). They used a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to examine the factors that influence the citizens in the Vietnamese City Ho Chi Minh to adopt a vegetarian diet (Ngo et al., 2021). These results are also interesting for the research of vegans, as vegetarians are people who avoid animal-based foods and thus it can be considered as a mitigated form of veganism. The results of their study show that the factors animal welfare, health, religion, mood, and reference groups motivate people to decide on plant-based diets. Mood is the main variable that affects people's dietary choices significantly. Next, reference groups are considered as the second reason for following a vegetarian diet. As previous research has shown, the variable health is also an important variable influencing people's dietary choices. Unlike previous studies, Animal welfare and religion were not as significant compared to other variables in the research model and therefore have a lower impact on people's vegetarian diets. Ngo et al. (2021) also found out that if one factor increases, the motivation to follow a vegetarian diet increases as well. According to the research results, mood can be considered as an important factor that affects people's vegan food choices. Moreover, the study provides evidence that references such as family, friends or coworkers influence a person's vegetarian decision. Besides, religion plays an important role for adopting an animal free diet. In Vietnam the religious life is very vibrant, and there are many different forms of religious activity by various religious organizations. Eliminating animal foods can therefore be seen as a reduction of overall suffering which is a Buddhist morality and thus, indicating a special case for Vietnam compared to other countries.

Veganism is considered as a behavior in which a person rejects animal in all variations of products. Such a diet is stated as healthy and nutritionally balanced and provides many health benefits (Korčoková & Loydlová, 2020). Therefore, vegan food can be considered as healthy. Korčoková and Loydlová (2020) aimed to point out which factors influence consumers' behavior when choosing healthy food, by conducting a quantitative survey on

consumers' attitude to food and their opinion on bio food in the context of a healthy lifestyle. Among the reasons invoked by the respondents on buying bio food and farm products the most important are related to health (53%), quality (25%), environment (13%), and lifestyle (9%). According to the research, consumers are currently intensively interested in products, especially food, that is considered healthy.

A growing number of food bloggers, influencers and celebrities publicly embrace their vegan diets and reach millions of followers and potential imitators through their social media profiles. Veganism is popular among Millennials who are drawn to social media in their everyday life. Therefore, social media can be seen as one of the drivers of adopting a vegan lifestyle. Pilař et al. (2021) executed a communication analysis of data from the social network *Twitter*, which comprised all tweets that used the hashtag #healthyfood between 2019 and 2020 on *Twitter*. They identified the main topics associated with healthy food on the social network and found out that *Twitter* users are most likely to associate healthy foods with a healthy lifestyle, diet, and fitness. The fourth most frequent used hashtag in combination with #healthyfood was the hashtag #vegan. In terms of food attributes, the hashtag #vegan was the most common used hashtag, which shows that people perceive vegan foods, organic foods, and homemade foods to be the healthiest foods. This relationship confirms previous studies that have identified health motives as one of the main motivations for a vegan diet.

Phua et al. (2020) conducted an online experiment in December 2018 to examine how consumer eating habits and celebrities' vegan identity affect various health communication outcomes about veganism. They found out that more than 100 million *Instagram* posts were tagged with the hashtags related to veganism such as #vegan, #veganism, #iamvegan, #veganlover or #veganfood. Considering that celebrity endorsement is one of the most popular forms of marketing communication to create a positive brand image, the authors discovered a correlation between celebrity endorsement and the intention to go vegan. When people identify with a celebrity, they also purchase the advertised product or service to gain cultural meaning through the association of the celebrity and product. As a result, the study reveals that social media posts about celebrity endorsement of veganism and messages, highlighting reasons for a vegan lifestyle, can motivate consumers to improve or maintain their health and quality of life by being health conscious.

In addition, Lundahl's (2020) study shows comparable results as it highlights how media can play an important role in destigmatizing consumption behavior. The timespan of the study was seven years and focused particularly on a British tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. The resulting framework shows that media institutions can use celebrities as positive

deviants. In this way, it is possible to turn a prominent fashion into a normalized consumption practice that leads to a larger number of followers.

Taken as a whole, most research identifies various motives for following a vegan diet and includes the combination of motivations. Recent studies have highlighted that vegan motivation is dynamic, which means that people acquire different motivations overtime. Animal welfare is an emerging motive in various studies according to the decision to become vegan (Janssen et al., 2016; Kalte, 2021; Korčoková & Loydlová, 2020; Ngo et al., 2021). Besides, health-motivated veganism is identified in most studies and expressed especially through social media networks as shown in the research by Pilař et al. (2021) and Phua et al. (2020). Food choices are linked to social relationships, as personal dietary decisions interact with one's social networks and sociocultural environment (Lundahl, 2020; Phua et al., 2020). Therefore, future research should investigate if the motives to follow a vegan diet, especially of the younger generations, are determined by the use of social media.

### **Method**

In order to answer the research questions an online questionnaire was conducted in the beginning of May 2022. The target group were people who followed a vegan diet. An online survey was selected with the aim of reaching many people who follow a vegan diet in a short period of time in different countries. The survey started with identifying the participants as vegans by asking the question if they follow a vegan lifestyle. If the answer was “Yes”, the questionnaire continued with a selection of different food options for breakfast in order to eliminate the participants who chose meals that are not in line with the vegan lifestyle. In total, 53 people participated in the survey. Among this number, four people were not vegan and 15 participants were excluded based on their not suitable choice of food regarding the vegan lifestyle. Thus, the data from 34 participants can be considered in the results.

The survey continued by asking the participants questions about their decision to follow a vegan lifestyle. The participants were given a selection of answers to get information about their timespan of being vegan as well as their transition to veganism. After that, the participants were asked to choose their reasons why they follow a vegan lifestyle. The variety of motives was based on the literature review and included animal suffering, concerns about environment, health aspects, religious beliefs, political participation and the option for other reasons which should be named after. The participants were allowed to choose more than one option which is based on the results of previous studies indicating that consumers are driven by the combination of motives (Janssen et al., 2016). Added to that, the participants should

name their main reason to become vegan in an open space to potentially reveal further insights of their motivation. Also, the participants were asked if their family members and friends also follow a vegan lifestyle.

The next section of the survey referred to the social media usage of the participants, starting with general questions about their usage frequency, platforms and content. After that, the survey focused on questions related to veganism on social media. The participants were asked if they follow accounts related to veganism, if they use social media to inform about veganism and if they use social media to talk about veganism with others. Added to that, the participants had the possibility to name in an open space if they experienced something on social media related to veganism that impacted them in order to get a more detailed picture. The questionnaire closed with questions about socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, work status, and country) as well as an open space for feedback or additions.

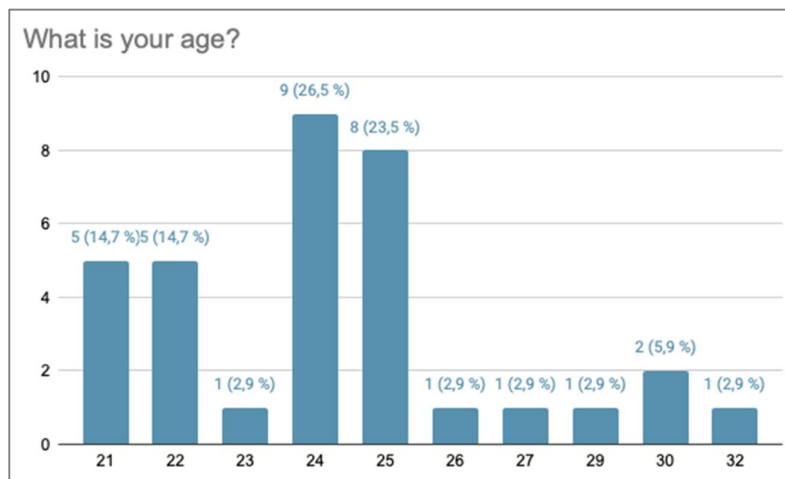
## Results

### *Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample*

More than three quarters of the respondents (82.3%) were under the age of 25 (Figure 1). The average age was 24,35 years old, and the median age was 24 years. The average age can be attributed to the fact that more than two thirds of the participants were students (70.6%), the rest of them being workers (29.4%). As for the gender, more than two thirds of the participants were women (76.5%), 20.6 % men, and one of the respondents preferred not to say (2.9%). Most of the respondents came from Germany (70.5%), followed by Romania (11.7%), and the United States of America (2.9%).

**Figure 1**

### *Age of the participants*



### *Duration of following a vegan diet*

Most of the respondents were following a vegan diet for less than 1 year (44.1%), ten respondents (29.4%) were following a vegan diet for 2 years to less than 5 years, eight respondents (23.5%) were following it for 1 year to less than 2 years, and only one respondent (2.9%) was following it for 5 years to less than 10 years. Regarding how participants made the transition to veganism, most of them have become gradually vegan over a period of time (61.8%), followed by those who participated in a vegan challenge (14.7%), by those who made it another way (14.7%), and those who went straight vegan (8.8%).

### *Social media impact*

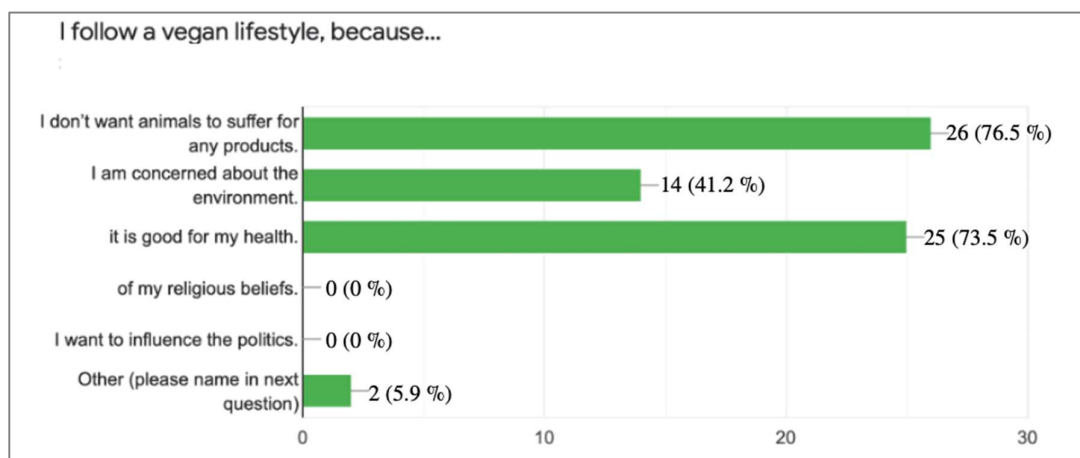
Most of the respondents are using social media every day (88.2%), while 8.8% of the participants are using it 1–3 times a week and only 2.9% 1–3 times a month. When asked about following vegan food accounts and influencers on social media, it was found that more than two-thirds of the respondents (76.5%) answered positively, while only 23.5% of the respondents did not follow accounts related to veganism. The open question about content related to veganism on social media platforms that impacted the respondents received 19 responses and revealed several main influences. Four of the respondents mentioned that some videos and documentaries led them to become vegan and to find out more details about this type of diet. Two respondents stated that certain content made them think about the conditions in which animals live or are treated in farms. Ten respondents mentioned that they were impacted by posts and articles related to veganism.

### *Consumer motivations for following a vegan diet*

The checkbox question about the motives to follow a vegan lifestyle revealed the following results (Figure 2):

**Figure 2**

### *Motives for veganism*





Added to that, the open question about the main motive for adopting a vegan diet revealed some more insights. Eight out of thirty-four respondents (23.5%) mentioned motives related to animal welfare. A quarter of the respondents (32.4%) mentioned motives related to personal well-being and health. We also found a third group of important motives mentioned by five of the respondents (14.7%), which were related to environmental protection and climate change. Some respondents (29.4%) mentioned other motives (e.g. ethical or a challenge).

### **Discussion**

Overall, the results showed that animal suffering was the most named motive in the decision to follow a vegan diet, followed by health-related motives. These results of the survey confirm the outcomes of the studies of Janssen et al. (2016) and Kalte (2021). However, environmental concerns were only named by less than half of the participants. Compared to the study by Ngo et al. (2021) who found out that reference groups also play an important role in the decision to follow a vegan diet, our survey showed that almost 30% of the respondents do not know friends or family members who are vegan. However, 76.5% of the respondents follow accounts on social media which are related to veganism, including influencers and celebrities. These can also be seen as a reference group since social media user perceive them as friends and built parasocial relationships with them (Yuan et al., 2016). Therefore, our observation can contribute to the results of Ngo et al. (2021) and should be investigated more in the future.

Moreover, our study results reveal that most of the participants consume food-related content on social media and 55.9% of the respondents are consuming health-related content. These results provide insights about the interest of vegans, since the target group of this study were people following a vegan diet. It can be concluded that content about vegan food and health aspects of veganism also influences consumer's motivation to follow a vegan diet. Added to that, 67.6% of the participants stated that they use social media to inform themselves about veganism. Interestingly, the results show that even though vegans are using social media as a source of information they do not use it to talk about veganism with others. This assumption is also supported by our findings, that mostly videos and documentaries on social media impacted the participants to follow a vegan diet. These findings are important since previous research of social media and veganism by Phua et al. (2020) and Pilař et al. (2021) was only based on the analysis of hashtags and did not include further insights about the consumer behavior. Due to our findings, health related motives seem to become more

important while animal related motives do not play such an important role within social media. We therefore recommend exploring the dynamics of motives for following a vegan diet on social media networks in future research.

Our study underlies some limitations. First, the survey was conducted in a very short period of time, which is why the number of participants is lower compared to other studies. Added to that, it should also be noted that the participants were mainly students under the age of 25 years from Germany and Romania. This should be considered when generalizing the results. A more extensive study based on our results would offer more reliable results. In addition, correlations between the answers could not be investigated due to the short timeframe of the study. Further analyses, for example with *SPSS*, could provide more in-depth results.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to reveal the motives of vegans to follow an animal-free lifestyle and to examine the role of social media of veganism by conducting an online survey. The results of the survey show that the majority of vegans are motivated by animal welfare and health aspects. Moreover, the analysis of the social media use of vegans revealed that they use social media to receive information about veganism but not to talk about it. Especially food and health related content is interesting for vegans on the platforms. From our results, we conclude that vegans who frequently use social media are particularly motivated by improving their health through this form of diet. We therefore suggest focusing further on the correlation between social media use and motivation for veganism in future research. Furthermore, it would be interesting to additionally investigate whether the health aspect only motivates people or whether people also decide against a vegan diet because they assume negative consequences on their health due to this lifestyle.

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