



The motivations, struggles and behaviours of vegan consumers: A digital consumer insights study of a vegan online community

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Abstract

The vegan movement has been gaining momentum as a growing number of people are adopting to veganism by eliminating all kinds of animal products. Through the fast spread of information online, consumers are becoming more aware of the inhumane treatment of animals used for production, the environmental impact of meat and dairy consumption as well as the health benefits a vegan diet can provide. Therefore, this dissertation aims to understand a vegan online community, providing insights into the motivations, struggles and behaviours of vegan consumers. The netnography approach was identified as the most appropriate research method, using computer-mediated communications to study online communities. The research results reveal that animal welfare, health benefits and environmental concerns are the main motivations for community members to adopt to veganism. When transitioning or maintaining a vegan lifestyle or diet, vegans face the following struggles: lack of knowledge, limited accessibility of vegan options, time, mistrust regarding vegan product claims, challenges in social settings, health problems and cravings. In order to navigate through the vegan journey, vegans replace all animal-derived products, take supplements, use mobile applications, plan and prepare meals, and exchange knowledge within online communities. The managerial implications derived from these findings include the utilisation of mobile applications for targeted advertisement, influencer marketing, tailored communication strategies, certified vegan trademarks and increasingly catering for vegan preferences.

Keywords: vegan consumers, online community, netnography, motivations, struggles, behaviours

Título: As motivações, lutas e comportamentos dos consumidores veganos: Um estudo digital de percepção do consumidor de uma comunidade vegan online

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Resumo

O movimento vegano tem vindo a ganhar força dado o maior número de pessoas que está a adotar o veganismo ao eliminar todos os tipos de produtos de origem animal. Através da rápida disseminação de informação online, os consumidores estão se tornando mais conscientes do tratamento desumano dos animais utilizados para a produção, do impacto ambiental do consumo de carne e laticínios, bem como dos benefícios à saúde que uma dieta vegana pode proporcionar. Esta dissertação visa entender uma comunidade vegana online, fornecendo conhecimento sobre as motivações, lutas e comportamentos dos consumidores veganos. A abordagem da netnografia foi identificada como o método de pesquisa apropriado, usando comunicações mediadas por computador para estudar as comunidades online. Os resultados da pesquisa revelam que o bem-estar animal, benefícios à saúde e preocupações ambientais são as principais motivações para os membros da comunidade adotarem o veganismo. Ao fazer a transição ou manter um estilo de vida ou dieta vegana, os veganos enfrentam as seguintes lutas: falta de conhecimento, acessibilidade limitada das opções veganas, tempo, desconfiança em relação às reivindicações de produtos veganos, desafios em ambientes sociais, problemas de saúde e desejos. Para navegar pela jornada vegana, os veganos substituem todos os produtos derivados de animais, tomam suplementos, usam aplicações móveis, planeiam e preparam refeições, e trocam conhecimentos dentro de comunidades online. As implicações empresariais destas descobertas incluem a utilização de aplicações móveis para publicidade direcionada, marketing de influenciadores, estratégias de comunicação personalizadas, marcas registradas veganas certificadas e cada vez mais atendendo às preferências veganas.

Palavras-Chave: consumidores veganos, comunidade online, netnografia, motivações, lutas, comportamentos

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Definition and Relevance

The number of vegans has been increasing over the last decade. For instance, in the United States the number of people identifying as vegan has surged by 600% between 2014 and 2017 (Top Trends in Prepared Foods 2017, 2017). With the rising number of vegans and people interested in a cruelty-free, meat- and dairy-free diet, the market for plant-based food is growing. Amongst others, this is reflected in the expanding market size for meat substitutes in Europe, which has grown by 451% from 2014 to 2018 (Elsner, 2018).

Veganism has become a topic widely discussed by traditional media, activist campaigns and social media. The Economist and Forbes considered 2019 as the “Year of the Vegan” (Banis, 2018; Parker, 2018). A growing number of people has become interested in the vegan lifestyle and seeks information online. Indeed, the google search inquires for the term vegan has been increasing over the last years ([Appendix 9.1.](#)). The fast spread of information online is boosting the awareness for animal abuse, the environmental impact of meat consumption and health effects of a vegan diet. Through documentaries on popular streaming websites such as Netflix, podcasts as well as celebrities and influencers¹ talking about veganism on social media consumers are increasingly confronted with these topics. The topic of veganism is also popular in online discussions. People use online communities to interact with each other, share beliefs, concerns, knowledge and opinions within the online groups. Since vegans are a minority within the minority group of vegetarians and are often alone in their journey (Parker, 2018), they turn to social platforms and online communities seeking support of other vegans.

Although there is a growing body of literature regarding the motivations and benefits of veganism, it seems that the process of becoming vegan and maintaining the diet is less thoroughly researched (Greenebaum, 2012). This dissertation seeks to fill this research gap by using netnography, which is a qualitative research method to study online communities. As vegans are an active online community, this is a particularly appropriate method for providing insights into consumer behaviour. Furthermore, most research focuses on people following a vegan diet that is eliminating all kinds of animal foods from their diet and eating only plant-

¹ Influencer = “An influencer, often times referred to as a blogger or content creator, is a trusted resource with a significantly engaged following on social media who shares genuine opinions and information on various topics, products and services that interest them via social media, a website or blog” (Estay, 2019)

based foods. However, for some people veganism is more than a diet. It is a philosophy and a lifestyle. In contrast to previous studies, this dissertation considers veganism holistically, that is both as a diet and a lifestyle. Consumers living a vegan lifestyle do not only eschew from animal foods, but from all kinds of animal products.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide insights into vegan consumers by studying the vegan online community. Therefore, the netnography method was chosen to analyse consumers' online conversations and discussions about veganism in order to understand the consumer behaviour of people who aim to eliminate animal products from their diet and lifestyle. This dissertation aims to provide managerial implications based on the generated insights to give guidance to companies on how to develop marketing and communication strategies to target vegan consumers and to implement changes to support vegan consumers in adopting and maintaining a vegan diet or lifestyle. Possibly, this might even facilitate consumer segment growth.

In order to comprehend the vegan consumer behaviour and provide implications, the following research questions are raised.

RQ1: How do the members of the online vegan community define veganism? What does it mean to live a vegan lifestyle?

The first question aims to provide a fundamental understanding of the community member's definition and interpretation of veganism as well as the meaning of the lifestyle.

RQ2: What are the motivations of vegan online community members to adopt to veganism? What are the main struggles vegans face with regards to the transition and maintenance of a vegan diet or a vegan lifestyle?

The second question addresses the reasons why consumers decide to adopt to veganism. Moreover, the second part of the question intends to explore the main struggles and challenges members are facing when it comes to the successful transition and maintenance of the lifestyle or diet.

RQ3: What are the common offline and online behaviours of vegan community members in order to adopt and live a vegan lifestyle or follow a vegan diet?

This question covers vegan consumers' behaviours and actions undertaken in their everyday lives in order to retain a vegan lifestyle or diet and to deal with struggles.

1.3. Structure of the Thesis

In order to answer the research questions and provide a profound understanding of vegan consumers, this dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first one includes the problem definition and research relevance as well as the objectives of this study. Subsequently, an overview of the topic of veganism in the academic context is provided. The third chapter introduces the netnography method and describes the undertaken steps to conduct a successful netnographic study. Thereby, the selection process of the online community and the application of grounded theory to analyse the data is outlined. The following chapter presents the findings of the data analysis including the themes of the thematic network. Thereafter, the main conclusions and the resulting theoretical and managerial implications are addressed in the fifth chapter. Finally, limitations are discussed and suggestions for further research are provided.

2. Literature review: Veganism in the academic context

2.1. Vegan practices

Vegan consumption can be viewed as a type of ethical consumption, as consumers progressively adopt alternative forms of consumption to match their values (Johnston & Szabo, 2011). It can also be associated with political consumerism, as consumers make buying decisions based on their political and ethical stances (Bossy, 2014). Accordingly, Adams (2010) considers veganism as a boycott of animal products by consumers.

Vegans abstain from the consumption of any kind of animal product. This is reflected in the predominant definition of veganism by the Vegan Society², a registered educational charity and the oldest vegan society in the world. They define veganism as "a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose" (The Vegan Society, 2019a). This definition implies

² The Vegan Society was founded in 1944 by Donald Watson and five friends in the UK to separate it from the Vegetarian Society. Watson created the term veganism for vegetarians who do not consume dairy. The Vegan Society provides guidance and information on all aspects of veganism with the mission to make veganism mainstream (The Vegan Society, 2019b).

that vegans do not only eliminate meat, fish, dairy and eggs from their diet but also refrain from any product using animal exploitation across their whole lifestyle.

Identifying as a vegan can be equated with a declaration of one's identity, morals and lifestyle. Since not all vegans have the same values and norms, their interpretation of the vegan definition as well as their consumption practices might differ. Cherry (2006) discovers that there are two distinct ways to define and practice veganism. While half of her participants practiced veganism according to the above-mentioned Vegan Society definition, the other half generated and followed idiosyncratic and less strict definitions and thus, consumed honey, dairy products and eggs at times. Willetts (1997) outlined how a 'lapse' from strict vegetarianism did not stop a vegetarian or vegan from maintaining their self-definition. This emphasizes how blurred the lines of the vegan definition can be.

2.2. Vegan identity, motivations and retention

Vegan practices may be influenced by how vegans form their own identity. Only a few vegans are actually raised vegan, the vast majority adopts to veganism at some point in their teenage or adult life (Ruby, 2012). The motivations for becoming vegan have an effect on how vegan identities are formed. Moreover, motivations provide insights into the key drivers of consumers' actions (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006).

Studies that focus on the vegan consumer are scarce, as most scientific research is about vegetarians with vegans included only in some of them. The few studies that have examined why consumers adopt a vegan diet found that the most frequently mentioned reasons were ethical, health-related and environmental. Ethical reasons, sometimes also referred to as moral or animal-related reasons, encompass concerns about animal welfare, animal rights, animal agriculture and speciesism³ (Dyett, Sabaté, Haddad, Rajaram & Shavlik, 2013; Janssen, Busch, Rödiger & Hamm, 2016; Larsson, Rönnlund, Johansson & Dahlgren, 2003; Radnitz, Beezhold & DiMatteo, 2015). Health-related reasons, or self-related reasons, include aspired benefits for personal health and well-being and relate to the belief that a vegan diet is healthier than a diet that includes animal products, as it prevents illness and promotes personal fitness (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Janssen et al., 2016; Rothgerber, 2013; Radnitz et al. 2015; Timko, Hormes & Chubski, 2012; Waldmann, Koschizke, Leizmann & Hahn, 2003). Environmental reasons,

³ Speciesism = "Speciesism is the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species" (Horta, 2010)

sometimes called ecological or environment-related reasons, comprise of concerns about environmental protection, ecological sustainability, climate change and resource scarcity (Beardsworth & Keil, 1993; Janssen et al., 2016). Most studies distinguish between ethical and environmental reasons, however, Rothgerber (2013) views environmental concerns as ethical reasons and thus, includes these concerns in the ethical-related reasons. Although ethical and health reasons are both mentioned as primary motivations, ethical considerations prevail as motivations for adopting veganism in academia (Janssen et al., 2016; Radnitz et al., 2015; Rothberger, 2013; Timko et al., 2012). In contrast, Waldmann and colleagues (2003) have identified health reasons as the most frequently mentioned set of reasons for veganism in their study. Nevertheless, it is not clear which role environmental reasons play. Whereas the study conducted by Kerschke-Risch (2015) concluded that climate protection is the second most relevant reason, other studies attributed little importance to environmental concerns (Dyett et al., 2013; Izmirili & Philips, 2011; Waldmann et al., 2003). Reasons that were less often mentioned are distaste of animal products (Waldmann et al., 2003) and religious beliefs (Dyett et al., 2013; Izmirili & Philips, 2011). Larrison et al. (2003) add that external factors such as family, peers and perceived consequences also influence the decision of transitioning to veganism. Many studies report that it is seldom one reason that drives changes in dietary behaviour but rather a combination of the aforementioned reasons (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991; Janssen et al., 2016; Rothgerber, 2013).

Accordingly, Greenebaum (2012) has identified three distinct vegan identities based on their motivation for being vegan: Ethical vegans, health vegans, environmental vegans. While the ethical vegans adopt to the vegan lifestyle for ethical, moral and political reasons, the health vegans believe in the health benefits of a vegan diet in order to lose weight or improve their mental or physical health and the environmental vegans are driven by the negative impact the consumption of animal products has on the planet.

The literature on the retention and maintenance of a vegan lifestyle is quite rare and focuses mainly on the role family members and friends play in the success or failure of dietary change (Asher & Cherry, 2015; Cherry, 2015; Hirschler, 2011). Reactions of family members, as well as the dynamics of food choice between significant others, can create barriers to the successful maintenance of a vegan diet (Asher & Cherry, 2015). According to Hirschler (2011), dietary change can lead to strained personal and professional relationships. Particularly, family members tend to be negative and tough to navigate, as they continuously disparage the vegan diet and its beliefs, express parental concerns about the appropriateness of a vegan diet and

create uncomfortable social interactions (Hirschler, 2011). Cherry's study (2015) supports these findings and adds that everyday interactions with non-vegan family and friends are particularly difficult for vegans, since they got teased, questioned and mocked. Eating with family and friends who were not vegan is perceived as challenging. Cherry (2015) emphasises how important social support from family and friends is to maintain a vegan lifestyle. In addition, social support through interactions between vegans within their social networks plays a major role in maintaining a vegan lifestyle (Cherry, 2006).

2.3. Vegan movement

As veganism is about removing animal products from consumer's diets and lifestyles, it is often recognized as just one goal or means of the animal rights movement (Munro, 2005). According to Cherry (2006), veganism can be seen as a 'post-industrial movement' (Jasper, 1997) or a New Social Movement, as stated by Melucci's definition: "A social movement [is] a form of collective action, (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, [and] (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs" (Melucci, 1984, p. 825). Cherry (2006) states that the number of participating vegans in the USA exceeds the number of members of vegan organizations. This implies that veganism is not limited to the engagement in activism or moral protest associated with vegan organizations, but that it has to be seen as a larger, more spread movement. Vegans constitute a new form of social movement built not on legislation or identity politics, but on day-to-day practices integrated into one's lifestyle (Cherry, 2006). Therefore, the success of the movement is measured by cultural and lifestyle changes made by individuals, instead of legislative changes (Cherry, 2006).

Veganism is a transnational movement with a growing number of people partaking around the world (Radnitz et al., 2015). Only a few studies have been conducted to determine the number of vegans in various countries. For instance, British vegans make up 1,16% of the total population, a number that has quadrupled between 2014 and 2019 (The Vegan Society, 2019c). In the United States, the number of consumers who claim to be vegan increased by 600% from almost 4 million in 2014 to 19,6 million in 2017 (Top Trends in Prepared Foods 2017, 2017). In contrast, a Gallup poll in 2018 says that 3% of Americans are vegan in contrast to 2% in 2012 (Reinhart, 2018). While in 2008 0,8 million Germans were vegan, the number grew by 62,5% to 1,3 million vegans in 2016, which is 1,6% of the total German population ("1,3 Millionen Deutsche," 2016). However, these numbers have to be treated with caution, as often

activist groups or the industry have commissioned the surveys, who might have motives to exaggerate results (Best, 2001). Nonetheless, the prevalence of veganism is unquestioned.

Veganism can be considered a consumer-based movement that grows as the global concerns about the impacts of animal production are growing (Wrenn, 2011). The most relevant concerns addressed by vegans and the benefits revolving from the adoption of a vegan diet are outlined in the next sub-chapter.

2.4. Benefits of veganism

2.4.1. Environmental benefits

The concerns about the environmental impact of animal agriculture for the production of meat, dairy, eggs as well as other animal products have been increasing in the past decade since its role in climate change has been proven evident. Attention to this research was partially incited by the report “Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options” published by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2006 (Steinfeld et al., 2006). The report estimates that livestock production generates 18% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions worldwide, which is larger than the global contribution of the transportation sector. As stated by the report, the main sources of emission are land use change, enteric fermentation from ruminants and manure management. However, there has been discussion about the correct way to measure the impact of animal agriculture on climate change. Goodland and Anhang (2009) argued that livestock and their by-products are responsible for not only 11%, but 51% of the GHG emissions. They claim that in the FAO report the sources of GHG emission are underestimated, wrongly assigned to a sector or even overlooked. Nevertheless, taking this debate under consideration, researchers have roughly agreed on the 18% figure (Herrero et al., 2011; Persson, Johansson, Cederberg, Hedenus & Bryngelsson, 2015).

Not only does the livestock industry has a negative impact on GHG emissions, but it is also a major driver for land-use change, deforestation, habitat destruction and thus, biodiversity loss (Aleksandrowicz, Green, Joy, Smith & Haines, 2016; Erb, 2016; Gerber, 2013; Machovina, 2015). Furthermore, animal products generally have a higher water footprint than nutritionally equivalent plant products (Hoekstra, 2012). Animal agriculture is a major cause of chemical pollution, nitrogen pollution as well as marine dead zones (Diaz & Rosenberg, 2008; Erisman, 2013). A report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) concludes: “A substantial reduction of impacts would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet

change, away from animal products” (Hertwich, 2010, p. 82). Hedenus, Wirsenius and Johannson (2014) state that the minimization of meat and dairy consumption is a necessary element to mitigate GHG emissions in order to meet the climate change target of a maximum of 2 °C average increase of the global surface temperature with a high probability.

In response to the environmental damages caused by livestock and animal production, research was conducted to examine and compare the benefits of restricting animal product consumption. In their systematic review of studies that evaluates the environmental impact of dietary change Hallström, Carlsson-Kanyama and Börjesson (2015) found out that the vegan diet has the highest capability on reducing GHG emissions and land use demand. Aleksandrowicz et al. (2016) confirm these findings and extend them to the environmental indicator of water use. They found that in the majority of cases the diets that reduce animal-based food consumption the most, namely vegan and vegetarian diets, produce the greatest environmental benefits across the indicators GHG emissions, land use and water use. All in all, researchers agree on the same trend, namely that the higher the adoption to vegan consumption, the lower the environmental footprint, including the contribution to climate change.

2.4.2. Health benefits

Similar to the increased attention to research on the positive environmental impact of veganism, interest in the health benefits of a vegan diet has increased in the past years, especially in the research field of nutrition. While in the past nutritionists viewed vegan diets as risky or unhealthy, a growing consensus has emerged over the last decades that vegan diets are not only considered to be healthy but also more ideal for health than diets including meat (Craig, 2009; Leitzmann, 2014).

Since all meat and animal products are eliminated from a vegan diet, vegans heavily rely on alternative food products such as whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, peas, seeds and nuts. These foods comprise a large part of a vegan diet and thus, can contribute to a higher daily intake of several beneficial nutrients. Multiple studies report that vegan diets are usually higher in fibre, magnesium, vitamins E and C, antioxidants and potassium (Craig & Mangels, 2009; Davey et al., 2003; Dewell, Weidner, Sumner, Chi & Ornish, 2008; Turner-McGrievy, Barnard, Scialli & Lanou, 2004; Turner-McGrievy et al., 2008). Moreover, vegan diets tend to be lower in saturated fat, cholesterol and calories (Craig & Mangels, 2009; Davey et al., 2003; Dinu et al., 2017). These nutritional differences may be the reason for some health advantages

associated with a balanced vegetarian or vegan diet. Several studies report that vegan diets offer protection for obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and some cancers (Tonstad, Butler, Yan & Fraser 2009; Craig & Mangels, 2009, Le & Sabaté, 2014; Craig, 2009). Observational studies indicate that vegans are generally slimmer and have lower body mass indexes (BMI) compared to non-vegans (Craig, 2009; Dinu et al., 2017). Additionally, various randomized controlled-studies show that vegan diets contribute more effectively to weight loss in comparison to other diets, even when vegan participants did not actively focus on reducing calories (Barnard et al., 2006; Mishra et al., 2013; Turner-McGrievy, Davidson, Wingard & Billings, 2014; Turner-McGrievy, Davidson, Wingard, Wilcox & Frongillo, 2015).

However, removing all animal products from the diet leads to potential nutritional shortfalls, which may lead to severe consequences. A poorly planned vegan diet may not provide sufficient amounts of essential vitamin B12, omega 3 fatty acids, iron, calcium and zinc (Craig & Mangels, 2009). Unless vegans frequently consume foods enriched with these nutrients, appropriate dietary supplements should be taken.

The mentioned health benefits assume that a vegan diet involves a high intake of vegetables, fruits and nuts. Vegan food, however, is not necessarily healthy, as many of the vegan substitutes products for meat and dairy are processed (Greenebaum, 2012). A vegan who consumes a lot of vegan junk food might not benefit from the health advantages of the diet to the same extent than a vegan who eats only whole foods. In conclusion, a vegan diet has positive health benefits as long as it is balanced and well-managed.

Although the environmental benefits and health benefits were considered in different sections, they are linked. Environmental consequences of meat production such as climate change and pollution can indirectly cause severe health issues (West et al., 2013). Leitzmann (2014) points to the emergence of new scientific fields such as nutrition ecology that take into account human wellbeing and environmental concerns equally. Accordingly, a vegan diet can produce combined benefits.

2.4.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations focus primarily on animal rights and the treatment of animals. More than 60 billion animals are slaughtered each year for human consumption, and this number is growing rapidly, commonly by intensifying production while lowering standards of animal treatment (Staples & Klein, 2016). The specific ethical considerations vary, ranging from

concerns for animals' welfare and their freedom to the association of animal products with colonization and patriarchy (Fox & Ward, 2008; Harper, 2010). What these considerations have in common is the boycott of animal products on the grounds of social reasons (Adams, 2010; Cherry, 2015).

In addition to individual vegan beliefs, theorists from the fields of critical animal studies and feminism studies have proposed critical theories that endorse the adoption of vegan consumption. Critical animal researchers use the term "speciesism" to illustrate the unequal treatment of animal species (Wrenn, 2013). For instance, societies value the lives of humans, dogs and chickens very differently. The adoption of vegan consumption is part of the suggested process of ending speciesism. Additionally, ecofeminist scholars stress that the oppression against marginalized groups, such as women and colonized people, is intertwined with the oppression of animals through their exploitation for production (Wright, 2015). By and large, there are distinct approaches theorising about the ethical problems associated with animal production, all of them agreeing that vegan consumption is part of the solution.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction to Netnography

Since the goal of this thesis is to provide consumer insights into the vegan community to understand its culture and lifestyle, the method of netnography was chosen. Robert Kozinets developed netnography as “an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insights” (Kozinets 2002, p. 61). This new qualitative research method is an adaptation of the participant-observational ethnography techniques with the aim of studying online communities and cultures (Kozinets, 2002). As the source of data, it uses computer-mediated communications which are publicly available in online groups and online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography uses this information to “understand and identify the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups” (Kozinets, 2002, p.62). In addition, insights on meanings, symbolism and consumption habits of online consumer groups are collected by analysing the communications, postings and interactions that occur across members of an online community (Kozinets, 2002). Members become part of a community due to their shared interest in a lifestyle, hobby, brand, product or service.

In contrast to ethnography, the method of netnography has the advantage of being far less obtrusive (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). This gives the researcher the opportunity to immerse oneself into the community, get insights on how its members interact with each other and observe the community's behaviour as well as its culture. Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) state that the unobtrusive manner allows researchers to get a view into the customer's everyday lives. Compared to research methods such as personal interviews and focus groups, the netnography method is naturalistic and unobtrusive because consumers are observed in a naturalistic setting rather than in a manufactured one (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, Kozinets (2015) emphasizes the flexibility and adaptability of this method. However, there are also limitations to the netnography method, as netnography focuses mainly on online communities and is depending on the interpretative skills of the researcher (Kozinets, 2002). This makes it difficult to generalize findings to other groups outside of online forums or communities (Kozinets, 1998; 2002). In addition, the authenticity of respondents and the quality of textual data material are a major concern (Xun & Reynolds, 2010).

While netnography was originally developed as a response to the increased use of the Internet by consumers (Kozinets, 1997), the integration of digital technologies into the consumer's everyday life makes the netnography research method more relevant than ever (Simmons, 2008; Tikkanen, Hietanen, Hettonen & Rokka, 2009; Rokka, 2010). Today, consumers have a persistent connection to the Internet through various mobile devices and computers and people, in particular, the younger generation, like to express and share their views, experiences and day-to-day activities online (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). For that, social media has established itself as an important communication platform for consumers (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Due to social media and the constant expansion of the Internet's reach, Heinonen and Medberg (2018) expect that the usage of the netnography method will continue to grow in the next years.

In order to conduct a successful netnography study, Kozinets (2002, 2010) has identified six essential steps: (1) research planning; (2) entrée; (3) data collection; (4) interpretation; (5) ensuring ethical standards; (6) research representation. In the following sub-sections, each step is addressed.

3.2. Research planning

The first step in the research planning involves defining the research questions to identify the online communities most relevant to answer them. Moreover, it is of great importance for the researcher to study the online communities and its members to get a better understanding of them. In order to find suitable online communities, search engines and online platforms such as Google, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram were searched by using the keywords “vegan”, “vegan community” and “vegan lifestyle”. After numerous online communities have been identified, preference was given to the online communities that were more relevant to the research topic, have higher traffic of posts, a larger number of participants, more interactions between within the community and offer more detailed, descriptive and rich data (Kozinets, 2002, 2010).

Therefore, the Facebook group “How to Vegan” was chosen for this netnographic study, as it has the largest number of members on Facebook and the high number of daily posts provide a great source of descriptively rich data. Other social networks were excluded, since they did not fulfil the criteria to the extent as the chosen Facebook group did. Instagram sites were eliminated from the study as the comments were short and mostly included icons/emoticons and tags of friends, which do not provide enough rich data for analysis. Vegan blogs focus mainly on recipes and were excluded due to the lack of comments and discussions. YouTube videos provided an overwhelming amount of comments; however, these were neither of descriptive nor relevant nature. While this study concentrates on one community, this focus allows the researcher to deep-dive into the community’s culture to provide an in-depth view of the community members.

3.3. Entrée

The Facebook group “How to Vegan” was founded in March 2016 by a vegan health coach, has in total seven administrators, four moderators and 81,800 members (as of October 2019). It is supposed to be a place for positive support and guidance for both vegans and non-vegans. The group has some rules and guidelines to set expectations, prevent conflict and provide a safe, positive environment for members to ask questions, share experiences and have friendly discussions. For example, members are asked to not post graphic images or videos of animal abuse, to not promote the use of animal products of any kind and to not start conversations on topics such as religion, abortion, palm oil, wool and so forth. Additionally, to avoid spam and

keep the group's focus on vegan lifestyle topics self-promoting and advertisement posts are prohibited and deleted by group administrators. Moreover, a definition of veganism is provided to ensure a form of agreement amongst members. After answering a set of questions, which were reviewed by the administrators, access to enter the Facebook group was granted.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected over a three months period from October to December 2019. A total number of 236 posts and comments were downloaded and analysed. The data consist of mainly text postings and some posts that include a visual such as a video or photo as well as a text. In addition, the gathered data was complemented by further informational material such as online articles, blogs, books, documentaries and journals.

Grounded theory was used for the analysis of the collected data. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p2.), the purpose of grounded theory is the “discovery of theory systematically obtained from social research”. In grounded theory, the collected data is examined to construct a theory, instead of having a theory and testing it with data. This process consists of translating the gathered data into codes, categories and themes (Spiggle, 1994). A key strategy is a comparative analysis that ensures that during the coding process each data entry that might belong to the same category or theme is compared with regards to their similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Spiggle 1994). Data collection should continue until no new codes can be generated and no new insights can be derived from the data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In order to make sense of the collected data, either a manual or an electronic coding method can be used. Using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti is a possible electronic coding method. However, manual coding is the preferred method as it allows the researcher to immerse in the community culture to get a better understanding of them and leads to closeness to the data (Kozinets, 2010). Thus, the acceptance of a software output without critical scrutiny is avoided.

After the data was downloaded, each post or comment was coded and then similar codes were grouped into categories. Related categories were combined into themes, which then can become the basis for generating new theories. The result of the coding is a thematic network ([Appendix 9.2.](#)) that serves as the foundation for the empirical analysis in chapter 4.

3.5. Ethical standards

Amongst researchers, there has been debate about guidelines for ethical research on the Internet. Ethical concerns stem from the interconnected issues whether online groups can be considered a public or private space and what constitutes “informed consent” in cyberspaces (Kozinets 2002, p. 65). While Sudweek and Rafaeli (1996) argue that consent is implied when posting to a publicly available online group, King (1996) claims that informed consent is needed as consumers might be misled by the semi-public nature of their seemingly private conversations.

Kozinets (2010) proposes four ethical research procedures ensuring ethical standards of netnography research: (1) Reveal researcher’s presence and intentions to online group members; (2) Guarantee anonymity and confidentiality to participants; (3) Seek and integrate feedback from online community members; (4) Obtain informed consent from members to use specific posts as direct quote in the study.

In order to comply with these research procedures, the researcher first sends a private message to the Facebook group’s administrators introducing herself and informing them about the intention to study the community as part of her master thesis (asking for permission to study the community for research purposes). Moreover, permission from members was obtained when direct quotes were used. Additionally, all user names were anonymized, except when a user explicitly wanted to have his or her name included in the research.

3.6. Member checks

Member checks are a procedure whereby the researcher presents the final research findings to members of the community that is studied in order to gather feedback (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kozinets, 2002). This procedure gives the researcher the opportunity to gain additional and more specific insights enabling further development and error checking. In addition, it guarantees ethical standards and creates a continuous exchange of information between researcher and community members (Kozinets, 2002).

Thus, two member checks were conducted for this study. Both participants were active members of the Facebook Group “How to Vegan” and were contacted directly through Facebook Messenger. Members were presented with the analysis’ findings and answered a set of questions in order to obtain further insights and clarification.

3.7. Ensuring trustworthy interpretation

During the collection and analysis of netnographic data, the researcher has to follow guidelines that ensure the quality and “trustworthiness” of the research. Kozinets (2002) recommends the use of triangulation of the data by testing its trustworthiness through the help of surveys, interviews, focus groups or additional ethnographic studies. In this study, the conduction of two member checks guarantees that the data is trustworthy. In conclusion, netnographic researchers must account for the limitations of the online medium and technique to be trustworthy (Kozinets, 2002).

4. Analysis

4.1. Definition

The conduction of the data analysis resulted in the identification of the first theme – the definition of veganism. This theme is about how veganism is defined amongst the community members and what it means to live a vegan life.

Many discussion threads were identified regarding how veganism is defined and how it is interpreted by its members. Data analysis shows that community members mostly refer to veganism as a “*lifestyle*”. Moreover, they associate veganism with terms such as “*philosophy*”, “*movement*” and “*journey*”. The administrators of the Facebook community use the Vegan Society’s definition within discussions to promote a consistent understanding of veganism as “*a philosophy and a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practical, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose*”. User 1 concludes “*The definition is simple. As a vegan you don’t eat or use any animal products*”.

The movement is about ending animal abuse and exploitation and promoting a lifestyle that creates a more caring world in which animals can exist in their own right. Although members also refer to other reasons for becoming vegan, such as health problems or environmental concerns, many argue that there is absolutely no other reason for being vegan than “*helping animals*” and stress that it is an “*animal rights movement*”. Many vegans believe that if someone does not believe in the vegan philosophy that animals have an inherent right to life and not being used, this person cannot be considered a vegan, but rather a plant-based eater who eats the way vegans do for their own health, environmental or other reasons. The differences and

similarities between a plant-based diet, a vegan diet and a vegan lifestyle are often discussed within the online community. Members claim that people still wearing and using animal products and thus, not “*living the vegan lifestyle*” are just on a plant-based diet. The majority of plant-based diets consists exclusively of plant-based food, whereas other forms of a plant-based diet can contain small amounts of animal foods. In contrast, a vegan diet totally removes all animal-derived foods. Therefore, a plant-based diet is not necessarily vegan, but a vegan diet is always plant-based. In contrast to vegans who live a vegan lifestyle and believe in animal rights and thus, abstain from all animal products, people mostly follow a plant-based or vegan diet for reasons other than animal welfare, such as health or environment.

Although the terms are not the same, they are often treated as such. In the online community, the word veganism is often used simultaneously for a diet and a lifestyle. Many self-define as vegans due to convenience or lack of understanding of what veganism really means. This leads to conflicts with other people’s motivations and ethics. User 2 explains the importance of this distinction: “*I hear some saying that it doesn't matter that we all do the same, but we don't. Plant dieters wear leather, fur, go to animal circuses, buy animals in pet stores and from breeders, buy animal-tested products and don't usually believe animals deserve rights. They've actually very little in common with vegans, except they mimic our diet by coincidence. Why is it so important to keep the two distinct? Because yet again humans are making it about themselves. What started as a rights movement for non-humans is being hijacked and misappropriated as a fad diet for our own benefit, due to ignorance and human ego. We need to keep the focus on animals and their rights if we are to progress their cause*”.

While most members follow the strict definition of veganism and abstain from animal products, a few admit that they occasionally bend the definition to match it to their needs and demands. They would consider eating something non-vegan when they have no other option due to the lack of availability of a vegan alternative. Additionally, User 3 states “*You don't have to be perfect to be vegan. I know vegans who still wear leather or eat the occasional slice of pizza. If the mindset is there, you're already a vegan*”. However, this statement stands in contrast to the conviction of most vegans and User 4 responds that “*no vegan can temporarily give up its morals and ethical views for pizza*”. It is made clear in the online community that deliberate consumption of animal products is not tolerated, however, the online group participants acknowledge that mistakes can happen, since no one is perfect. Particularly, in the transition phase mistakes occur and people need time to adapt veganism to all aspects of their lives. While some members transition to veganism overnight, for most it is a process. They consider the

transitioning process as a journey throughout which they adapt their daily consumption behaviour to the vegan lifestyle. It is perceived as accepted for transitioning vegans to continue wearing leather shoes or use other animal products they already possess until they need replacing.

Both in academic literature as well as within the online community the definition of the Vegan Society is used to create a common understanding of veganism. Although it seems that a universal definition exists, there is a lot of debate regarding who is eligible to self-define as vegan based on one's motivation and how strict the definition has to be followed. As stated in the academic literature, members of the vegan online community sometimes follow a less strict definition, since they might consume honey or another animal ingredient (Cherry, 2006). The analysis results support Willetts' (1997) finding that people continue to self-define as vegans, although they might deviate from their dietary pattern and consume an animal product at times. Following a plant-based or a vegan diet can be considered as a less strict version of veganism as the behaviour changes are restricted to the dietary patterns and not the whole lifestyle. A clear distinction between a plant-based diet, a vegan diet and a vegan lifestyle is missing in the academic literature about veganism. Most research refers to the term vegan diet (e.g. Craig, 2009; Radnitz et al., 2015). The analysis' findings provide insights into the debate on who can define as a vegan.

Moreover, many discussion threads were identified regarding what it means to live a vegan life. The main behavioural guidelines are outlined in the next section. First of all, vegans eat a plant-based diet which is free of all kinds of animal foods such as meat, fish, shellfish, insects, dairy, eggs and honey. Moreover, vegans abstain from all animal-derived materials (e.g. leather, fur, wool), animal ingredients (e.g. gelatine, milk protein casein) as well as products tested on animals (e.g. cosmetics). Although medicine is tested on animals, members agree that no one should do without their prescribed medication. Furthermore, as vegans choose not to support any form of animal exploitation, they avoid visiting zoos or aquariums or taking part in horse or dog racing.

4.2. Adoption

The second theme emerging from the data analysis is the adoption to veganism. The collected data shows that vegans are motivated by different factors and face various struggles when

adopting to veganism. The challenges and associated conflicts of the adoption occur both while transitioning to veganism as well as when maintaining the vegan lifestyle or diet.

The first identified struggle is the lack of knowledge as members are often uncertain about what to buy and what to eat. Often, members are struggling with finding vegan alternatives to substitute animal products. For example, online group participants ask which vegan butter to use for baking, what kind of cheese alternatives taste good, which make-up brands are vegan and cruelty-free and what vegan shampoo to use. Moreover, members sometimes simply do not know what to eat and therefore, inquire inspiration for new recipes or tips for cooking with new ingredients from other members. User 5 declares *"I feel like I have run out of ideas and now eating too much vegan junk food"*. Accordingly, members claim that eating a whole food plant-based (WFPB) diet, consisting of minimally processed plant-based foods, is particularly difficult and requires a lot of knowledge. There is also a lack of information regarding the nutrients in a vegan diet. Members state that they are afraid that their calorie intake is too low and that they are not receiving all the vitamins they need, as they lack the knowledge of which foods contain which vitamins and which foods are a good source of protein. User 6 asks *"How do you all make sure you get the nutrients needed? I eat lots of veggies in my meals but often it's the same veggies every day and I wonder if I'm missing anything by not having enough variety"*.

A frequently mentioned struggle is the limited accessibility to vegan options. In particular, eating out in restaurants can be a challenging due to the lack of vegan food choices. User 7 states *"The only vegan item on the menu is French fries"*. Moreover, social events such as birthday parties, family gatherings or work events present a struggle for vegans as the available vegan options are extremely rare or non-existent at all, which leaves them mostly with an *"empty stomach"*. Group participants also point out the difficulty of finding quick vegan grab-and-go or takeaway options when they are on the move or at work. It is mentioned that access to vegan options is especially limited in small towns compared to bigger cities.

Furthermore, members discuss how veganism can be time-consuming and inconvenient. Due to the limited access to vegan options they *"need to think ahead and pack snacks/food when leaving the house"*. Additionally, User 8 declares that *"more time for food prep and planning ahead is required to eat healthy and well-balanced"*. Members also complain about the time they waste on reading labels and checking all the ingredients, which prolongs their grocery

shopping time. Sometimes they even visit several grocery stores looking for vegan options and particular substitute products.

Members express mistrust regarding whether a product is vegan or not. Sometimes a product seems to be plant-based or vegan and might be even labelled as such, but then contains an animal-based ingredient or is tested on animals. For example, a member talked about a cheese alternative that contains casein, a milk protein. Egg-free, dairy-free or lactose-free labels do not necessarily mean vegan. This all leads to confusion, uncertainty and additional caution. This lack of trust is fuelled by incidents of mix-ups where vegans were served, intended or unintended, meals with animal products. User 9 narrates *“I ordered one of the vegan options of the menu (jackfruit tacos) and when they brought the food the tacos looked a lot like meat. I double-checked with the waiter who promised me a bit annoyed that it is vegan. I had a bite and immediately knew that these were not the vegan jackfruit tacos I had ordered. I ask a different waitress and she confirms my assumption. I just had meat for the first time in 12 years. My heart is broken”*.

User 10 adds *“I felt so guilty afterwards. I did not finish the rest of the meal and threw it away. So, an animal was killed anyway and I felt as if I had contributed to that death”*. Many members describe these experiences as *“upsetting”* and *“heart-breaking”*, leaving them feeling tricked and mad, as if their *“sobriety was taken away”*. Some even got sick afterwards. These kinds of mix-ups can be particularly dangerous when someone has a serious allergy. While most restaurant staff were apologetic and reimbursed them, several people experienced ignorant staff members who did not want to understand the situation, which led to anger and frustration. However, some members say that they do not want to cause a scene or make a fuss about it, especially when in a larger group of non-vegans, as people often already think of vegans as being annoying.

Members face challenges in their social settings when it comes to family, partners, friends or non-vegans in general. Often members are confronted with negative responses when announcing their transition. Some members recalled reactions of shock, laughter, family and friends telling them they are stupid and ridiculous and who thought that it is just a phase. In general, many vegans struggle with the lack of support and comprehension from friends and family members, as they refuse to be tolerant or accepting of the vegan lifestyle. Especially the holiday seasons can be challenging and stressful for vegans. Research participants mention problems such as visiting non-vegan relatives over the holidays and being anxious about what

to eat as well as dealing with hostile family members who endlessly berate one's lifestyle choices or hosting a holiday meal and feeling pressured to provide a turkey or ham dish. Several participants find the presence of a turkey or other meat dishes upsetting, however, most of them accept it "*for the sake of family peace*". Furthermore, some members express that they are uncomfortable with the feeling of inconveniencing anyone because they chose to be vegan. As the social life often revolves around food, members express feelings of isolation, exclusion and disconnection. Sometimes vegans are not getting invited to dinners anymore because others think that they will not have anything to eat anyway. Some members indicate that their lifestyle change caused rifts in their relationships and that they have lost friends on the way. People without any vegan friends or family feel particularly isolated and lonely.

Furthermore, members state that trying to explain why one is vegan without offending anyone is a difficult task, as people tend to get defensive and upset when the topic veganism is brought up. In addition, members indicate that conversations with non-vegans about veganism, repeatedly defending and justifying one's decision to be vegan, replying to silly questions and listening to comments and dumb jokes can be annoying, exhausting and sometimes even frustrating. Lastly, a member check revealed that vegans sometimes encounter uncomfortable situations when denying non-vegan food that someone has cooked for them and thereby, accidentally confronting that person. The member told the following story: "*I was at my boyfriend's aunts house for the first time and the table was filled with all this food... mostly non-vegan. The aunt has been cooking all day and I felt so terrible when I had to tell her that I'm vegan. My boyfriend simply forgot to tell her*".

Furthermore, members complain about health problems such as bloating, having a lot of gas and excessive farting, digestion problems, diarrhoea, nausea, heartburn, thinner hair, facial acne, dark circles under the eyes and intolerances (e.g. gluten or soy). In addition, a problem vegans face when they are transitioning is that they never feel full. User 11 states "*Since going vegan I am always hungry, although I am constantly eating and my food is really balanced. I feel horrible*".

A common issue that mostly new vegans, but also a few long-term vegans are struggling with is the craving of some old flavours such as meat, cheese or eggs.

Cravings, health struggles as well as the lack of knowledge are struggles people face particularly when starting the vegan journey. However, there was no distinction made between

transitioning and long-term vegans, as all struggles were mentioned by members regardless of how many years they have been vegan.

The study's results are in line with the findings of the few authors that have examined vegans' barriers and challenges to successfully maintain a vegan lifestyle (Asher & Cherry, 2015; Cherry, 2015; Hirschler, 2011). The researchers' findings regarding the impact of non-vegan family and friends on the retention process was confirmed in this study through the identified challenges in social settings. However, this study reveals insights into many more struggles that vegans are facing.

With regards to motivations, the data analysis yields different reasons for people to adopt to veganism: Animal welfare, environmental concerns, and health. However, the most frequently mentioned motivation is the love and compassion for animals. Vegans want to prevent the exploitation of animals and end animal cruelty. Moreover, they believe in animal rights. User 12 states *"I wish people would stop treating animals like they are objects instead of living, breathing, sentient creatures who have a right to life and freedom"*.

Another motivation is the concern about the earth and environment, inspiring people to adopt to veganism to *"save the planet"*. They consider animal agriculture as a leading cause of climate change and thus, see veganism as its solution. Members are motivated by environmental reasons and expected environmental benefits such as lowering their environmental footprint.

Furthermore, members are vegans because of health reasons and the expected health benefits of a vegan diet. A major reason for following a vegan diet is weight loss. In addition, members name health problems such as high blood sugar levels, high cholesterol levels, obesity, joint inflammation, low energy level and daily exhaustion as well as their desire to lower their risk of diabetes, cancer and heart diseases as reasons for adopting to veganism, or rather a vegan diet. Members also identify life-changing events such as a heart attack or the diagnosis with diabetes as a trigger for changing their lifestyle and eating habits. User 13 recalls *"When I was diagnosed with diabetes type-2 I immediately started following a vegan whole-foods plant-based diet. Since then my blood work is amazing and weight just dropped off"*.

Sometimes members start their vegan journey due to one of these reasons, however, upon further engaging with veganism they learn about all the other aspects of it. Research participants describe how their identities based on their reasons to become vegan evolve over time. The analysis shows that often a combination or all the reasons together motivate members to adopt

to veganism. User 14 concludes with *“I know I am on the right side of history and do all I can for the animals, future of the planet and future generations”*.

Next to the three main reasons, there are more factors that motivate the decision to adopt to veganism. A few members mention that they simply do not like the taste of meat or other animal products. Moreover, many members state that videos, documentaries and movies (e.g. “Vegucated”, “Earthlings”, “What the Health”, “Forks over Knives”) *“changed their world”* and motivated them to become vegan. Moreover, a close friend or a family member can influence someone to start the vegan journey. Celebrities, such as Joaquin Phoenix, Lewis Hamilton, climate activist Greta Thunberg or influencer on YouTube and Instagram are promoting veganism and thereby, reach a large follower base. Although members say that they are not the reason, they still act as role models and inspire them throughout their vegan journey. A member check complements this finding with the following statement: *“Influencers and celebrities are role models. I think that they can contribute to a mindset shift and curiosity towards wanting to start eating more plant-based and live a more ethically aligned lifestyle. Especially when they make the lifestyle seem so easy and appealing”*.

The identified motivations are in accordance with the academic literature on why people adopt to veganism (Beardsworth & Keil, 1993; Janssen et al., 2016). The expected environmental (Aleksandrowicz et al., 2016; Hallström et al., 2015) and health benefits (Craig, 2009) as well as ethical considerations (Harper, 2010) that have been identified in the academic research act as motivations for people to adopt to veganism. In conformity with academic literature, ethical considerations and health benefits are most frequently mentioned as reasons for following a vegan diet and lifestyle (Janssen et al., 2016). In addition, this study supports the findings of the authors who found that ethical considerations are counting as the most important set of reasons and health benefits as second (Janssen et al., 2016; Radnitz et al., 2015; Rothberger, 2013; Timko et al., 2012) and stand in contrast to the results of Waldmann and colleagues (2003). In their study, the majority of participants were vegan for health reasons (Waldmann et al., 2013). While the role of environmental reasons was not clear in academia, in this study environmental concerns are the third most important factor after ethics and health. The main motivations mentioned, namely animal welfare, environment and health, can be aligned with the three types of vegans identified by Greenebaum (2012): Ethical vegans, environmental vegans and health vegan. However, members do not use these terms, except for ethical vegans who use that term to highlight that they are vegans for ethical reasons.

4.3. Behaviours

The third theme builds upon the two themes mentioned before and considers the online and offline behaviours of vegans. It concerns their behaviours and actions undertaken in order to live and maintain a vegan lifestyle and to overcome the challenges they are facing.

The offline behaviours include actions performed by members in the real world. As vegans eschew all kinds of animal products, they eat a plant-based diet that includes various types of vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds. Moreover, they use substitute products to replace meat, dairy and eggs. In addition, vegan flavour replacements are used to get cheesy or meaty flavours in vegan food, e.g. nutritional yeast to replace a cheesy flavour and liquid smoke for a more smoky, meaty flavour. Besides food substitutes, members replace non-vegan cosmetics, clothes and accessories with vegan alternatives. As a vegan diet may not always provide all required vitamins, members mention they take supplements, such as B12, D3 or Omega 3, to complement their diet.

Research participants name mobile applications as useful tools to make their lives easier. They use the application “Chronometer” for tracking their nutrition and health data, the application “Is it Vegan” for identifying whether a product is vegan or no or the application “Happy Cow” to find vegan restaurants or restaurants that serve vegan dishes.

With regards to the accessibility of vegan food in restaurants, members tend to look up the menu online, get creative with various side dishes and in the case of very limited vegan choices eat beforehand and have a drink or snack in the restaurant. In general, members do a lot of food preparation and planning, as there is often no guarantee that vegan food is available wherever they go, whether it is in a restaurant, a birthday party, a business event or a family gathering. Research participants mention that they usually prepare and take vegan food to social events to ensure that they have something that they enjoy eating. Some members said that often non-vegans try their food and actually enjoy it. Sometimes they are unaware that it is vegan and are positively surprised when they find out. Members like to cook vegan dishes for their family and friends to show them that vegan food can be tasty and healthy. However, participants agree on the importance of not urging others to try the food and to impose veganism to anyone. Nevertheless, it can be a great way to promote veganism to others. When dealing with non-vegans and in particular with family members and friends it is important to not judge them for their consumption behaviour and be defensive. Rather, members suggest being positive and

inspirational. Talking about personal benefits and achievements, whether it is related to one's health, sports or other activities can be one way of doing so. By emphasising the positive aspects, for instance, telling others about one's higher energy level or weight loss success due to a vegan diet, people might be more open-minded and maybe even inspired.

Since vegans are often uncertain whether the product's ingredients are vegan-friendly, members read all labels to ensure purchasing a vegan product or use the application "Is It Vegan". Moreover, they double-check their food when in a restaurant or café, as mix-ups do happen occasionally.

The online behaviours include actions undertaken by members in the online environment of the studied vegan community. Firstly, members ask questions to the community when they need inspiration for new food ideas, they are looking for a vegan alternative product or they simply want other vegans' opinions. Some members even asked for scientific studies to be able to respond to friends, family members or other non-vegans when they were asking provocative questions about veganism. Community members exchange their knowledge with each other in the online community. They provide recipes and food pictures for inspiration, share vegan product recommendations as well as vegan cookbook and documentary tips and talk about their experiences. Furthermore, they post pictures and information regarding nutrition and protein sources in order to help vegans consume the right vegetables, legumes and seeds and have a balanced diet ([Appendix 9.3.](#)). When asking for advice on health issues less substantiated answers were often given based on superficial knowledge and experiences. If it is about more serious health issues members advise to look up a doctor or professional and not trust advice from people in a Facebook group.

All in all, community members support each other across their vegan journeys. Members seek guidance and connections with like-minded people, in particular when they are the only vegans in their social environment. User 15 thanks the community *"I love this group because it feels like a support system when we don't have many people to turn to! Thank you everyone for your advice and constant input and reminder as to why we made the swap"*.

5. Conclusion and implications

This chapter aims to answer the study's initial research questions with the main findings of the netnographic analysis. Subsequently, the main theoretical and managerial implications derived from the analysis are outlined.

This dissertation explores the vegan online community and provides an overview of vegan consumers' motivations, struggles and behaviours. The netnography approach was identified as the most appropriate research method to examine the vegan online community due to its unobtrusive character. The qualitative research study was conducted by analysing the rich and insightful discussions of a carefully chosen online community on Facebook ("How to Vegan") with regards to the topic-related questions.

Based on the analysis' results conclusions are drawn and research questions are answered.

RQ1: How do the members of the online vegan community define veganism? What does it mean to live a vegan lifestyle?

In general, the community members define veganism according to the definition of the Vegan Society, meaning, that they eliminate all kind of animal products that are related to animal abuse and exploitation from their lives. Hence, vegans eat a purely plant-based diet and eschew all animal-derived materials as well as products tested on animals.

Veganism is about ending animal abuse and exploitation. The belief in animal rights is considered as a fundamental pillar of veganism. Many community members believe that everyone who does not have the animal's welfare at its heart might not be considered as a vegan, but rather a plant-based eater. Thus, community members distinguish between a vegan lifestyle and a vegan or plant-based diet based on one's motivations for being vegan. While most members follow the strict definition of veganism and abstain from animal products, a few admit that they occasionally bend the definition and might consider eating something non-vegan.

RQ2: What are the motivations of vegan online community members to adopt to veganism? What are the main struggles vegans face with regards to the transition and maintenance of a vegan diet or a vegan lifestyle

Animal welfare, health benefits and environmental concerns were identified as the three main motivations of community members to adopt to veganism. In addition, their decision to become

vegan was influenced by their distaste of animal products, watching pro-vegan documentaries and movies, family members and friends as well as celebrities and influencers promoting a vegan lifestyle on social media.

Several struggles that members face when transitioning and maintaining a vegan life were identified. Members often lack knowledge of what to eat and what to buy. Moreover, they complain about the limited accessibility of vegan options when on the go and argue that following a vegan lifestyle can be inconvenient and time-consuming. Additionally, mistrust regarding vegan product claims and labels are expressed leading to confusion and uncertainty amongst vegan community members. This lack of trust is fuelled by mix-ups where vegans were served dishes including animal ingredients. Members face challenges in their social settings as often the social life revolves around food and family and friends are not always understanding and supportive. Lastly, health problems and cravings are mentioned as struggles.

RQ3: What are the common offline and online behaviours of vegan community members in order to adopt and live a vegan lifestyle or follow a vegan diet?

In order to live and maintain a vegan life, members replace all animal foods, animal-derived materials and products tested on animals with plant-based food, substitute products and vegan alternatives. Moreover, they take supplements such as B12 to complement their diet. They also use mobile applications to make their lives easier and spend a lot of time on food preparation and planning. Within the online community, they exchange their knowledge and support each other throughout their vegan journeys.

5.1. Theoretical implications

As consumers are increasingly turning to online communities and forums for information when deciding on a product or brand, online communities have a growing impact on the behaviour and adoption of new products and services (Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, it is of great importance for marketers to study the consumer behaviour of online community members. So far, the academic literature is lacking research investigating consumer behaviour of vegans. Thus, this dissertation provides valuable insights into a vegan online community to obtain a deeper understanding of the consumers.

This study expands upon the existing academic literature on consumers' motivations and struggles regarding the vegan lifestyle by conducting a netnographic analysis. Some authors

have explored the motivations of consumers to become vegan (e.g. Dyett et al., 2013; Greenebaum, 2012; Izmirili & Philips, 2011; Janssen et al., 2016; Larsson et al., 2013) and a few have examined the struggles of vegans in a social context (Asher & Cherry, 2015; Cherry 2015; Hirschler, 2011). However, none of these researchers considered computer-mediated communications in the online environment as a source for data collection. By observing the online members unobtrusively in a natural setting, insights were generated based on their experiences and viewpoints shared with the community. As a result, the analysis confirmed the previously identified motivations and struggles and revealed additional factors motivating and influencing vegan consumers.

In summary, the research presents valuable findings regarding the community's definition and interpretation of veganism, their behaviours, the motivations to become vegan as well as the struggles they face when transitioning to or maintaining a vegan lifestyle or diet. The analysis of the vegan online community revealed several interesting insights, which provide the foundation for the managerial implications presented in the next sub-chapter.

5.2. Managerial implications

Based on the presented analysis findings, managerial implications can be derived for governments and companies of various industries, such as the food and gastronomy industry.

The thematic analysis reveals that vegan consumers use different kinds of mobile applications on their smart devices to search for vegan or vegetarian restaurants ("Happy Cow"), track their nutrition status ("Chronometer") and check a product for non-vegan ingredients ("Is it Vegan"). These applications provide new opportunities and marketing channels for companies to reach consumers. Therefore, companies should increase their digital marketing activities and advertise their products and services over these applications. This advertising option would allow firms to address their target group of vegans and plant-based eaters directly and effectively.

In the analysis, community members mention they follow celebrities and influencers on their social media channels and get inspired by them. There are vegan influencers on social media who try, talk about and recommend vegan products. One example of a well-known vegan is the British TV-star Lucy Watson who has collaborated with firms such as Bulkpowders, Neat Burger and Plenish drinks promoting their vegan products ([Appendix 9.4.](#)). Although some companies are already taking advantage of influencer marketing, there is still a huge potential

for firms in the future, inter alia reflected in the continuous Instagram user growth (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2019). Thus, vegetarian and vegan industry players as well as companies selling vegan products should utilize well-known influencers to promote their products. Since this study identified a lack of knowledge of what products to purchase as well as mistrust towards vegan products claimed to be vegan as struggles, influencer marketing can help mitigating these problems. For instance, what makes influencer marketing an effective tool is that products are advertised through trusted intermediaries that directly reach the target audience interested in a vegan lifestyle (Mathew, 2018).

The analysis demonstrates that the demand for vegan, plant-based products is driven by consumers who have different reasons for their consumption behaviour whether it is for their care for animal welfare, health or environment reasons. It is of great importance for companies to understand and consider the motivations of their consumers, as these are the key drivers for purchase decisions. The motivation for being vegan can translate into the motivation to purchase a vegan product. Producers and retailers are advised to tailor their marketing communication and positioning strategies to different consumer segments, which are based on the different motivations for a vegan lifestyle. Since animal welfare was identified as the prevailing motivation, companies should include messages such as “no animals were harmed” in their communication strategy when promoting vegan products. When firms also want to target consumers interested in the environmental aspect of a vegan diet and/or consumers pursuing a healthy diet, it is advisable to include corresponding messages and claims on product packages, promotional material and advertisements.

The analysis shows that vegan consumers spend much time reading product labels to validate their suitability for vegans and occasionally detect a non-vegan ingredient in a seemingly plant-based product. Neither at European nor at global level a legal, binding definition of the term vegan exists that could have been adopted by industries (European Vegetarian Union, 2019). As a result, the reliable labelling of vegan products in accordance with standardized criteria is difficult and lead to incorrect labelling by producers themselves. Not only does this create uncertainty amongst vegan consumers, but also amongst producers and retailers. To provide an indicator for safe products for the vegan community, organizations tried to standardize vegan products by awarding them with a protected trademark ([Appendix 9.5.](#)). With regards to product label design, companies should use trustworthy and internationally recognized trademarks such as the V-Label or the Vegan Society Trademark on their product labels to provide guidance for their consumers when shopping and to build trust both in their product and their brand. In

addition, governments and overarching political institutions, such as the European Commission, should implement a binding standard. This would ease the process of identifying which foods are suitable for vegans and would minimize the risk of finding traces of animal substances in products. The creation of an official definition, regulations and reliable statistics are needed in order to protect vegans' consumer rights and also support manufacturers and retailers.

Limited food options in restaurants were mentioned as a major challenge when going out with friends and family. Although there are a few vegan restaurants nowadays, restaurants should offer more vegan or veganized options of dishes by swapping an animal ingredient with a vegan one. Many fast-food chains are already catering to the growing demand for vegan food. Dominos sells vegan pizzas, Subway provides vegan sandwich options and Burger King offers the Rebel Whopper. By incorporating high-quality vegan dishes in their menu, restaurants can grow their customer base, as plant-based food appeals to many consumers, including vegans, vegetarians, flexitarians as well as environmentally and health-conscious people. As vegans are appreciative of restaurants catering to them and the vegan community is very active and likes to share recommendations, it is likely that they would spread the word and tell fellow vegans, which means free word-of-mouth marketing. Furthermore, restaurants offering vegan options are more likely to be chosen for group bookings where members are vegan. Moreover, restaurants can show forward-thinking and innovation. All in all, more vegan options on menus would increase the accessibility, convenience and acceptability of being vegan.

6. Limitations and further research

Although the conducted netnography study provided valuable findings, some limitations must be mentioned. In addition, suggestions for further research are presented.

In general, netnography method has a narrow focus on online communities. Additionally, this study was limited to a single online community. Therefore, results found in this particular online group cannot easily be generalised to other groups. Moreover, not only did the researcher have to deal with an overwhelming amount of data, but she also faced large quantities of irrelevant data during the data collection process. Hence, the screening of all data requires a significant time effort. Since this study's time was restricted, the number of analysed threads is limited. In order to have a larger sample size and verify the study's main results, further research using quantitative methods, such as surveys, should be conducted.

Another limitation is that the data selection and interpretation are somewhat subjective due to the dependence on the researcher's interpretative skill.

Lastly, the lack of informant identifiers due to the anonymity of community members in the online environment presents another limitation. As a result, the identification of demographic characteristics of online users is irreproducible and the generalisation and application of the research findings are impeded. Further quantitative research, e.g. a survey, is needed to assess to what extent social and demographic criteria, such as age, gender, income or education level, have an influence on their decision to adopt veganism and maintain the lifestyle. Additionally, it was impossible to match the posts and comments to the stage of someone's vegan journey. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct a survey to analyse whether differences in their motivations and particularly struggles and behaviours exist based on the stage of their vegan lifestyle and experience.

The study reveals that some community members follow a less strict definition of veganism. Moreover, community members distinguish between people following a vegan/plant-based diet and still using other animal products (e.g. wearing leather) and people living a vegan lifestyle and abstaining from all kind of animal products. Based on these findings a quantitative study should be conducted to explore the causal relationship and possible correlation between the different motivations (e.g. animal welfare, health or environmental reasons) and level of commitment. This study would investigate whether the different reasons influence how vegans define and practice veganism, whether they follow the diet or live the lifestyle and how committed they are to stay with their decision.

In conclusion, this dissertation provided valuable insights into a vegan online community leading to a better understanding of the growing vegan consumer segment, including their motivations, struggles and behaviours. Due to consumers' increasing awareness and concerns regarding the impact of animal production and consumption on the animal's welfare, the environment and one's health, the vegan movement has been gaining momentum. This movement is nowhere near stagnating but it will be a crucial and growing segment that companies should consider and cater for.

7. References

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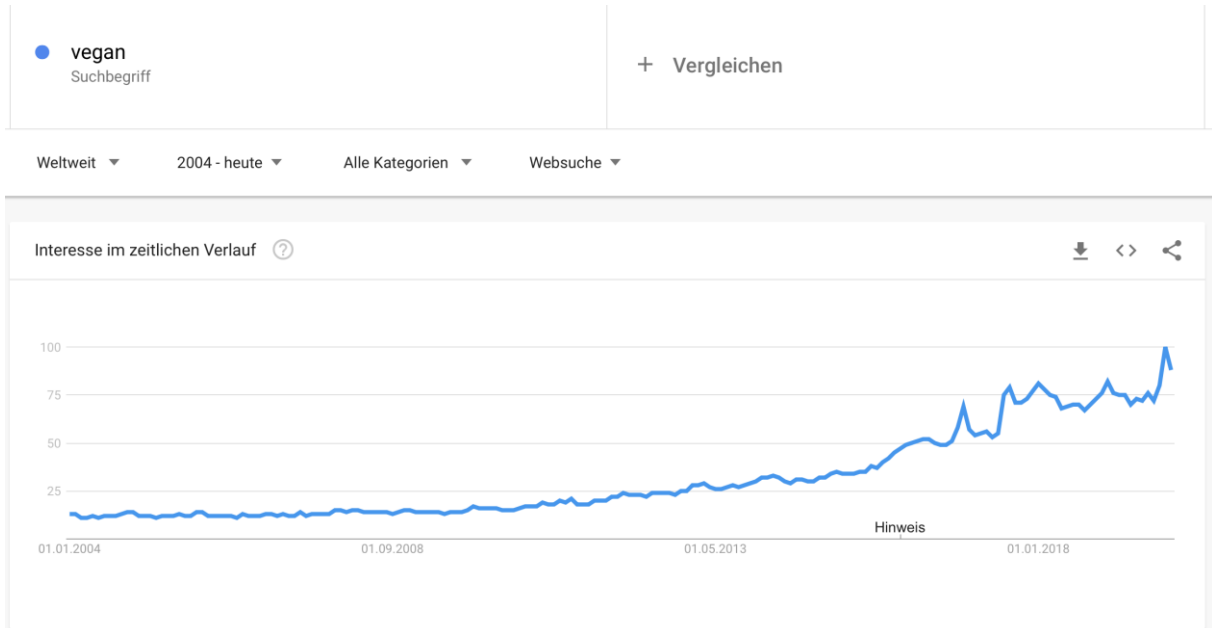
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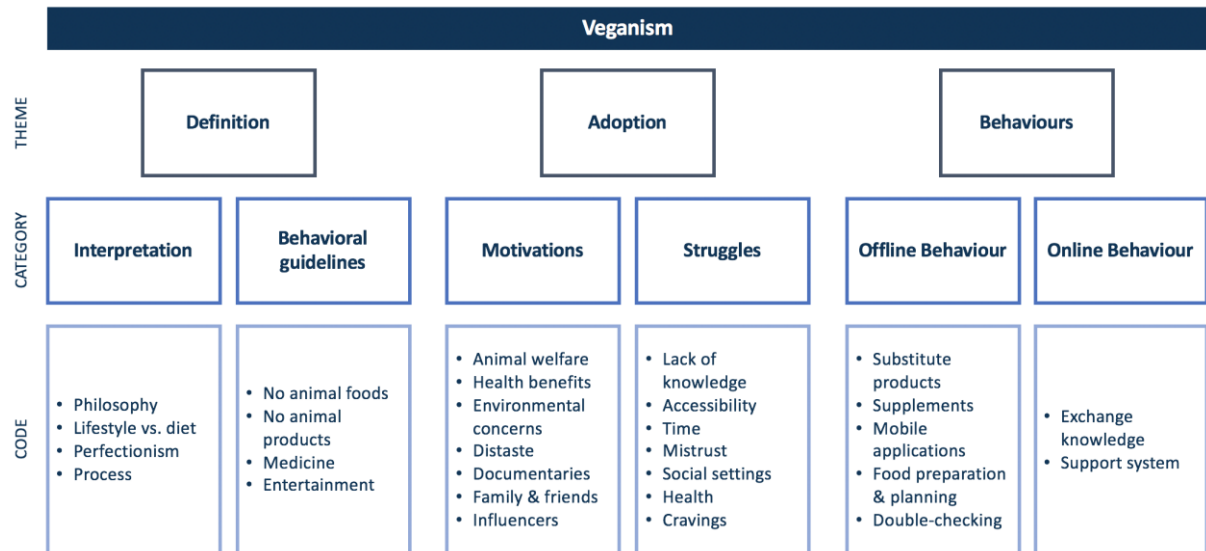
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8. Appendix

Appendix 8.1.: Google Trends worldwide

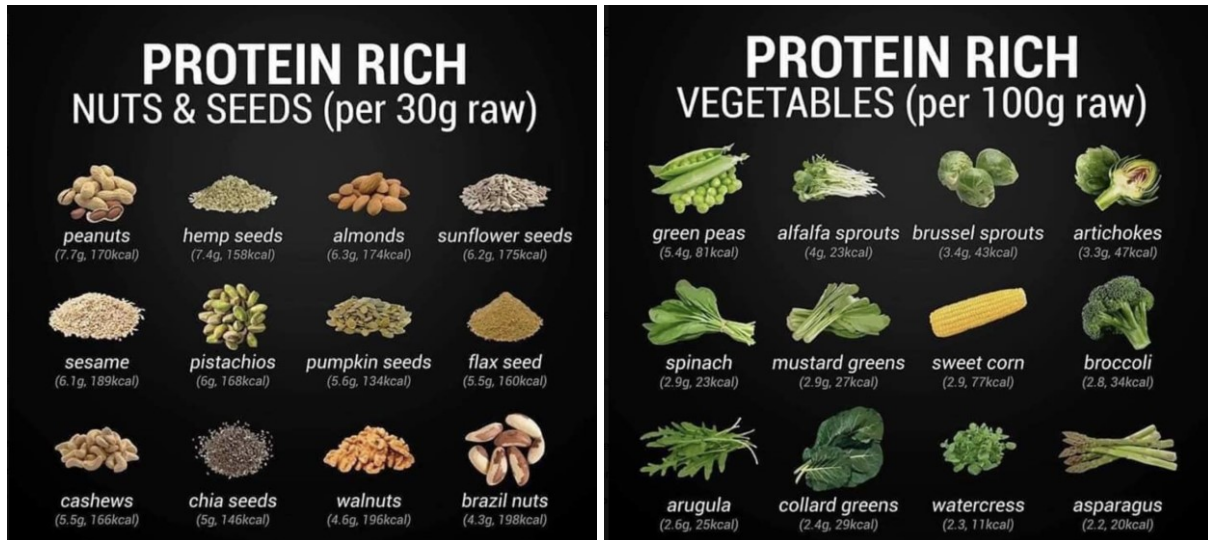


Appendix 8.2.: Thematic Network



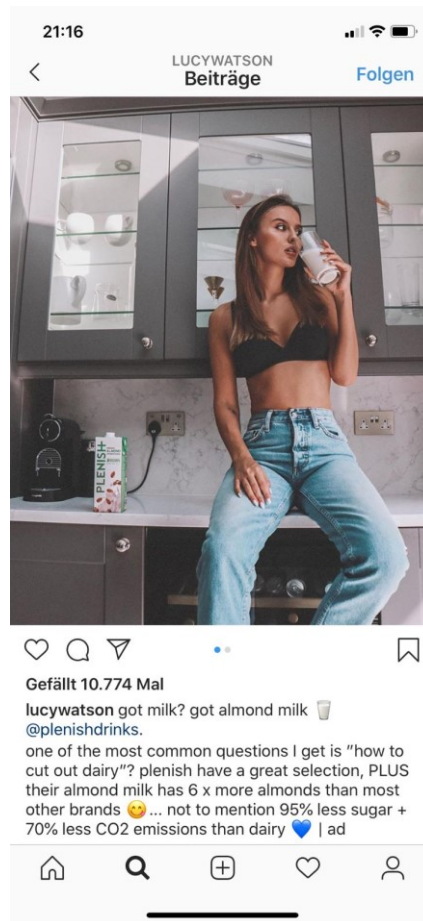
Appendix 8.3.: Pictures of protein rich foods

Pictures were posted in the Facebook Group “How to Vegan”



Appendix 8.4.: Examples influencer marketing – Lucy Watson





Appendix 8.5.: Vegan trademarks



Left: Vegan Trademark by Vegan Society



Right: V-Label by European Vegetarian Union