

Mobile Veganism: How Mobile Apps Shape the Construction, Mobilisation and Practice of Vegan Consumerism

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Abstract

Veganism is an ethical philosophy that seeks to exclude animal cruelty and exploitation from all areas of life, as far as it is possible and practical. Once considered a fringe movement, veganism has since gained traction as a marketable way of life, with increased media attention, commercial opportunities, product availability and celebrity recognition (Jallinoja et al. 2016). Additionally, several major climate and agriculture organisations now recognise the environmental merits of veganism, arguing for a global transition in food consumption to reduce meat consumption and adopt plant-based eating as a principle for sustainable diets (Willett et al., 2019).

In response to this growing political and economic interest, a range of vegan apps have emerged, promising to assist with the mobilisation of plant-based eating. This includes barcode scanning apps, restaurant finding apps and nutrition trackers, all of which can be categorised under the broader umbrella of 'ethical consumption apps' (Humphery & Jordan, 2018). These apps may assist consumers when deciding how to spend their money based on political, environmental, and health-based concerns. However, they also present new challenges for the vegan ethical consumer, namely the reliance on tech intermediaries and material infrastructures rife with harms relating to labour exploitation and e-waste production. This paper engages with these debates, investigating the role that mobile apps play in shaping vegan consumerism, revealing distinctive user cultures, practices and socialites yet to gain scholarly attention. Led by the following research questions:

(Overarching RQ): How do vegan apps shape the construction, mobilisation and practice of vegan consumerism?

(Sub-question 1): How does the design of vegan apps shape user practices?

(Sub-question 2): How do users appropriate vegan apps into their lifestyle and consumption routines?

(Sub-question 3): What cultural and political discourses are reflected in the design, operation, and governance of popular vegan apps?

(Sub-question 4): How do users conceptualise, negotiate, and position vegan apps in relation to broader vegan advocacy?

To answer these questions, the approach of digital ethnography is employed with two parallel phases, including the App Walkthrough Method and participant observation. This design has been chosen to facilitate a 'non-digital-centric' approach to investigating the digital (Pink et al., 2016) - looking not only at app interfaces but also the situated use of vegan apps in consumption settings, including urban spaces, restaurants and supermarkets. This contributes to the theme for this conference, emphasising the materiality and context of vegan app use within the everyday consumption routines of Australian citizens. Two case studies have been selected, including the restaurant finding app HappyCow and barcode scanning app Fussy Vegan Pro. Data analysis is ongoing, with preliminary findings indicating that vegan apps contribute most significantly to the mobilisation of 'prefigurative activism' (Monticelli, 2021). Meaning that they provide pathways for users to 'live out' a vegan society in the present moment, rather than waiting for societal change to occur. This is achieved using specific mobile features such as geolocation and mapping, which act as tools for spatial reconfiguration, transforming one's everyday life into an arena for vegan food politics.

Keywords: veganism, ethical consumerism, mobile applications, user cultures, prefigurative activism

References

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BIO

Daniel is a PhD student at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and member of the Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC). His current research considers how mobile applications shape the construction, mobilisation and practice of vegan consumerism. Prior to this he was an RA for an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project, using digital methods to investigate sustainable food consumption in Brazil and South Africa. Daniel also holds an MA in Digital Media and Society from the University of Sheffield, UK, where he was awarded the prize in Sociological Studies for the contributions made in his MA thesis.