Veganism as a Social Movement

Teagan Murphy

Honors Thesis

University of Florida

Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kendal Broad
Abstract

Veganism is typically understood as a dietary or lifestyle choice made at the individual level. However, it might be possible to gain a better sense of the growing trend and presence of veganism if it were understood and analyzed as a social movement. This paper analyses the relationship between veganism and social movement mobilization by comparing trends found in the interview responses of 10 self-identified vegans to prior research on both social movement and vegan mobilization. Interview responses revealed four key factors to “going vegan” that are comparable to the key factors or steps to social movement mobilization: (1) ideological compatibility and sympathy to larger social causes; (2) education and awareness on vegan eating and the related social issues; (3) resource access and availability; and (4) social network ties. The appearance of these themes suggests that even though vegans may disagree on the notion that activism is inherent to veganism, the scope of vegan practice can be better understood – and ultimately better promoted – through the lens of a social movement.

Keywords: vegan, social movement, mobilization, motivation, barriers
Introduction

Veganism is a growing trend in the United States. From 2016 to 2017, the proportion of individuals in the United States who identified as vegan shot up 600% – from 1% to 6% of the population (GlobalData, 2018). In 2018, plant-based food sales increased 20% to top $3.3 billion, up from the 8% increase in 2017 (Plant Based Foods Association, 2018). Google Trends analyses indicate that between 2012 and 2017, searches for the term “vegan” quadrupled and received nearly three times more searches than “vegetarian” or “gluten free” (Appendix A). Following increased demand, the supply of vegan alternatives to meat, cheese, eggs, and other animal products has greatly expanded in recent years, with 95% of all U.S. grocery stores now selling plant-based meat products (Forgrieve, 2018).

Veganism is typically understood as a dietary or lifestyle choice made at the individual level. However, many vegan individuals are connected to one another, forming a sense of community or collective presence through social, cultural, and organizational ties. For many, veganism goes past an individual lifestyle change, also encompassing collective organizing and activism. Typically through participation in animal-related organizations such as PETA, the Humane League, Vegan Outreach Farm Sanctuary, Anonymous for the Voiceless, or Farm Animal Rights Movement, activists lead protests, demonstrations, and campaigns with the ultimate message of encouraging others to “Go Vegan.” With this in mind, it might be possible to gain a better sense of the growing trend and presence of veganism if it were understood and analyzed as a social movement. This paper aims to explore the following questions: To what extent can we analyze veganism through a social movement framework? Is activism an inherent aspect of veganism? Are the reasons why individuals “go vegan” and stay vegan similar to the
reasons why individuals join and stay in a social movement? How do the barriers to entry compare with that of other social movements?

This paper starts with a literature review of studies that describe either: (1) trends and collective experiences among individuals in joining various social movements – i.e., why they joined, why they did or did not remain, and what barriers exist at the individual level; or (2) motivations and barriers to becoming vegan. The paper then moves into an analysis of interviews conducted with 10 individuals who currently reside in Gainesville, FL and self-identify as vegan. The interviews asked participants why they initially went vegan, how they define veganism, why or how they persisted in their veganism, whether they engage in vegan activism and in what forms, what barriers they see to becoming vegan, and what resources are best for going and for staying vegan. From there, the paper analyzes and highlights patterns in interview responses and then compares those responses to information gathered from prior research on social movements and veganism.

Literature Review

There is an extensive body of research on social movements and a multitude of components to explore on the topic. One area of particular interest within the subject is what motivates individuals to join social movements. The research studies I included in this literature review have found a variety of factors that influence individuals to participate in social movements, such as their attitudes and ideologies, their practical ability to join, and, most notably, their social network ties related to the movement.

Klandermans and Oegema (1987) found in their analysis of social movement involvement that there are four key steps toward being mobilized to participate in social
movements: (1) becoming part of the mobilization potential, or having attitudes that align toward that movement and make you part of the target audience; (2) belonging to recruitment networks, especially through organization or friendship ties; (3) finding motivation to participate by weighing the costs and benefits; and (4) overcoming barriers to participation, which presents a separate issue from finding motivation to participate.

McAdam (1988) took a different approach to understanding social movement participation by studying retention and follow-through. In an analysis of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project’s Freedom Vote campaign led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, McAdam (1988) aimed to distinguish between those who applied to participate and those who followed through with participation. Analysis indicated that most participants in this summer campaign joined the movement for three reasons: (1) they were biographically available, having the time, money, and resources to participate as white college students from higher-income backgrounds; (2) they had ideological compatibility with the campaign and supported the movement; and (3) they had social network ties at home that brought them into the campaign, such as student organizations they were a part of at their universities (McAdam, 1988). The one consistent factor that separated students who stayed committed to the campaign from those who dropped from the campaign was strong social network ties (McAdam, 1988).

Passy and Giugni (2001) further emphasize the importance of social networks in their study on differential participation in social movements. In surveying members of a major organization of the Swiss solidarity movement, Passy and Giugni (2001) found that the intensity of participation depends both on one’s embeddedness in social networks and on the individual perceptions of participation, such as the perceived effectiveness of one’s own potential contribution. Further regarding social networks, they found that these networks serve three main
functions: structurally connecting prospective participants to an opportunity to participate, familiarizing them with a particular issue, and shaping their decision to become involved. The latter function implies that embeddedness in social networks significantly affects individual perceptions of participation (Passy & Giugni, 2001).

This motivational factor of network ties has appeared in other studies of specific social movements. In a study on women’s rights and feminist activists, Whittier (1996) found that despite the general decline of such movements from their peak in the 1970’s, several radical feminists continue to maintain their commitment to feminist ideology in their daily lives. These women claim that the “feminist network,” or their connections and ties with other radical feminists, has kept them involved and committed to the ideology (Whittier, 1996). Gould’s (2009) analysis of the ACT UP and the AIDS awareness movements of the 1980s also reflects this importance of network ties. While this analysis focused primarily on the emotion work of organizing, Gould also highlights how the social network ties and bonds that existed among members of LGBT+ communities helped create a conducive and even fun environment that kept individuals involved in the movement (2009).

Hirsh’s (1990) study on Columbia University’s divestment movement – which demanded that the university divest from business relations in apartheid South Africa – highlighted four additional components to generating commitment, specifically in long-lasting tactics: consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, polarization of “us” versus “them”, and collective decision-making. Consciousness-raising allows for the spread and reinforcement of certain beliefs, which creates concern and the sense of passion mentioned earlier (Hirsch, 1990). Collective empowerment can create a bandwagon effect: the more people who are aware and in support of the movement, the stronger it seems, and the more people who join (Hirsch, 1990).
Polarization of “us” (the social movement) versus “them” (the decision maker who holds the power) strengthens commitment as it furthers the idea that the decision maker is an enemy who must be opposed (Hirsch, 1990). Collective decision-making allows members to feel that they have an important role in the organization but are also bound by group decisions and commitments (Hirsch, 1990).

As indicated by these studies, there are varying key factors that influence individual participation in social movements. These factors can be summarized as follows: individual attitudes or ideologies and how they align with a given movement, individual ability to join social movement activities and overcome any barriers to joining, strong social network ties related to the movement, and collective strategies enacted by social movement organizations. Among these factors, social network ties and the general social component of social movement mobilization stand out as reoccurring themes. These themes continue to be apparent in the second part of this literature review, which focuses on studies related directly to veganism. Note that studies on the motivations of becoming vegan and the “vegan movement” are limited due to the relatively recent trend of veganism, and I chose to include studies that focused specifically on veganism rather than vegetarianism or the animal rights movement.

In a study on perceptions of veganism among college students, Markowski and Roxburgh (2019) found that the “vegan stigma” is a major barrier to plant-based diets. In series of focus groups of vegans, then vegetarians, then omnivores, the study found that vegetarians and omnivores viewed vegans negatively, describing them as attention-seeking, pretentious, annoying, rude, overbearing, and maintaining an air of moral superiority (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). This study also found that non-vegans respond to the stigma by socially distancing themselves from vegans, either physically or verbally; anticipating the vegan stigma –
along with other practical challenges – when considering what difficulties they would face if they were to transition toward a vegan lifestyle; and behaviorally distancing themselves by continuing to eat meat and/or animal byproducts (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019).

In studying what keeps vegans in – rather than what keeps non-vegans out – Cherry (2006) conducted 24 in-depth interviews with self-defined vegans. Most interviewees were not affiliated with any related social movement organization, but about half were connected to the largely vegan “punk subculture.” This study found that the relational network ties of punk vegans – who expressed having numerous vegan friends and felt supported in their veganism – were less likely to cheat or experience lapses than non-punk vegans – who had fewer vegans ties and connections and saw their lifestyle as “deviant” from social norms. The discussion from this study further adds to research suggesting the importance of network ties in motivation and participation, this time with specific regard to veganism.

Methods

This study consisted of a series of ten interviews conducted with individuals who identify as vegan and currently reside in Gainesville, FL. Eight of the individuals who participated in the study belong to a vegan-focused University of Florida student organization or Gainesville community organization. This included organizations that engage in advocacy efforts, such as demonstrations and protests to encourage others to go vegan, as well as organizations that serve as support groups, focusing on events such as vegan potlucks or vegan cooking nights. Only individuals who identified as vegan were eligible for the study. Each interview was conducted in a public location where conversation would not be overheard, such as an empty classroom or a library study room. Interviews lasted 10 to 20 minutes. The demographic information of the participants is listed in the chart below:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (Non-Hisp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions regarding why they initially went vegan, how they define veganism, why or how they persisted in their veganism, whether they engage in vegan activism and in what forms, what barriers they see to becoming vegan, and what resources they believe are best for going and for staying vegan. All interviews were audio-recorded on a mobile device. The recordings were encrypted, stored on a password-protected computer, and destroyed immediately following their transcription. In transcribing the recordings, all identifying information was removed. Each participant is identified only by a number (ea. “Participant 1”). Once transcribed, all of the interviews were analyzed question by question, noting trends or discrepancies among participants for each question. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida (IRB Project #201803070).
Results

I opened each interview by asking participants why they initially decided to go vegan. Every participant noted animal welfare and “ethics” regarding the treatment of animals as one of the main reasons. Participant 2 summarizes this sentiment succinctly: “Why did I initially decide to go vegan? For the animals. The ethics convinced me to go vegan.” For all except Participants 1 and 3, this was the primary reason. Participant 1 noted that the perceived personal health benefits are what ultimately pushed her to go vegan. She stated: “I always liked animals, and then I think what really sparked the change was that I realized it was also better for my health, and I’ve always been a really health-conscious person.” Participant 4 noted environmental concerns as the primary factor she decided to go vegan. Participant 5 also noted environmental concerns as a secondary factor. Aside from personal reasoning, four participants noted that watching videos and documentaries on either the benefits of veganism or the consequences of animal agriculture are what led them to going vegan. Two participants noted that the influence of another individual led them to becoming vegan. Overall, ideology and awareness of larger social issues were the major motivators for participants.

All participants claimed that veganism has been a positive experience for them. Speaking on the perceived mental and emotional benefits of being vegan, Participant 7 stated the following: “I just feel overall happier. I feel less guilty when I’m eating food, and I’m doing something positive for the environment and for the animals.” Participant 6 also noted some physical benefits of her veganism: “I’ve noticed my energy levels are up. My skin has definitely cleared up a lot.…” These examples highlight some of the overall mental and physical health benefits participants mentioned when discussing their positive experience with veganism. With regard to the initial transition, four participants discussed it being a difficult process. Participant
4 noted that the transition “was like being sick for a month” as his body adjusted to a complete diet change. Three participants noted that even the transition was an easy and positive experience. Regardless of the difficulty of the transition, all participants spoke highly of their experience with veganism and seemed to be at a point where they felt stable in their veganism – i.e., unlikely to experience future difficulties or lapses.

In defining veganism, six participants framed their description around consumption choices. Five of these participants gave very similar definitions in terms of avoiding animal products. For example, Participant 8’s definition of veganism was “to not consume animals or animal products to the best of your extent,” and Participant 9’s definition was “Not consuming animal products to a reasonable extent.” Participant 3 is the only participant who framed their definition around consumption but did not use similar phrasing, instead describing veganism as “being mindful of the source of your food in general.” Participants 1 and 4 also explicitly mentioned animal byproducts going past food choices to include things like leather or products that may have been tested on animals. The remaining four participants framed their definitions of veganism around welfare. For example, Participant 2 describes veganism as “limiting harm for sentient beings… and promoting their well-being.” Participant 7 also gives a more general definition, describing veganism as “having respect for a life and not viewing yourself above another life.” Participants 6 and 10, however, explicitly mention protecting animals’ lives from suffering in their definitions of veganism. The common sentiment among most participants was that veganism is largely based on protecting animals.

Four participates stated that they do not believe activism is an inherent part of veganism. Among the six who do believe activism is inherent to veganism, explanations of the role of activism varied. Some participants see activism as a separate but connected activity. For
example, Participant 4 gave the following response when asked whether activism is inherently related to veganism: “I think right now, for sure it is, because if it wasn’t for vegan activism, I probably wouldn’t be vegan, [and] probably a lot of people wouldn’t be.” This participant’s response seems to indicate that does not view being vegan as an act of activism in itself, but that veganism and activism tie together. Other participants saw veganism as a form of activism in itself. Participant 8 stated the following: “By not consuming animals you are taking a step to fight against injustices done to animals and go against animal production for food. I think also being vegan… [is] like you’re being an example. By even being vegan and ordering something vegan in front of someone: that’s also activism.” Participant 5 highlighted that veganism is inherently a boycott (of meat and animal byproducts) and has the “same symbolism of other boycott campaigns.” which is a commonly recognized form of activism. For Participants 8 and 5, just being vegan is a form of activism. Participant 3 gave a different perspective from the rest, claiming that veganism ties to other forms of social movements that involve activism. She stated: “How could you eat food without even considering the labor that’s being put into it, which could stem so many ways in terms of social labor movements, or in terms of environmental and ecological…? Food is so important in driving not just our own sustenance and energy, but also the energy of different movements.” Overall, participants are divided in their perspectives on activism as an inherent part of veganism, and there are further divisions among those who agreed with this connection.

As part of the interview, I asked participants to consider what reasons or factors helped them stay vegan once they had already made the initial commitment or transition. Seven participants mentioned that one factor was continuing to maintain their awareness of the negative consequences of animal agriculture, whether through research, videos, documentaries, etc. Two
participants noted the wide availability of vegan options at local grocery stores and restaurants and the ease of access to these options as one of the main factors. Five participants noted that having a sense of community with other vegans locally or having the support of one of more vegan peers helped them stay vegan.

Only Participants 3 and 6 mentioned experiencing lapses in their veganism. Participant 3 noted that her definition of veganism has changed and may differ from other definitions of veganism, so her lapses are due to not having a clearly defined ideal. Participant 6 claimed that her “heart was not in it,” as she had initially gone vegan to support her mother. Becoming more educated on the “ethical” side of veganism with regard to animal rights is what helped her overcome that lapse. Other participants mentioned occasionally “cheating” as they transitioned or when it becomes necessary, or times they had accidentally eaten nonvegan food, but they did not note any full lapses.

Most participants claimed that the reasons they maintained a vegan lifestyle were not different from the reasons they decided to go vegan. Many of these participants did also note that their initial reasons for going vegan were based around animal rights/welfare, but that environmental concerns and personal health became factors later on. Participant 3, however, noted that her veganism was initially personally driven, and then eventually became more based in “social building and community building.” Participant 4 noted that while he “never lost grasp of animal cruelty and animal rights and how that’s a large part of veganism, it’s definitely taken a smaller role.” Now, his anti-capitalist political stance plays a leading role in his commitment to veganism. The common theme among participant responses is that their ideologies both initially pushed them to go vegan and continues to motivate them to maintain the lifestyle.
Eight of the participants – all except Participants 3 and 9 – stated that they do engage in activism directly related to veganism, either in local or campus organizations. In these organizations, participants noted engaging in activities such as flyering (i.e., distributing leaflets and other literature about veganism), planning vegan community events, and organizing demonstrations or protests against animal agriculture. Four participants cited talking to friends about veganism or showing others vegan foods and recipes as forms of activism. When discussing her involvement with Vegan Eating for Gators, a student club at the University of Florida, Participant 8 stated the following: “…we give people opportunities to learn how to make vegan food and show them how easy it can be. In that way I engage in vegan activism.” This demonstrates the sentiment among participants that community-building, education, and exemplifying veganism are forms of activism. Despite previously stating that activism is an inherent part of veganism, Participant 3 claimed that she did not engage in activism directly related to veganism or encouraging others to go vegan. However, she did state that she frequently engages in other related forms of activism such as environmental advocacy. Participant 9 simply stated that he did not engage in any forms of vegan activism.

I asked participants to discuss any barriers they personally faced in being vegan and then any barriers they believe exist overall in being vegan. A common barrier that every participant personally faced is lack of support and understanding from nonvegan family members or peers. 7 participants explicitly mentioned facing this barrier with family in particular. Participant 8 stated the following: “[My parents] really made a habit to keep trying to force me to eat nonvegan, just to have something once, just to try something once. It’s been repetitive.” Her response was the most extreme compared to other participants, who mentioned struggling with their family simply failing to understand veganism or take their choice to go vegan seriously. Participant 2 stated that
along with his family not understanding veganism, his own lack of education on how to live a
healthy and fulfilling vegan lifestyle served as a barrier that made the transition more difficult.
Participants 4 and 5 discussed a particular reoccurring barrier of frequently going out to eat with
friends and having no vegan options to choose from. Participants 5 and 10 noted that there is a
“stigma” associated with being vegan, with Participant 5 saying that it goes two ways: “It just
becomes kind of like you’re either babied or you’re just judged for your decision.” This
highlights the common sentiment that claiming to be vegan can lead to negative or misguided
reactions from others who are not vegan, such as being mocked or overly accommodated.
Participant 6 also noted frequently hearing jokes from friends about her choice to be vegan.
Overall, responses indicated that the social barrier was the biggest barrier each participant faced.

Two more participants cited the “stigma” against vegans when discussing overall barriers
to veganism as opposed to personal barriers. Three participants stated that a lack of education on
vegan nutrition and the consequences of animal agriculture serves as a major overall barrier.
Participant 1 gave the following explanation: “There’s a huge education problem, I think, where
some people kind of go vegan just kind of overnight, and they don’t realize the nutrition changes
that you have to think about, and so they face health problems just from a lack of resources.”
Two participants stated that the main issue is a personal or mental barrier that individuals have to
overcome. In describing the “mental barrier,” Participant 4 stated the following: We don’t like
thinking about negative impact we have on the world. As long as you ignore it or just come up
with excuses, it’s easier. I think if that could somehow be wiped away, then would world would
be vegan a lot quicker than any other way.” Three participants noted that veganism is not
accessible to everyone, as vegan options may be limited and expensive or individuals themselves
may be in varying socioeconomic statuses. Participant 8, for example, referred to the barrier
faced by people living in food deserts, and Participant 9 noted that even people who do no have access to meat alternatives face a barrier in becoming vegan. Aside from the vegan stigma, participants primarily named barriers that they themselves do not face or that they were able to previously overcome.

Discussion

Responses from participants as to whether activism was an inherent part of veganism were divided. Among the six who said yes, a further distinction emerged: those who see activism as a separate activity tied to veganism, and those who see veganism in itself as a form of activism. Regardless of whether participants see veganism as a social movement or form of activism, their interview responses revealed key factors to “going vegan” that are comparable to the key factors or steps to social movement mobilization noted in the literature review. Those key factors are: (1) ideological compatibility and sympathy to larger social causes; (2) education and awareness on vegan eating and the related social issues; (3) resource access and availability; and (4) social network ties.

All of the participants stated ideological reasons that helped motivate them to go vegan, with the one common factor among all participants being animal welfare. The importance of “ideological compatibility” is highlighted by McAdam (1988) as one of three key factors in determining who is most likely to join a particular social movement. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) also highlight the importance of ideology. Among their four key steps to becoming mobilized, being part of the “mobilization potential” is the first. This involves having attitudes that align with a specific movement or cause. These participants resonated with the animal ethics argument for going vegan, and some were able to see how veganism tied to other political
stances they already held. This ideological compatibility served as a major factor in motivating them to go and stay vegan.

Many participants named education and awareness as important factors in mobilizing others to go vegan. This included education and awareness on the larger social issues tied to veganism such as animal cruelty and environmental concerns, as well as on general nutrition and how to maintain a healthy and fulfilling vegan diet. Several participants expressed the importance of either factor, stating that more “education” would allow more individuals to go vegan. “Consciousness-raising” is a key factor to social movement participation highlighted by Hirsch (1990), and many participants seem to echo the idea that raising general awareness of critical. They also stated that maintaining that awareness through constant research and exposure to the negative consequences of industrialized animal agriculture (e.g., reaching articles on the environmental impact, watching undercover videos of animal cruelty, etc.) is an important factor in maintaining the motivation to stay vegan and not experience any lapses.

None of the participants mentioned facing any practical barriers (income status, lack of access to vegan foods, etc.) to becoming vegan. Many stated that having access to a variety of vegan options on campus, in local restaurants, and at grocery stores was helpful for maintaining their veganism. Some also acknowledged that there are practical barriers that may prevent individuals in general from becoming vegan, such as having a lower socioeconomic status, living in a food desert with limited access to produce and a variety of food options, or even living in areas with limited access to specialized vegan options (vegan alternatives to meat, dairy, eggs, etc.). These participants demonstrate having the “biographical availability” – or the time, money, and resources – to go vegan, a key factor highlighted by McAdam (1988) in determining who becomes involved in social movement activities. Participant responses also relate to the fourth
VEGANISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

step toward social movement mobilization highlighted by Klandermans and Oegema (1987): overcoming barriers to participation. Individuals may have the ideological compatibility and the background knowledge that would motivate them to go vegan, but this motivation can be blocked by practical barriers.

The final key factor is social network ties. Multiple participants noted the crucial role that having a vegan community or least having vegan friends and peers played in supporting their veganism. Social network ties, as evinced by the literature review, were critical for social movement participation. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) named “belonging to recruitment networks,” especially through organizational or friendship ties, as the second step towards social movement participation. McAdam (1988) highlighted social network ties as one of the three key aspects of initial recruitment to social movement organizations and activities. While several participants presented their transition to veganism as a process they undertook individually – learning about the veganism and making the decision before becoming connected to other vegans – some noted that they became vegan after being connected to other individuals who were already vegan or transitioning. These network ties performed the three key functions highlighted by Passy and Giugni (2001): connecting them with opportunities to support them in going vegan, familiarizing them with related issues, and shaping their decision to go vegan.

Most participants were able to form social network ties to other vegans by belonging to organizations related to veganism, either at the University of Florida or in the Gainesville community. Some knew other vegans before going vegan themselves or joining these organizations but were then able to expand their networks upon joining. A few participants do not belong to a vegan-related organization. Cherry’s (2006) study on the social network ties among vegans indicates that vegans who do not belong to affiliated organizations are still able to
maintain strong ties if they are part of strong network of vegans otherwise. Results from this study are unable to further support Cherry’s results as most participants did belong to organizations, and those who didn’t belong to organizations did not mention belonging to strong vegan networks otherwise.

McAdam (1988) also noted network ties as the distinguishing factor between who shows interest in a social movement and who follows through with participation. When asked about differences between resources that allow someone to go versus stay vegan, only some participants highlighted social networks and “community” as a factor of particular importance for staying vegan. However, most participants did acknowledge the role of social support – either from vegan peers or a larger vegan community – to some extent. It is unclear from the study whether social network ties make up the key factor that determines whether someone will stay vegan after making the initial commitment, but the importance of networks and community overall is still demonstrated.

On the other end, lack of support or social connections was one of the most commonly cited barriers among participants in discussing both personal and overall barriers. Four participants noted the “stigma” surrounding being vegan during their interviews. Markowski and Roxburgh (2019) found that the “vegan stigma,” or negative perceptions of individuals who identify as vegan, can be a major factor that prevents individuals from considering veganism or even interacting with vegans. Aside from the common negative perception from, participants stated that having friends, family members, or significant others who were unsupportive of their veganism – whether mocking it, failing to understand the decision, or advocating against it – made the lifestyle more difficult for them. Overall, these responses indicate that a lack of community, social ties, or support can be a barrier to veganism.
Conclusion

There is discrepancy among vegans as to whether veganism is a social movement and whether activism is an inherent part of veganism. Despite this, there is general agreement that ideological compatibility, education and awareness, resource access, and social network ties are all important factors in aiding individuals to go and then stay vegan – all of which are key factors in social movement participation.

Regarding what factors allow people to go vegan versus what factors allow people to stay vegan, responses in this study do not provide any major distinction. Many individuals seem to believe that these factors are the same. For example, many discussed that becoming educated and aware of animal cruelty and mistreatment on factory farms can help push someone to go vegan, and then continuing to maintain one’s awareness of that cruelty through exposure to articles or footage will help someone stay vegan. Some participants did note that community can be a particularly important resource for helping an individual stay vegan, which would be comparable to McAdam’s (1988) study, but this was not a largely apparent theme.

While there are mixed responses from vegans themselves on the ties between activism and veganism, participant interview responses on coming to veganism provide themes that are consistent with those found in studies on how individuals join social movements and ultimately become activists. This suggests that regardless of individual perceptions, we can better understand the scope of vegan practice if we understand it through the lens of social movements. The ties between veganism and activism are clear, and we can see how vegan mobilization is comparable to activist mobilization even if some vegans do not name it as activism.
A variety of factors could potentially explain why some vegans do not agree that activism is inherent to veganism. One might be that their perception of activism involves outspoken activities or advocacy to promote a cause, such as speeches, protests, petitioning, demonstrations, and even other activities that might be considered “radical”. Individuals who do not engage in this kind of activism may not see themselves as activists, or they may not view other vegans who abstain from such activities as activists. However, veganism in itself, even just in terms of a lifestyle or dietary change, could be perceived as a form of prefigurative politics (Breines, 1982). Vegans are engaged in a lifestyle and cultural practice that they hope to see become a future norm – a sentiment expressed by some participants in the study.

It is also possible that vegans steer clear of the “activist” label or attempt to separate veganism from activism to avoid the compounded stigma of not only being a vegan, but an outspoken vegan and an activist. As Markowski and Roxburgh (2019) indicated, which was further supported by participant interview responses, there is a stigma against vegans and a perception that they are annoying, overbearing, and maintaining an air of moral superiority. Some vegans might be attempting to deny this perception by not only avoiding activities they perceive as activist, but by avoiding the label of activist overall.

Overall, this study aimed to provide insight on the notion of veganism as a social movement from vegans themselves, but it does not provide a representative sample of vegans and their perspectives. Further research on the subject should aim to include more diverse demographics of individuals. Further studies could also be conducted to compare the perspectives of vegans belonging to different demographic groups, or the vegan subcultures that emerge among these different demographics.
Studies such as this on the motivations and barriers of veganism from the perspectives of vegans themselves provide further insight into understanding the current trend of veganism. This understanding can prove useful to vegan activists and vegan organizations that aim to further spread the message of veganism, encourage more individuals to go vegan, and aid interested individuals in maintaining their veganism. It is also important to note that for these activists and organizations, veganism is not an end within itself, but a means for the end goals of fighting for animal rights, lessening our environmental impact, and developing sustainable food systems. Reaching more individuals and spreading veganism would ultimately promote these larger causes and bring us closer to achieving them. Further research on the matter will allow activists and organizations to have a deeper understanding of the motivations that need to be in place and the barriers that need to be overcome in order to allow more individuals to not only go vegan but stay vegan.
References


Appendix A

[Google Trends chart showing interest over time for vegan, vegetarian, and gluten free categories.]

Worldwide. 1/1/12 - 1/1/18. Web Search.
Appendix B

Institutional Review Board
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please read this document carefully before you decide to participate in this research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to participate, or withdraw consent at any time, with no consequences.

Study Title:
Veganism as a Social Movement

Person(s) conducting the research:

Primary Investigator: Kendal Broad
Term Professor (2017-2020), Associate Professor, Joint Appointment
Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law
klbroad@ufl.edu
352-273-0389

Co-Investigator: Teagan Murphy
Undergraduate Student
Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law
teagan513@ufl.edu
561-452-4082

Purpose of the research study:
This study aims to understand if the reasons why individuals “go vegan” and stay vegan similar to the reasons why individuals join and stay in social movement, and how the barriers to entry compare with that of other social movements. You must identify as vegan to participate in this study.

What you will be asked to do in the study:
If you agree to be in this study, I (Teagan Murphy) will conduct an interview with you as the study co-investigator. The interview will include a series of open-ended questions regarding your experience with veganism. With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview on a mobile device.

Time required:
The interview will take place in one session and should last no longer than 30 minutes.

Risks and benefits:
There are no anticipated risks associated with this study. The possible benefit of participating in this study is increased knowledge and understanding about veganism.

IRB Project #: 201803070
IRB Version: 12/1/2018
Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. Any sort of report made will utilize pseudonyms and will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept on a password-protected computer; only the researcher will have access to the records. If the interview is audio-recorded, all files will be kept on a password-protected computer and destroyed after the recording has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Withdrawal from the study:
You are free to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this study at any time without consequence. You can decline to answer any question you don’t wish to answer. If you withdraw, your information will be discarded.

If you wish to discuss the information above or any discomforts you may experience, please ask questions now or contact one of the research team members listed at the top of this form.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB02) office (098 PSY Bldg., University of Florida; Box 112250; (352) 392-0433 or irb2@ufl.edu.)

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

_________________________________________________
Participant Name

_________________________________________________
Participant Signature

_________________________________________________
Name of Person obtaining informed consent

_________________________________________________
Signature of Person obtaining informed consent