



School of Business, Economics and IT
Division of Informatics

Vegan lifestyle on Facebook: An online ethnography study

Author: Noelia Arriazú Nolasco

**Master Thesis, 15 HE credits
Thesis work in informatics
Autumn/Spring term 2016**

**Supervisor: Maria Spante
Examiner: Kerstin Grundén**

Acknowledgements

Gracias a todos los que han participado en las entrevistas, por haber compartido conmigo algo tan importante de vuestras vidas.

To my classmates, thanks for all the constructive criticism I've received. Because of it, this year has been a continuous learning and you have been a great support.

I want to make a special thanks to the person who has supported me every day. Thanks to Jagannath for being by my side even in the worst stressful moments.

But primarily, I want to thank Maria for messing with my brain so successfully. You've managed to get the better of me, and I will always be grateful for that.

“You have to be confused before you can reach a new level of understanding anything.”
— Dudley Herschbach (Nobel-Prize Chemist)

Noelia

Abstract

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of vegans in the world. The main goal of my research is to understand the vegan struggles in their daily life and study how Facebook might help them solve these difficulties. This master's thesis focuses on the user perspective and how they perceive barriers to follow a vegetarian lifestyle in Spain. The research questions are about finding those barriers and knowing how they could be solved by using Facebook groups. For this purpose, an ethnographic approach has been used.

The target group of this study are vegans who have gone through the time of change and may have had some problems in making that decision. Fifteen vegans have been interviewed to find challenges that have arisen when they have changed their lifestyles. After that, an online ethnography study has been performed by observing the content of a Facebook group, called “Vegetarianos y Veganos – España”, focusing on publications where group members were asking for advice, information or solutions.

The results indicate that the investigated group of Facebook is essential for the exchange of information, knowledge and experience. The members also contribute to increased knowledge through publications and comments. But most importantly, the members receive solutions to the problems they share with the group.

Resumen

En los últimos años ha habido un aumento en el número de veganos en el mundo. El objetivo principal de mi investigación es comprender las dificultades que tienen los veganos en su vida diaria y estudiar cómo Facebook puede ayudar a resolver esas dificultades. Ésta tesis se centra en la perspectiva del usuario y qué barreras perciben siguiendo un estilo de vida vegetariano en España. Las preguntas de mi investigación se centran en encontrar esas barreras y cómo podrían ser resueltas mediante el uso de grupos de Facebook. Para ello, se ha utilizado un enfoque etnográfico.

Los objetos de éste estudio son veganos que han pasado por el cambio y pueden haber tenido algunos problemas debido a la toma de esa decisión. He entrevistado a 15 veganos para encontrar desafíos que han surgido cuando han cambiado su estilo de vida. Después, he estado observando el contenido del grupo en Facebook llamado "Vegetarianos y Veganos - España" centrándome en las publicaciones donde los miembros del grupo pedían consejos, información o soluciones.

Los resultados indican que el grupo de Facebook que ha sido investigado es apropiado para el intercambio de información, conocimientos y experiencia. Los usuarios también contribuyen a aumentar el conocimiento a través de publicaciones y comentarios. En líneas generales, los miembros del grupo encuentran soluciones a los problemas que comparten con los demás miembros del grupo.

Keywords

Vegan, veganism, Facebook, online ethnography.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Background and problem.....	1
1.2. Definitions	3
1.3. Objective.....	4
1.4. Research questions.....	4
2. Literature Review	5
2.1. Vegans and veganism	5
2.2. From the Internet to Facebook.....	6
3. Theory: Connectivism	8
4. Research Methodology	9
4.1. Interviews.....	9
4.2. Ethnography.....	10
4.2.1. Online ethnography	11
4.2.2. Ethics	12
4.3. Limitations and difficulties	13
5. The Facebook Group	15
6. Results and Analysis.....	18
6.1. Barriers found	18
6.2. Topics on the Facebook group.....	25
7. Discussion.....	32
8. Conclusions	34
References	35
Appendix 1: Interview Guide	38

Table of Figures

FIGURE 1: GOOGLE TRENDS (GOOGLE, 2016A).....	1
FIGURE 2: GOOGLE TRENDS WORLDWIDE - TIME RANGES (GOOGLE, 2016B).....	2
FIGURE 3: GOOGLE TRENDS SPAIN - TIME RANGES (GOOGLE, 2016C).....	2
FIGURE 4: GROUPS STATS (GRYTICS, 2016).....	16
FIGURE 5: POSTS ENGAGEMENT (GRYTICS, 2016)	17
FIGURE 6: COMMENTS ENGAGEMENT (GRYTICS, 2016).....	17
FIGURE 7: POSTS TYPES (GRYTICS, 2016)	25
FIGURE 8: POST DISTRIBUTION (GRYTICS, 2016)	26
FIGURE 9: COMMENT DISTRIBUTION (GRYTICS, 2016).....	27
TABLE 1: TOP PUBLISHERS AND COMMENTERS (GRYTICS, 2016).....	31

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and problem

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of vegans and vegetarians in the world. Currently, the term vegan is becoming more and more common. People can now find more vegan restaurants, vegan cosmetics, fake-meat food, mobile apps about ingredients suitable for vegans, speeches about veganism and etc. Also there are more and more people interested in the lifestyle and seek information about it. This is shown in the increase of Google searches illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.

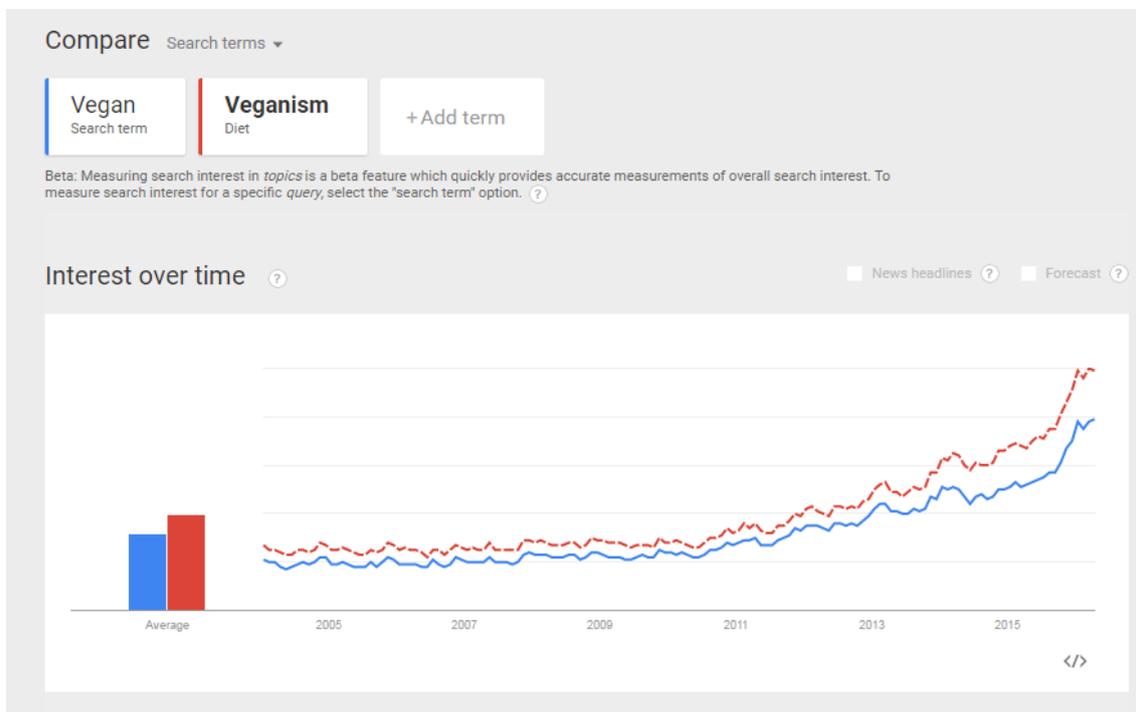


Figure 1: Google trends (Google, 2016a)

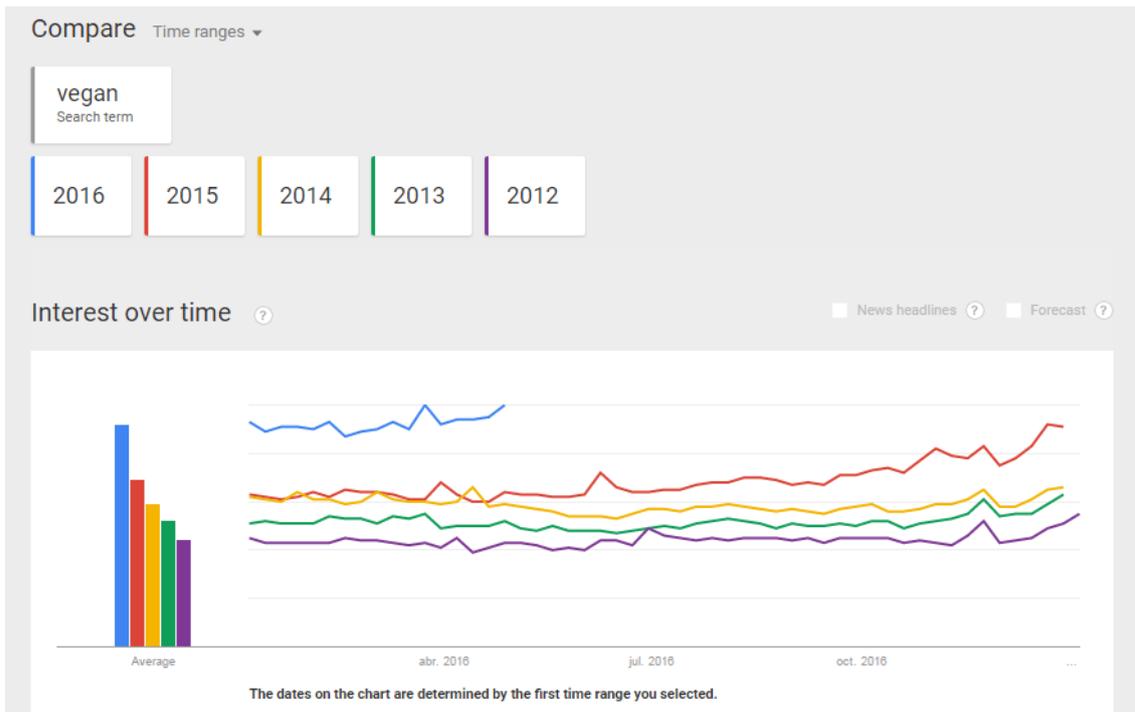


Figure 2: Google trends worldwide - Time ranges (Google, 2016b)

The interest worldwide about the term "vegan" has more than doubled in just 5 years with an average of 44 in 2012 against an average of 92 in 2016. In Spain, the increase was even bigger. The search term "vegan" quadruples during the last 5 years (average of 22 against 89) as shown below.

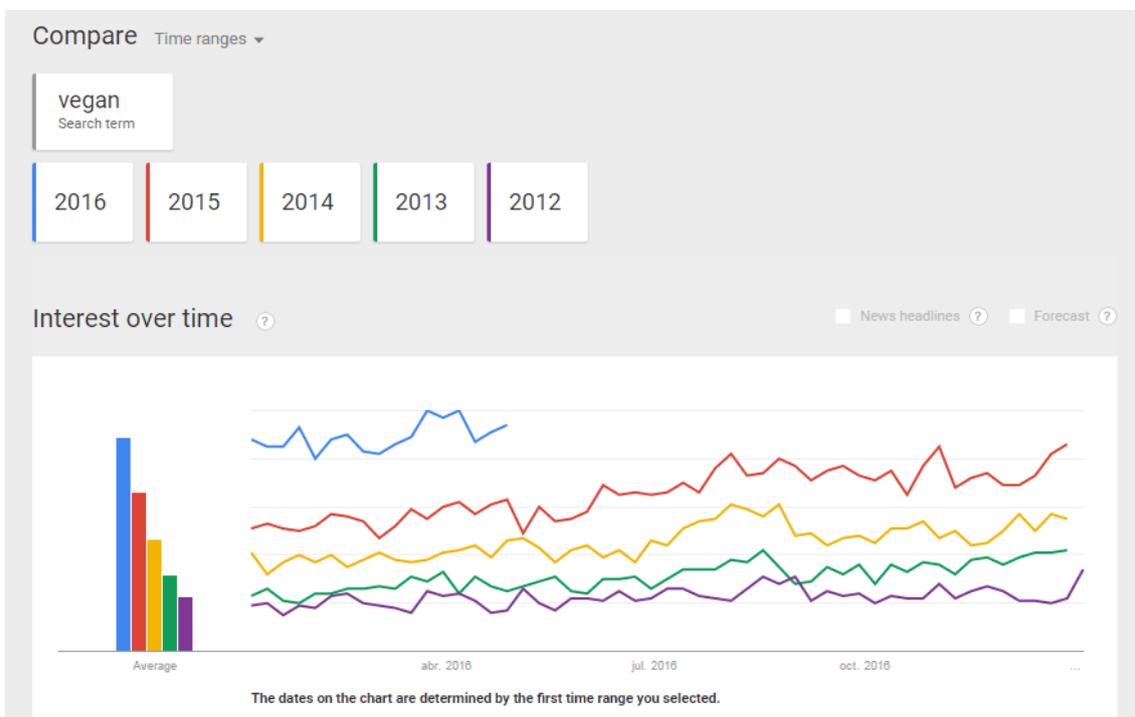


Figure 3: Google trends Spain - Time ranges (Google, 2016c)

When I started the vegan lifestyle, I needed a lot of information to accompany my new decision and it was even more difficult because of the language barrier, having moved to Sweden. With time, I could find that information from different sources and I can now lead my vegan lifestyle. Even though, I still need to use different information systems to collect new information about new products that I want to consume. There are still many barriers arising in my day to day. This motivates me to carry out this thesis.

Within the vegetarian lifestyle, there are different categories or levels (see 1.2 Definitions for more information), but the reality is different because everyone does not fit into these categories. There may be vegetarians who eat eggs but do not use products tested on animals. Being a vegetarian and how to live that lifestyle depends on the person and the individual circumstances. Often the vegetarian lifestyle is not just limited to nutrition. There are people practicing these lifestyles with the intention to cause the least possible suffering to animals while others abstain from eating animals but ignore other aspects in daily life such as how clothes or cosmetics are produced. However, the majority of vegans change their lifestyle for ethical or health reasons (Radnitz, et al., 2015).

Despite these problems to clearly distinguish the groups from each other, the focus in this thesis will be on vegans. Vegans belong to the group that make conscious lifestyles choices not only about food, but also about cloths, cosmetics and other daily life products. Therefore, it is here argued, their information need and information sharing is higher than the other groups even if vegetarians can use the information for vegans.

1.2. Definitions

For a better understanding, it is really important to define the main concepts used in this thesis. According to Cambridge dictionary:

Vegan: a person who does not eat or use any animal products, such as meat, fish, eggs, cheese, or leather.

Vegetarian: a person who does not eat meat for health or religious reasons or because they want to avoid being cruel to animals.

Lacto-vegetarian: a person who does not eat meat, fish, or eggs but does drink milk and eat some foods made from milk.

Ovo-vegetarian: a person who does not eat meat, fish, or dairy products (= milk or foods made from milk) but does eat eggs.

1.3. Objective

As shown before, there is an increase of vegans worldwide. Numerous individuals are beginning in this lifestyle which will look for the information they need. Because of this, new vegans seem to be a particularly relevant group for the study. Perhaps the term "new" is a bit arbitrary, but when I talk about new vegans I mean people who have recently changed their lifestyle and not those who have grown up living in a vegan family. This thesis focuses on those that have struggled with their decisions to become vegans, and how social media played a role in these decisions.

This thesis will focus on Social Network Sites (SNS), and specifically I will focus on Facebook. I would like to emphasize the importance of Facebook in today's society. Facebook is the most popular SNS with a 1.04 billion daily active users on average for December 2015 (Facebook, 2016). There are a lot of groups in Facebook, opened and closed, discussing various topics. Generally, the purpose of closed Facebook groups is information seeking, information sharing, debating and discussing, related to the subject of the groups. Those groups also have rules to follow in order to avoid off topic discussions.

Looking more closely at the vegan lifestyle, we still know very little about how vegans use SNS such as Facebook and what role Facebook has in the everyday struggles of vegans. This master's thesis focuses on the user perspective and how they perceive barriers to follow a vegetarian lifestyle in Spain.

1.4. Research questions

Due to the increase in the number of vegans, there will be many new vegans who seek information and need answers for their questions. I will focus on these new vegans and I will focus my study in understanding the vegan struggles in their daily life.

- * RQ1: WHAT BARRIERS DO NEW VEGANS FACE IN THEIR LIFESTYLE?

The second question will be focused on one particular Social Network Site, e.g. Facebook. There are a lot of studies regarding the popularity of SNS and specifically Facebook, which has a huge influence in the people (see 2.2 From the Internet and to Facebook). Therefore, I will study how Facebook groups might help to solve these difficulties found in the first part of my study.

- * RQ2: HOW COULD FACEBOOK GROUPS HELP IN SOLVING THOSE BARRIERS?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vegans and veganism

A key part of the study is to understand what veganism is and who vegans are. For this reason, it is necessary to have a section to explain in more detail the concepts vegan and veganism.

The vegan movement or veganism is a lifestyle movement which it has previously been investigated and defined. According to Davis (2012, p. 189) veganism is an ethical position which rejects any use of animals for any purpose, including clothing, research and entertainment, as well as diet. Cherry (2006, p. 156) emphasizes that vegans represent a new form of social movement that is not based on legislation or identity politics, but instead is based on every day practices in one's lifestyle.

But where does the word vegan come from? Davis (2012, p. 190) explains that the word 'vegan' was invented in November 1944 by Donald Watson in England to provide a name for the first Vegan Society. The Vegan Society (2016) defines veganism as:

“A philosophy and 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; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.”

The Vegan Society (2016) explains that veganism is not just about diet. Vegans avoid exploiting animals for any purpose, with compassion being a key reason many choose a vegan lifestyle. Animal substance is embedded in all sorts of products ranging from accessories and clothing to bathroom items.

The animal rights and vegan movement are strongly linked. The animal rights and the environment, along with health, are three important themes to pay attention to in the vegan lifestyle. Not only the food, but also all daily actions are important for vegans in their lifestyle. Since veganism focuses on eliminating animal products from people's diets and lifestyles, veganism is often considered as only one goal or tactic of the animal rights movement (Munro 2005 see Cherry 2006, p. 155).

Existing research describes why individuals make the choice of becoming a vegan. The choice is made for different reasons. Primarily, it is a decision driven by a concern for animals (ethics) and health, which may impact both specific food choices and other lifestyle behaviours linked to health outcomes (Radnitz, et al., 2015, p. 31). But maybe the why someone became a vegan is not that important as why that person is still a vegan. An ethical vegan has strong beliefs, fighting every day for a better world with his/her actions. Therefore, there are many problems to address in their daily life as vegans.

2.2. From the Internet to Facebook

What is the Internet? I can give a technical definition about what the Internet is, but the interest in this study is not the structure and protocols of the Internet but the link between the Internet and how it affects the society, in other words, the social impact. Castells (2001, p. 1) said that The Internet is the fabric of our lives. Hine (2012, p. 2) talks about such a big impact that maybe the Internet changes things, maybe it causes us to live our lives differently, or to be different people. Globally 3.2 billion people were using the Internet by end 2015, of which 2 billion are from developing countries (ITU, 2015).

Internet use has changed over the years. Like Wellman (2001, p. 2034) said: “An Internet year is like a dog year, changing approximately seven times faster than normal human time”. The sources of information available on the Internet are endless. There are many search engines that facilitate the search and access to information. With social networks, users are part of that information, whether sharing information or creating new content. The Internet offers new ways to search for information and as a medium of communication. Since the Internet is becoming an essential medium of communication and organization in all realms of activity, it is obvious that social movements and the political process use, and will increasingly use, the Internet as well, making it a privileged tool for acting, informing, recruiting, organizing, dominating and counter-dominating (Castells, 2001, p. 137). Although technology does not change society—it only affords possibilities for change—powerful forces are shaping the Internet: increased broadband use, global ubiquity, portability, 24/7 availability, personalization, and the switch from place-to-place to person-to-person connectivity (Wellman, 2001, p. 2034).

The world is globalized with the use of the Internet and therefore people are more connected. Hine (2000, p. 157) provides a basic definition about Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as a general term referring to a range of different ways in which people can communicate with one another via computer network. Often computer networks and social networks work conjointly, with computer networks linking people in social networks and with people bringing their offline situations to bear when they use computer networks to interact (Wellman, 2001, p. 2031). Hine (2000, p. 10) explains that conducting an ethnographic enquiry through the use of CMC opens up the possibility of gaining a reflexive understanding of what it is to be part of the Internet. This provides a symmetry to the ethnography, as the ethnographer learns through using the same media as informants. Therefore it is important to know which media the informants to be studied are using.

Vegans, as a minority community, have the need to look for other vegans on Social Network Sites (SNS), producing virtual communities, because sometimes they don't find other vegans in their social environment. Dijk (2012, pp. 1-2) talks about a new infrastructure for society explaining that today, we no longer only depend on roads, electricity cables, water pipes, gas lines, sewers, post-boxes, telephone wires and cable television to conduct our daily lives and manage our households. We now also need networks of electronic communication. Young people in rich countries can no longer

imagine a world without mobile telephony, the Internet and Facebook or any of the other social networking sites.

Hagel (1999, p. 57) explains that virtual communities are defined by bringing people together with a common set of needs or interests and they could be organized around an area of interest, a demographic segment or a geographic region. In this case, vegans are linked by their personal interests but also they like to be connected with people closed to them. Both by proximity or language, virtual vegan communities are formed by region and in this way they receive the information they need, like for example, a vegan restaurant near her home. But occasionally, they join communities in other regions because for example they are interested in doing a trip there or there are more participants.

Why did I choose a Facebook group for my study? As previously mentioned, Facebook is the most popular Social Network Site. Only in March 2016, Facebook (2016) has an average of 1.09 billion daily active users and 989 million mobile daily active users. Facebook (2016) define their groups as communities for you and other group members to discuss common interests. For some vegans, Facebook groups are a fundamental support for their lifestyle. There are many vegans seeking the support or help of like-minded individuals in groups of Facebook because they do not have that support in their environment. I will explain later the Facebook group chosen for my study with more details (see 4. The Facebook Group).

3. Theory: Connectivism

The beginning of the theory goes back to 2005. Downes (2005) provides an overview of connective knowledge. But it was Siemens who wrote about connectivism as a theory for the first time.

As Kropf (2013, p. 13) points out, the Internet has become a focal point for a potentially dynamic modern learning theory called connectivism. She continues explaining that connectivism attributes learning through cyber nodes specifically rooted in social networks. Connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories (Siemens, 2005b, p. 5).

According to Siemens (2008) as mentioned Kropf (2013, p. 13), connectivism is a learning theory comprised of different series of nodes to connect hundreds of networks. These connections provide individuals with direct access to reliable information from millions of sources to duplicate, reproduce, and share within their social networks, and to delete, critique, and discard inaccurate, irrelevant, and unreliable information (Kropf, 2013, p. 13)

Siemens (2008) explains that the learning in connectivism occurs when knowledge is distributed within a network. The factors that influence the process of learning are diversity of the network and strength of ties. The transfer of the knowledge occurs by connecting or adding nodes to the network. Connectivism is a theory suited for complex learning, rapid changing core and diverse knowledge sources.

According to Siemens (2005a, pp. 23-24), connectivism presents eight principles:

- Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision.

The notion of connectivism has implications in all aspects of life, not only in learning but also management and leadership; Media, news, information; Personal knowledge management in relation to organizational knowledge management and design of learning environments. Connectivism presents a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity (Siemens, 2005b, p. 7).

4. Research Methodology

As I have shown in the section 1.4 Research questions, my research consists of two linked research questions in which the first part of the study is essential to answer the second part.

To answer the first research question (RQ1) I interviewed new vegans to collect information. The questions of the interview are related to the problems that have arisen during their daily life.

To answer the second research question (RQ2) I performed an online ethnography study in one Facebook group called "Veganos y Vegetarianos - España" to study the vegan culture within the group of Facebook from the point of view of social subjects.

Ethnographic research basically includes observations and interviews held with individuals and other related people to describe or explain their everyday experiences. In this type of research, the key tools are made up of in-depth interviews and constant observations used in all ethnographic studies (Firat & Yurdakul, 2011, p. 109).

4.1. Interviews

Fetterman (1998, pp. 37-39) talks about interviews in an ethnography study and he considers that the interview is the ethnographer's most important data gathering technique. He recommends a structured or semi-structured interview when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the "insider's" perspective. As I mentioned in previous sections, I already had prior knowledge about veganism even long before I started thinking about this research. Seven months ago I joined a group of vegans on Facebook for the first time. I joined it because I thought I could learn very interesting things and because I visit Facebook frequently. I thought it would be a very easy and convenient way to obtain information that was relevant to me. I can follow the "insider's" perspective in my study because I was in their situation before. Fetterman (1998, p. 38) also recommends the researcher to use informal approaches to discover the categories of meaning in a culture. Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how the perceptions of a person are compared to others.

It will be helpful to clarify the value interviews bring to an ethnographic project. The method allows researchers to grasp the relationship between what people "say they do" and "what they do". It is for this reason that interviewing in isolation does not constitute ethnographic research (Taylor, et al., 2012, p. 92).

The interviews in my study were conducted individually and they are semi-structured interviews with a guide to follow during the interviews (see Appendix 1: Interview Guide). I believe that such interviews are more flexible to adapt to different types of people and I am able to ask for clarifications. This type of interview also gives me the opportunity to get a deep understanding. The interviews take an informal approach when I ask at the end of the interview with open questions about their lives in particular.

The interviewees have chosen the way to conduct the interview that best suits their needs, for example a call via Skype or Facebook, but all interviews have been a call by Internet due to the barrier of the distance.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated for the following analysis. In the beginning of the interview I asked about the interviewee's background in the interest of their daily life to then know more about them and understand their situation. The following questions were more specific to answer the first research question (RQ1). Some questions are common to all participants and others are according to their background, for example I did not ask about the food of their pets if previously they have told me that they have no pets.

Volunteers were solicited through the chosen group of Facebook. A total of fifteen vegans from different parts of Spain were interviewed. Their characteristics vary in education, geography, age (between 18 and 47 years old) and gender, although the female presence was predominant with a number of ten women and five men. The response of more women than men was expected because when I asked to The Vegan Society about some statistics they answered with an email where they said: "The Vegan Society estimates that there are more women than men in the movement" (11th May 2016).

4.2. Ethnography

Agar (1986, p. 12) explains that the social research style that emphasizes encountering alien worlds and making sense of them is called ethnography, or "folk description". He continues explaining that ethnographers set out to show how social action in one world makes sense from the point of view of another. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 1) see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. They continue explaining that in its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p. 1) wrote that ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives. Fetterman (1998, p. 1) describes ethnography as the art and science of describing a group or culture.

Ethnographic research is fundamentally distinct from experimentation. The goal is not to determine how controlled variables account for difference, but to trace and interpret the complex currents of everyday life that comprise our collective lived experience as human beings (Taylor, et al., 2012, p. 3). Ethnography is a flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergent phenomena and emergent research questions (Taylor, et al., 2012, p. 6).

The sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting, combined with their intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants of the field site makes for the special kind of knowledge we call ethnographic (Hine, 2000, pp. 63-64).

The way that technology and culture interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining. This element of technocultural change is present in our public spaces, our workplaces, our homes, our relationships, and our bodies – each institutional element intermixed with every other one. Technology constantly shapes and reshapes our bodies, our places, and our identities, and is shaped to our needs as well. Understanding of the way this transformation unfolds requires us to keep a keen eye on particular and general context – specific times and places, distinctive rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, practical and popular uses, fears and dreams. A thorough understanding of these contexts requires ethnography (Kozinets, 2010, p. 22).

An ethnographer is a human instrument and must discriminate among different types of data and analyze the relative worth of one path over another at every turn in fieldwork, well before any formalized analysis takes place (Fetterman, 1998, p. 3). Ethnography is reflexive. This means that the researcher is the main tool of the investigation and that requires the researcher to question him/herself where and how it addresses the study subjects, the environment and the context in which the research topic arises.

4.2.1. Online ethnography

In my search for information about online ethnography, I have found that many authors have given different names to the same method. Hine (2000) called it virtual ethnography; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis and Tacchi (2016) called it digital ethnography; Puri (2009) called it webnography; Libin and Libin (2005) called it cyber-anthropology; and sometimes it's called online ethnography. Taylor, Pearce, Nardi and Boellstorff (2012, p. 4) explain that like many scholars, on occasion they conversationally use phrases like “digital ethnography,” “virtual ethnography,” or “internet ethnography”. But they see their selves as ethnographers conducting research in virtual worlds, not as “virtual ethnographers”.

Virtual ethnography is the adaptation of ethnographic methodology to the study of social and cultural practices associated with the use of the Internet or computer mediated interactions. Hine (2000, p. 10) describes virtual ethnography as a particular approach to ethnography which is almost but not quite like the real thing.

The internet also provides for ethnography to be differently organized in time and space. Virtual ethnography can exploit mobility to explore the making of spaces and times, and the relationship between them (Hine, 2000, p. 116). In this way, with online ethnography I will be able to carry out my study about vegans in Spain from my home in Sweden and look back at posts in the Facebook group in case I need to read them again.

T.L. Taylor, together with Pearce, Nardi and Boellstorff (2012, p. 89) do not want to give a strict overall time recommendation because the amount of time can vary, but in

general they cannot imagine effective ethnographic fieldwork taking less than six months. But they also said that if an ethnographer has already engaged in research, follow-up studies of one to three months may be possible if the research question is sufficiently focused. Due to the high activity of the group, going back in time will not be necessary because the amount of information that has been produced during these months. The observation in the field work will be carried out daily from the moment I'm accepted as a member of the group and I get the permission to investigate the group.

In her book, Hine (2000) explains that you can perform a virtual ethnography study in two different ways. The first way is from the perspective of an observer where the ethnographer will not interfere or interact with the community investigated. The second way, the ethnographer is actively participating in the community doing significant contributions. I have decided to pursue an investigation without interference or interaction in the group, looking through posts that members of the group have published. Thereby, the behaviour of the members is not interfered by the participation of the ethnographer.

Evans (2010, pp. 12-13) cites the work of Hine (2000) by summarizing the 10 principles of the virtual ethnography:

1. We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful.
2. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact.
3. The ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically.
4. Instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections.
5. Boundaries, especially between the "virtual" and the "real", are not to be taken-for-granted.
6. Virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion.
7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. Our accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities.
8. Intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography.
9. This is ethnography of, in and through the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings.
10. Virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.

4.2.2. Ethics

The issues raised by ethical principles should guide the practice of ethnography in the fieldwork. Fetterman (1998, p. 14) summarized as fundamental ethical standards of the

ethnography the securing of permission (to protect individual privacy), honesty, trust (both implicit and explicit), reciprocity, and rigorous work. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 264) consider the ethical issues under five headings: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and the consequences for future research.

Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland and Lofland (2001, pp. 339-351) describe a set of ethical principles:

- Non-maleficence: that researchers should avoid harming participants
- Beneficence: that research on human subjects should produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply be carried out for its own sake.
- Autonomy or self-determination: that the values and decision of research participants should be respected.
- Justice: that people who are equal in relevant respects should be treated equally.

The same ethical principles for classical ethnography can be applied for virtual ethnography. Wilson and Peterson (2002, p. 461) argue that anthropology online is substantially the same as any other sort of anthropological research. Although the AAA Code of Ethics does not address electronic communication directly, its ethical principles -of showing respect for people under study, of protecting their dignity and best interests, of protecting anonymity or giving proper credit, and of obtaining informed consent- apply online as well as in face-to-face contexts.

Undoubtedly I asked permission to participants or key informants for my study. The investigation is done through the Facebook group and I informed to the members about the study: objectives and benefits, and the importance of it. This not only to solve a question of an ethical issue, but also allowed me to search the commitment of the participants for the study. About the participants, I also ensured them that the use of the data collected is strictly for scientific purposes, and at the same time the anonymity and confidentiality of them are guaranteed. I explicitly expressed this to the participants before the study has started and I informed them even at the beginning of the interviews.

4.3. Limitations and difficulties

The first limitation I found in my investigation is related to the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and I translated them so there is the possibility of bias towards my own interpretation doing the translations for writing my thesis. Also, the interviews were conducted by an online call due to the distance. This brings the disadvantage that does not allow direct contact with the interviewee, which is essential to evaluate non-verbal communication. But on the other hand, the influence that the interviewer has over the interviewee is less than when the interviews are conducted face-to-face. Also the time it takes for the transcription and translation is time consuming. At least four hours of transcription are required for each hour of

conversation, and double that time if translation from another language is involved (Taylor, et al., 2012, p. 110).

The most important limitation that I have faced in this study is due to the chosen methodology. As a new ethnographer, I had to learn a lot about ethnography in a short period of time. This has led me to moments of real confusion which have now been solved by this investigation. I still have so much to learn about ethnography, but this has been a good beginning.

The major challenge was to distinguish between the role of the ethnographer and the role of a community member in the Facebook group, since I feel strongly connected to the vegans. Kerr and Hiltz (1982) as cited in Paccagnella (1997) talk about two problems specifically related to participant observation in CMC (Computer-mediated communication): going native and role conflict. The first referring to involving oneself in the group to the extent that objectivity is lost, e.g. to go native, while the second means a dilemma between the goals of the group and those of the evaluation. I was already accepted in the chosen group before I even decide the topic of my research. Therefore it became important to have the aim of the study in mind and avoiding to go native.

Fetterman (1998, p. 35) suggests that the ideal would be a period of time for 6 months to 1 year or more in the field. T.L. Taylor, together with Pearce, Nardi and Boellstorff (2012, pp. 88-89), explain that if we have conducted preliminary fieldwork, or do not need to learn a new language, or are returning to a well-know field site, the time necessary for participant observation may be considerably less than a year. In comparison with the recommended time frame from ethnographers, my thesis is 10 weeks of work. Still, based on my previous knowledge and understanding of the vegan Facebook group, I argue that I have enough pre understanding of the field in order to conduct online ethnography.

Ethnography needs a lot of time in the field to understand the culture studied, so the researchers spend a lot of time observing the group where they are. But on the other hand, if the researcher spends too much time in the field working there may be a risk of becoming a part of that group and losing the identity of being a researcher.

Fetterman (1998, p. 8) also explains that the ethnographer begins with a survey period to learn the basics: the native language, the kinship ties, census information, historical data, and the basic structure and function of the culture under the study for the months to come. As I explained earlier, I have already spent extensive time in the community of vegans. Therefore I have already obtained a deep pre-understanding of the phenomena as a new vegan myself. However, I still need to become an ethnographer to investigate my research questions on a more general level.

5. The Facebook Group

Currently, there are countless Facebook groups about topics related to veganism in one way or another. It is difficult to know the exact number of groups that globally are talking about it. Some groups are just to discuss where to find vegan products, others to find out about events in certain cities, others about sports (for example runners who are vegans), and some are general to talk about everything related to veganism.

I used the term vegan as a search keyword on Facebook. The majority of the results were closed groups. I focused on groups that were related to Spain and talk about veganism generally and not just on a particular topic. Among the groups that talk about veganism generally, I decided to choose the group with the largest number of members. In this section I will describe the community I studied, a Facebook group called “Vegetarianos y Veganos – España”, in English “Vegetarians and Vegans – Spain”, in which I am a member since 4th March 2016.

Description on Facebook about the group chosen:

“Community vegans and vegetarians (who eat only vegetables) or ovo-lacto-vegetarian in transition to veganism. Antispeciesist, activists for animal rights”

After the description, there is an explanation about the rules in the group. Then they emphasize about the goal of the group:

“We share FIGHT, CAUSES, TIPS, RESPECT, FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, INFORMATION, DOUBTS, IDEAS AND GOOD SENSE OF HUMOR.”

When I asked the administrators if I could do my study in that group, the administrator not only gave me permission to carry out my study, but also the administrator wanted to emphasize more on the target of the group. The administrator defined it like:

“It is against speciesism¹, pro veganism, feminists; we condemn racism, transphobia², xenophobia³, and any type of abuse. It is designed to be a community building info and debate among vegans, antispeciesist, feminist or vegetarian in transition to veganism.

Its administrators are also people members of groups of feminists, animal rights, political movements (like anarchism) or very committed with social movements, solidarity collectives, social associations, NGOs, etc.

It is a vegan community, antispeciesist, with information, help, debate and criticism about veganism in our society. The idea we have of veganism is that all social movements or reasons why continue fighting are transversal contents, which may be implicit in veganism, from the respect and defence of collective LGBT+ to the feminism;

¹ Speciesism: prejudice or discrimination based on species; especially discrimination against animals.

² Transphobia is a range of antagonistic attitudes and feelings against transgender or transsexual people or transsexuality

³ Xenophobia: dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries.

or of course the defence of animal rights. Humans are also animals; therefore, our social concerns are also encompassed by veganism.

We would like to clarify several things, hence my insistence. Many people throw comments like: - I thought this group was only to talk about animals. To which we respond: Yes. It is to talk about animals, their defence. But we, the people, humanity, are also animals. And here is where is include the defence of all social causes that fight for a human society without violence, without phobias, without slavery, to other people or to other animal species”

The group is defined by the following tags: Veganism · Vegetarianism · Friendship

With 12400 members as of 17th May 2016, the group “Vegetarianos y Veganos – España” is one of the largest groups of Facebook about veganism in Spain. This group was chosen because of the large number of participants. It was also chosen because they write a significant amount of messages and comments, where members interact and exchange their experiences and information.

Grytics (2016) is an analytical tool to get statistics and metrics about Facebook Groups. The chosen group is a closed group, so only administrators can obtain the statistics. After asking several administrators for help, finally one administrator sent me the report that the tool generates very easily and where you can see the following results:



Figure 4: Groups Stats (Grytics, 2016)

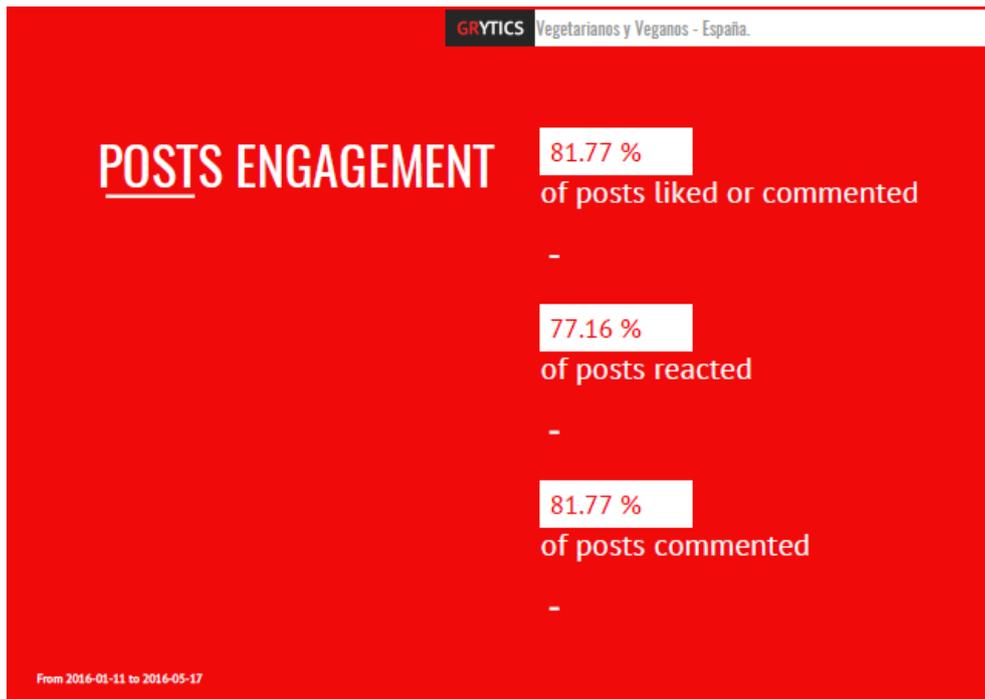


Figure 5: Posts Engagement (Grytics, 2016)

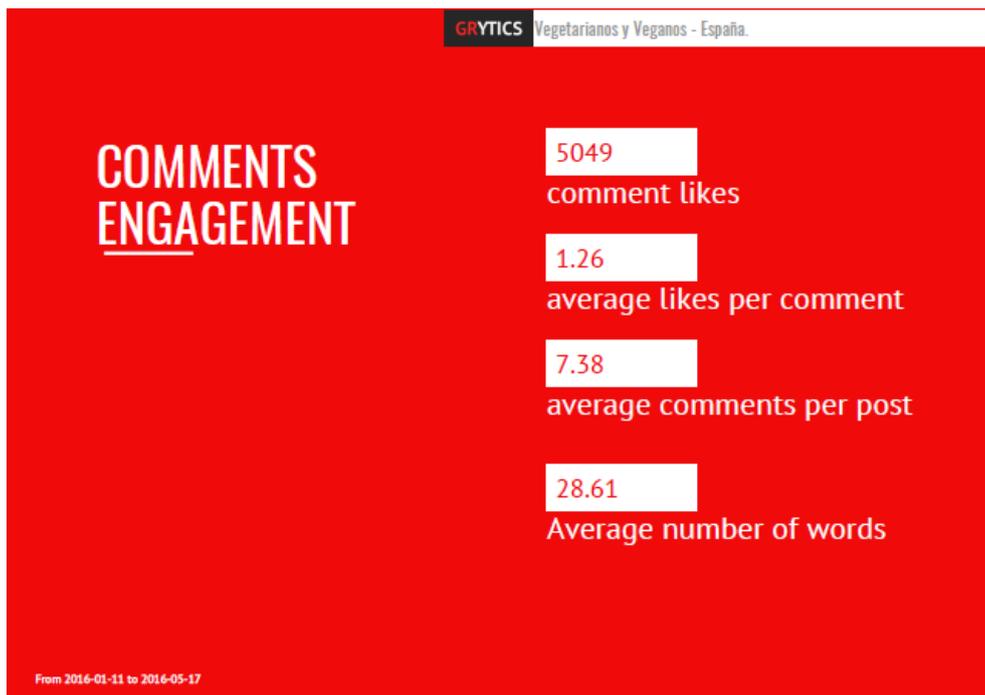


Figure 6: Comments Engagement (Grytics, 2016)

We can see that from 12400 members, only 2400 are active members. But the engagement of those members is quite high. 81.77% of the posts are commented with an average of 7.38 comments per post.

6. Results and Analysis

6.1. Barriers found

In this section I will show the results of the interviews conducted through which I have tried to find barriers that new vegans face in their lifestyle.

I studied the barriers that new vegans face by interviewing fifteen vegans. All of them defined veganism as a lifestyle in which is not only diet but is also not contribute to animal exploitation in all aspects. Some of them self-identified as activists and some others in the process of learning how to be vegan but not only in their diet. All of them expressed their dismays for different bad situations they found themselves in due to their lifestyles.

One of the first questions about challenges or concerns in their first experiences being vegan was about going to the supermarket. One of their concerns when they went to the supermarket was the time it took. Most have said that at first they have taken longer because they had to read all labels and check the ingredients.

“If I go to the supermarket to do the big shopping there yes, it takes more time because I have to read the ingredients in the products”

“Now it takes me longer to do the shopping”

“I spend an hour looking at the ingredients”

“It's tedious to have to always look at all labels”

About the ingredients, some of the interviewees have also stated that it is often difficult to find products that are strict vegan. Many products contain traces of milk and some vegans consider them unsuitable.

“It is quite complicated about traces of milk because even in the herbalists the usual burgers that they charge 4 or 5 €, some have traces of milk ... no kidding... if you're going to charge 5 € don't put in it traces of milk”

“If you want to be 100% vegan, almost everything has traces. For not having traces you have to spend more money”

“You realize that certain products that you would never think they could have milk, as sliced bread, then it had milk.”

In the shopping basket, some have complained about the prices on certain vegan products, although they all agree that generally a vegan diet is cheaper.

“What pisses me off is the price... If they are overpriced stuff, at least preserve it of containing traces”

“When going to pay, they are generally more expensive products. If they are specific, for example lactose free, they are more expensive in general”

“In Spain you have to go to a special store and it costs a lot of money”

“Everything you buy processed together with products that are not consumed on a large scale will be a little more expensive than omnivorous products. But obviously vegetables are cheaper than meat”

“There are things I think the price is exaggerated. Seeing what has a veggie burger, the price seems exorbitant”

But they do not just complain about food prices, they also complain about the prices of other products such as personal care products or cleaning products.

“Now I cannot afford to buy personal care products in a vegan store because they are usually more expensive and less quantity. I wish I could encourage those little vegan shops”

“I said I will buy this ecological and my boyfriend (non-vegan) said, for the same price we can buy 3 bottles that are not eco or that have been tested on animals”

“Cosmetics are super expensive. The main obstacle more generally ... the problem is prices”

Others also have complained that they have had trouble finding specific vegan products. For those living in the centre of big cities, it has not been a problem because there are many stores that sell only vegan products. Although, products seem to be more expensive in those stores as we have seen previously.

“Other stuff like tempeh or textured soy are foods that we eat normally and are not so easily to find them”

“At the beginning when I was buying was very hard because I had no idea where to buy these things and they were also cheaper or more affordable”

“The product to replace eggs, I can't find it. I had to buy it online... or go to the capital”

I was surprised that some of them insisted on how hard it is to find vegan alcoholic beverages, especially they told me about wine. To be more specific, there is no vegan wine in normal restaurants and when they find it, it is quite expensive.

“Vegan wine I've never seen it anywhere”

“I'll buy a wine to just take it at home because so far in restaurants there is not”

“For example there are extremes like wine. Ok, not all of them are vegan, or almost none, and then I say no. I'm not willing to pay 3 times more for wine just to take a wine with friends.”

Cosmetics, personal care products or products that are not just food seem to be a problem to find for some of them. Such products are not enough to just look at the label and check the ingredients. It takes a lot more effort and they need to check many other things like for example check if the product is cruelty-free because not all products are marked as such.

“That's difficult, very difficult and complicated life people because the food you can more or less control but then non-food products if it is more difficult to find because they are very expensive.”

“With personal care products I went crazy. As much as I was looking for the little symbol of the bunny, I couldn't find it.”

They have also stated that it is difficult to find vegan clothes, and when they find it, it is very expensive. Many of them have donated clothes that are not vegan that they had before becoming vegan. But to find clothes is much more complicated now that they have changed their lifestyle.

“I see more complicated the issue of clothing. I often do not know where to go to buy clothes”

“Vegan shoes or handbags are very expensive. But I see more easily to find footwear. There are textile shops where I cannot buy, not because they are not vegan but because they enslave humans and that's another point of veganism”

When they have gone on vacation, inside and outside the country, most have not had trouble finding restaurants with vegan options. Moreover, some expressed joy over the fact that they found more vegan options while they were on vacation elsewhere that where they lived. The problem has been within the hotels which many of them did not offer vegan options.

“Most hotels do not offer vegan options. You have to carry your things already cooked from home and then warm them up there if you can”

All respondents have shown respect and love for animals. I asked only to interviewees who have pets for the food that they buy for their animals. For those who have dogs, they have changed the dog food to vegan and did not have any problem finding the food or learn about it. However, respondents who have cats have shared their insecurities about it and this seems to be an ethical problem for them.

“To my cats I don't take the risk of giving them the diet. I'm still thinking because I know of people who give vegan food to them... maybe with time I will try.”

“I've often thought about buying vegan feed. I feel really bad every time I go shopping and do not know what to do. In these situations I have a bad time but I do not really know how to deal with it. I'm very lost.”

“I found no information that guarantees me that young cats or kittens may have a vegan diet without risks”

In Spain, hanging out with friends to drink beer and eat "tapas" is very typical. It is a moment that the Spaniards understand it as not only to eat but to socialize and meet with friends. When they meet with friends in bars, it implies a big problem for them because the few vegan options.

"More or less seeing the bars there are very few where I ask for vegan options, I give up. I usually limit myself to coffee. But food nowhere... generally I don't ask for anything unless it is a place where I have seen in the menu that they care about these things. Usually I do not ask anything to eat. I usually bring things in the bag"

"When it comes to going out to eat with my family is a little complicated because in my city there are no vegan restaurants. We had to warn in advance or they will give me a salad of lettuce and tomato"

Some of them, they have shared unpleasant experiences in restaurants where they have asked for vegan food and the waiter have served them food that is not actually vegan.

"In a restaurant where I went with my boyfriend, we have looked on the internet that has vegan option; I told the waitress that I was vegan and that if I could take this type of pasta and if it was suitable for me. When he brought it I realize that the pasta has cheese"

"On the menu was a vegetable soup. I asked if it was vegan. When you take the first spoon I noticed it had meat. I insisted if it was vegan and the chef admitted that the vegetable soup has beef broth. I do not know if the chef thought that I would not notice the taste of meat..."

Some have also highlighted the absence of vegetable milk in bars, restaurants, workplaces and universities.

"Black coffee always, I have no choice at work"

"At the cafeteria of the university there's only cow's milk."

"I think plant-based milk should already reach the bars and restaurants. Go to a bar and not even have soy milk... It is not difficult and it will make my life easier"

I have found that they have had many problems at the beginning that have been disappearing because they have found solutions and have adapted to change, for instance, find for the first time any specific product. But there is a problem that, both at the beginning and now, continues. That problem is the society and the people around them.

"What I especially noticed with the change is that people do not understand me however much I explain to them, there's a lot of people that do not understand me. They say I'm very strict ... they see it as a sacrifice and for me there is no sacrifice"

"Overlooking the society, they do not understand it or respect it because there is a limit where they are being disrespectful"

“People are pretty annoying. Everyone is making jokes and making fun. They want to find magical arguments to demonstrate somehow that you're wrong.”

Not all of them coexist with other vegans. Those who share an apartment with non-vegans have found some annoying situations. Those who live with non-vegan family, turn out to be more comfortable and have only a few specific moments with troubles but always emphasizing that their families respects them although do not share the same lifestyle. When they talked about couples who are not vegans, in the end they were able to convince their partners to have their same lifestyle. Here are some anecdotes that they have told me during the interviews:

“The most disgusting thing ever happened to me was when a roommate forgot a piece of meat and began to smell. It seemed like everything that was in the fridge had marinated in the smell of roast meat”

“A roommate defrost meat in the fridge and the blood fell on my veggie burgers”

“Sometimes they do not clean the cutting board and it is a bit disgusting if there is meat”

“Which can generate more conflict is that because he (not vegan boyfriend) has to use these products that are more expensive just because they are vegan, when he can use others”

“I've been very bad seeing corpses in my fridge. It's becoming more disgusting”

People who have other vegans in their environment seem to be easier to keep their lifestyle. But some of the interviewees have shared feelings of frustration and loneliness because nobody in their environment is vegan.

“If you do not know anyone who has this lifestyle or having at least some interest, this is very complicated and I have to spend hours and hours to train you yourself.”

“Nobody helped me, on the contrary, they have told me to give up because this is not healthy.”

“At first I found myself completely alone, uninformed and rejected.”

“They still look at me as if I was the black sheep of the family”

Many of them have told me that there have been people who have called them “weirdo”. It seems that some people do not really know what it means to be vegan. They have a misconception about it. Misinformation in society is something that worries them and they have shared it with me.

“There is a misconception of vegetarian and vegan terms. I had to say I was vegetarian because I thought they would not understand the term vegan. And they asked me if I was vegetarian or if I was vegan and I don't eat fish either. They have this misconception that if you are vegetarian you also eat fish.”

“Some have said to me: but neither fish, but this is not meat”

“Asking for a vegan salad they brought it with a boiled egg”

Many have begun to meet other vegans. Others are happy because their friends respect them and even ask to go to vegan restaurants. But there are some who have had bad experiences with friends or even they have lost friends because of their new lifestyle.

“There were many people who rejected me, they has stopped being my friend. I have received a lot of criticism from my own family.”

“They say you're crazy, you're going to get sick and they will not go to the hospital to visit you if you suddenly get something caused by veganism.”

“When they go out to eat, they no longer have me in mind”

“Recently I remember that I already gave up with a friend and put her away from my circle because a person who is your friend, how it is possible that she is always forgetting that you're vegan? My friend was always offering me milk or if I want to eat an egg when I went to her place after spending hours explaining her what is veganism”

A balanced vegan diet is healthy for all life stages: pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. This kind of diet is supported by the major associations from professional nutritionists such as The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, The British Dietetic Association, Asociación Española de Dietistas-Nutricionistas (The Spanish Foundation of Nutritionists-Dieticians), etc. But going to the doctor is an important part of the lifestyle. When you start as a vegan, it is important to know if you're doing well. Blood tests from time to time are necessary to control the blood levels, for instance levels of B12 or iron. One interviewee is a doctor and has expressed concern regarding to this topic:

“A colleague (doctor) asked me what is vegan. They don't even know. This was a strong impression. I was studying in different countries and I never took a lecture about nutrition... if I learn something was in an optional lecture a bit about fats, a little about proteins, the pyramid that is not even longer valid and no so much more. I have no idea about nutrition. Becoming vegan I have entered in a different world, but nobody taught me. This is very bad because it has many consequences.”

Concerning this issue, many interviewees have told me what happened when they have gone to the doctor asking for blood tests because they have changed to a vegan diet.

“I went to do checkups and I found the typical that are the prejudices of doctors who have been talk based on their beliefs and not on simply evidence. It's one of the things that I have found; they attribute any problems you have to being vegan, being vegetarian or even the fact of not eating meat.”

“In the doctor they told me that I'll have to stop because this is unsustainable. Because all my life I will have to take iron supplements and I do not know how many supplements more.”

“The doctor asked me why I'm vegan, because that's very dangerous. You have to eat meat and eat everything.”

“General Doctors are another barrier. When I stopped eating meat, they told me I was going to die.”

In some situations where they have told me about their problems, challenges or concerns, they have finished talking about Facebook. They talked about the help they received from Facebook groups. I didn't ask about Facebook or SNS and I didn't even mention it. I was surprised because I was asking about problems that have arisen and they also added where they have found solutions or motivation.

“Facebook is like my source of information and interaction.”

“Now there are more and more vegan people and if you get into Facebook or other social networks will always be someone who is happy to able to help you and you see it easy and not give up the fight”

“They (doctors) have told me so many things that have completely discouraged me but then I go to Facebook and they encourage me completely”

“Thanks to social networks because here it is difficult, is not like Madrid or Barcelona where there are more things. Here there is no so much yet”

“The first time I went to shopping was a little frustrating because I had troubles finding stuff, but thanks to a Facebook group, which for me it is awesome, there are people like us who have been in those situations. Anyone who wants to be vegan, I recommend you to get inside a group of vegans because they take away the fears and help you a lot. They tell you where the stores are, tell you where to buy, tell you where is cheaper...”

“To me, groups have been for me... I think that everyone could say the same ... Being in a group and have any doubt... I asked in the group where I could eat a big burger and does not cost an arm and a leg. And in 5 minutes, I already got answers... Much better than search on Google”

These comments have led me to investigate the Facebook group. In summary, the barriers found are related to economic, environment resources (supermarket, vegan shops or restaurants), cultural factors and social factors such as are social networks or demographics.

6.2. Topics on the Facebook group

To explain the different topics that I have been observing, first I have to explain a little more about the posts in the group. The statistics of the different types of posts that people have been publishing are shown below:

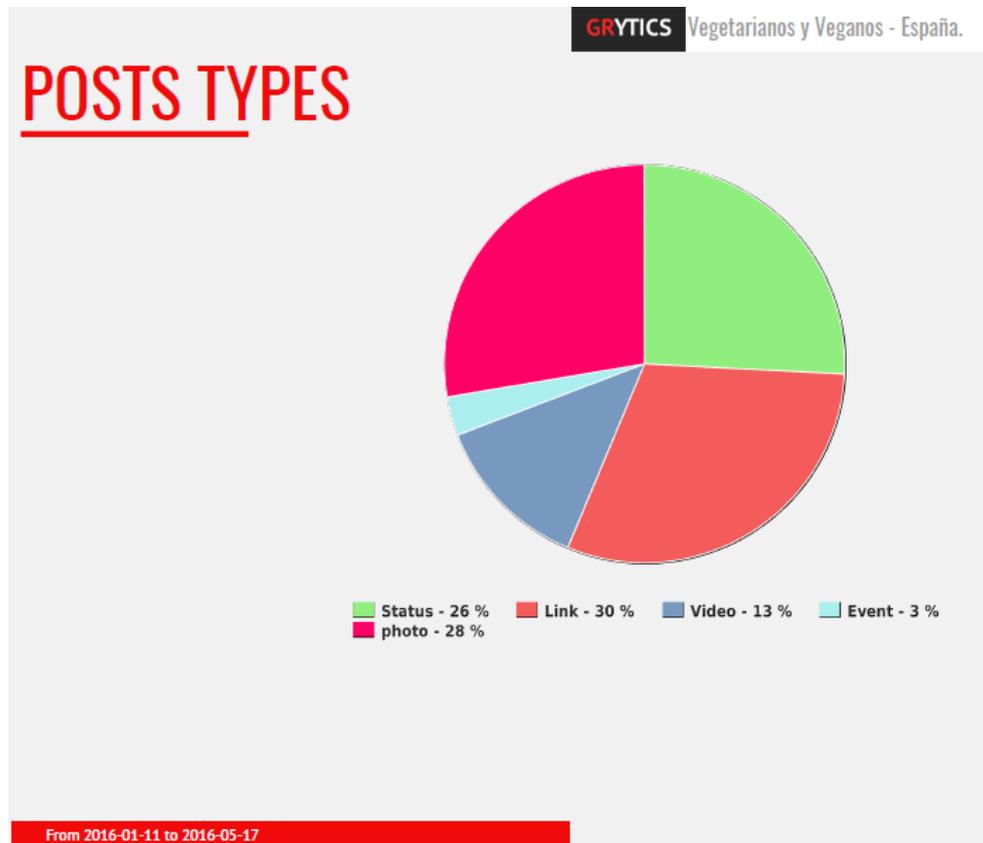


Figure 7: Posts Types (Grytics, 2016)

Links are the most frequent type of post that can be found in the Facebook group. Users share links to show something to the group, for example to share something interesting that they have read (news, recipes), to create a discussion about one topic or they just want to share something funny with the rest of group. These types of posts are not usually posts asking for help, unless they share links to collect signatures or adoption of animals.

I have seen publications that contain links to other Facebook groups, to promote blogs or other businesses, recipes, articles related to veganism (food, health or animals), etc. The articles that they share can be with positive content (new law to save animals) or negative (any action which has led to death of animals). Many news about current issues are also shared (political elections or the famous "Toro de la Vega"). These type of posts can cause a lot of reactions and comments.

Events are the less frequent type of post. Of course, events are always somehow related with veganism. I could see events about healthy activities, trips, workshops or events for sports like yoga. These types of publications do not have many comments.

Videos and photos of animals are the most abundant. I could see every day pictures of animals that need help, either by the health status or because they are looking for a new home. But I have also seen many posts with pictures of food, activism, vegan business, health and even unpleasant pictures about barbarities that someone has done to animals. Shared videos are very varied. Informative videos are shared as for example to explain why you should not eat eggs, but also they share videos to protest against something (bullfighting) or videos to increase awareness about veganism such as videos saving animals.

Status posts can be to request information, to share information or even to create a debate. Publications that are for seeking help, ideas or opinions are the most important posts for my research.

Coming up next is the amount of post per day and the number of comments per hour that all these publications receive.

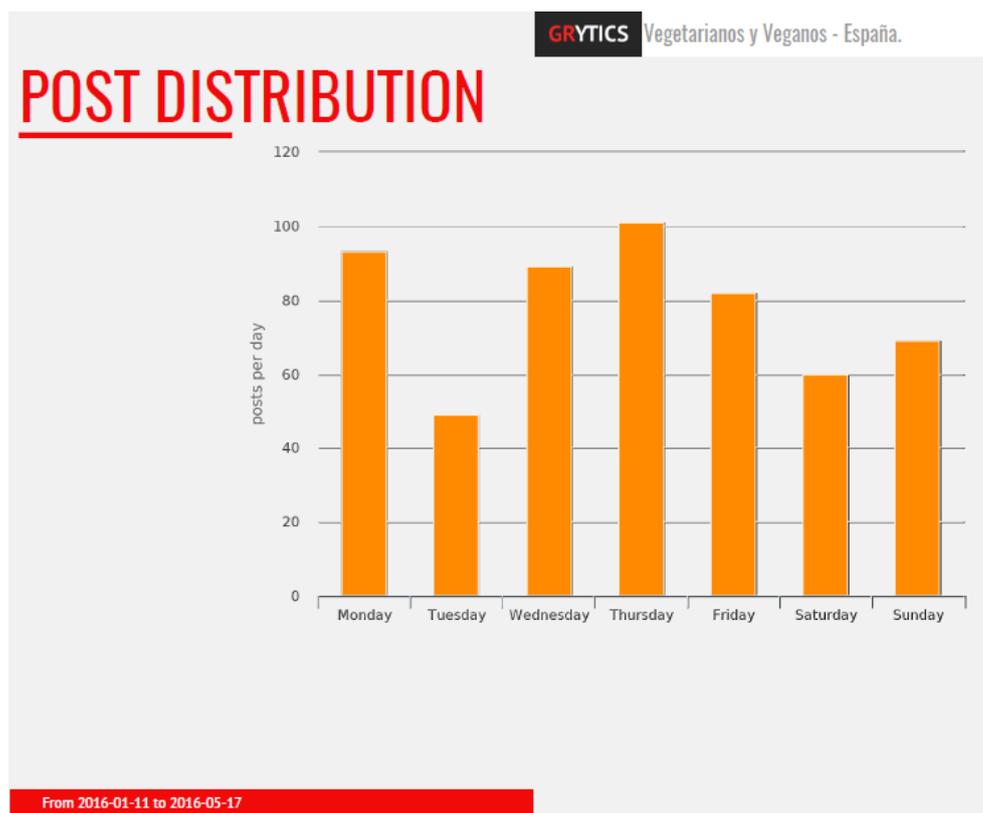


Figure 8: Post Distribution (Grytics, 2016)

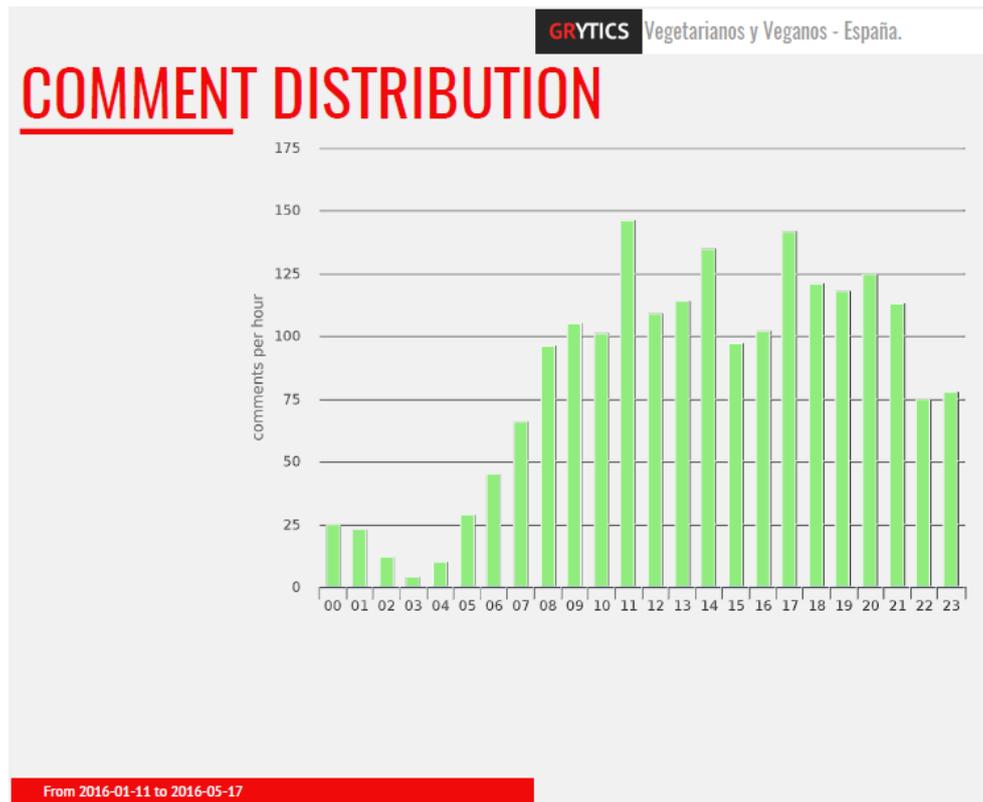


Figure 9: Comment distribution (Grytics, 2016)

As can be seen, this group is quite active. It is common to find more than 60 posts in a day and more than 100 comments in an hour. Many posts have not been very relevant to my study because my study focuses on the help to solve barriers that vegans face in their daily life. Therefore, I will focus on showing only what I considered relevant to my research. During the rest of this section I will show the issues that the members of the group have been discussing during my observation with several examples of posts they have posted.

Group members ask for advice when they go to visit a city and want to go to a vegan restaurant or vegan bar. They have asked for both inside and outside Spain and they have always received many answers.

“Hello group. I’ll travel soon to Istanbul and I have not had time to look for options to eat there at least one day in a restaurant... Someone with any idea? Thank you!!”

“Hello people!!! A little thing, I’m not from Madrid and I am in Lavapiés area. Anyone know of any vegetarian or vegan restaurant that is good and affordable? There are one here close which is a burger joint and it was great but I want to know other places. Thanks”

“Some vegan bar in Zaragoza to get ice cold beers and snacks?”

“Tomorrow I will spend the day in Seville, can you tell me a restaurant or bar where I can go for lunch?”

Apart from restaurants, they also ask for vegan shops or others vegan establishments receiving messages every time with different solutions and answers.

“Can anyone recommend me a veterinarian in Bilbao, please??”

“Hello people! Can anyone tell me some vegan clothing shop online or in Madrid? Thank you very much!”

“I need a nutritionist in Madrid. Can you recommend me some professionals? Thank you!”

“Hello, I write because I have to buy black shoes for work and my family insists in buying them with leather ... I live in Madrid, so if anyone knows where to find good, comfortable shoes that breathe and vegans ... speak now!”

Health issues are quite discussed in the group. They ask for tips in case of pain, flu, weight loss, assistance from nutritionists or medicine substitutes among other things. But one of the things that most worry them is vitamin B12. They ask for brands, required amount or the way of taking it. The number of comments and responses is quite high. All members of the group who ask about it obtain solutions.

“Hello people! I need help. After a time of being incredible lazy without taking B12, I have asked and they have given me these two cheapie options: either Sorianatural or Solgar. Both are cyanocobalamin and daily, but Sorianatural has 200mcg/day and Solgar 100. Weren't maximum 100? What do you say?”

“Good morning, I would like you to recommend me b12 supplements, because after an analysis, the results have been quite low (97) and margins are 180-914. Also how do you prefer it? If in liquid, pill... Greetings”

“Hello, the results of the analytic the B12 was in the limit. I take supplements twice a week what I can do? Iron is not very high either and I even take one pill a day. Recommendations please.”

“Hello group!! Can you help me on the issue of vitamin b12, how to obtain it and absorb it. I have been reading if there are deficiencies and I'm worried about this topic. I'm in process to change to veganism and I don't know how to get enough of it. Thanks”

The publication I show you below is also related to health issues and it received more than 40 comments in only 3h. In the comments they spoke of different solutions, natural remedies, experiences, messages of support and comments where they explained that they also had the same problem. It is one of the posts that have amazed me the most by the number of responses in so little time.

“Someone tells me what to do to avoid having gases caused by eating legumes? I had so many that they produced me fever... the bellyache did not let me even walk.....”

In the group there is no shortage of recipes or vegan blogs. But they ask for advice on specific occasions such as cooking for a meeting with friends or family, cooking certain products or vegan substitutes.

“Tonight I want to make vegan sushi!! Ideas to put in the roll?? I can think of only pepper strips, carrot and eggplant”

“Hello! I am new in the group and I have a kitchen doubt, I hope someone can help me. I want to cook strawberry jam and the recipe I have is with white sugar, could you give me other healthier options?”

“Beautiful people! I have a barbecue this Saturday and I can only think of corn cobs, any idea to make them jealous???”

There are many publications from group members asking whether a product or a brand is vegan or cruelty-free.

“Hello, anyone know if peggy sage is cruelty-free? And some cruelty-free brand of nail polishes? Thank you”

“Good afternoon! I wanted to make a consult: do you know if the brand Bea of shaving cream does animal testing? My mother had a shop for many years and there are many products of this brand. PS: In case Bea does animal testing, do you recommend me some brand suitable for vegans? Thanks veggies!”

“Is silk paper vegan?”

“Hello everyone ... I need brands of cream for oily skin that are cruelty-free”

They ask a lot about issues related to animals. They ask, for example about vegan pet food or about the care of animals they have found on the street. But they asked a lot when they are in a situation where they have to scare away some animals like ants, mice, birds and they do not want to hurt them or cause them any damage.

“Repellent for the bugs on my plants?”

“People, do you know any effective remedy to scare cockroaches? I do not want any poison; I just want them to don't come home. I just take the first shock of the summer and I have already filled the whole house with pieces of laurel, but I doubt it will work...”

“Dear veggies, I just go to the bathroom, and have appeared an invasion of ants (very large)... They were not in the morning, I do not know how it happened. Does anyone know a trick to scare them off or pull them into something, so you can remove them without hurting them? Thank you very much.”

The members also ask for cosmetics, personal care products or cleaning products. They ask for natural remedies, but it is more often to see that they ask for the name of brands that have vegan products.

“Hi group!! Does anyone know brands of vegan makeup? That you have tried!”

“What ecological makeup brands do you use? I have found recently PuroBio, cruelty-free and vegan and so far I quite like it, but I would like to know more brands”

“Hello, toothpaste that doesn't animal testing? Write the brand, and if you remember, the place where you bought it, thanks”

They also ask for opinions regarding complicated issues such as social relationships. They expose personal situations of everyday life with family, friends, at work or university where they hang out with non-vegans and conflicts arise.

“Hello! I have a question to ask to people who has not vegan partner. Just curiosity. If you talk about the topic "children", has your partner accused you of being extremists for wanting to teach them your moral principles?”

“Does anyone have a meat-eater partner? How can you make it compatible?”

“Hello friends, I would like to know how many of you have a speciesist job, how is your day to day and if you have plans despite the odious “Mr. Money” forcing you to be there. Thank you.”

They also ask for advice in other personal situations where they face ethical challenges. A topic discussed among members of the group is tattoos. They have had doubts about both the ink and the cream after being tattooed.

“Attention people of the tattoo world, I need your help. Is the tattoo ink mark "Pantera" vegan? The guy I want to get a tattoo from uses this brand. In case that Pantera does animal testing, which brand do you recommend me without him mad at me? Thanks”

“Good night, a little question: what cream do you use after get a tattoo? Something that can be acquired without being online if it's possible???? I have read that there are enough people using Vaseline but I also read that it is not good for healing a tattoo I'm a bit lost, somebody can help me? Thanks in advance”

“Goodnight. I have an ethical dilemma. I am looking for a tattoo artist. I have already spoken to several and now a concrete one tells me that the way they learn to make tattoos is by tattooing pigskin because it is the most humanlike.... I died of horror.... I wonder if this is true and if you are aware of these practices or if this is something that only this person has done... I need to know please. Thanks in advance.”

It is a group where many issues are discussed, and there are issues that have read recurrently. There are also certain users I've seen that they publish post sharing information or answering other posts very frequently, but nevertheless do not write many posts asking for help. There is a distinction between the members of the group that post the most and the members that comment the most. The top publishers and the top commenters are different people.

Top Publishers	N° of publications	Top Commenters	N° of comments
A	16	M	126
B	9	N	96
C	8	O	87
D	8	P	65
E	7	Q	61
F	7	R	55
G	7	S	54
H	6	T	50
I	6	U	50
J	5	V	45
K	5	W	45
L	5	X	45

Table 1: Top Publishers and Commenters (Grytics, 2016)

7. Discussion

My goal in the interviews was that the answers were not influenced or linked to the use of Facebook. For that reason, I did not ask them about their activities in the group and I did not ask them about what they publish, comment or discuss in the group. I wanted to understand their concerns and challenges in their lives as vegan. If I ask for the use of Facebook, they would answer me only about things that they live within the group. From this, I've seen differences and similarities between the responses of interviews and the publications of the Facebook group.

When a person changes the lifestyle to become vegan, there are many new things to learn. The interviews suggest that certain problems are more common at the beginning of the change of lifestyle. Over time, some barriers are disappearing due to all information they are acquiring but new ones are coming and others never disappear.

At first they have many questions about what to eat, what to buy and where. But after all, this situation will eventually change because they are taking new feeding routines and get to know new places where consume. Regarding to this, one can find many publications in the Facebook group. But one of the most serious problems I found as a result of the interviews is when other non-vegans have hurt their feelings. I have not seen many posts on Facebook dealing this topic but nevertheless interviewees have commented many situations where they have had problems with family and have even lost friends. I have often heard in the interviews that they are always listening to jokes about veganism but I have not seen publications asking for advice on what to do in these situations.

There are new vegans who do not find enough motivation for different reasons such as the lack of family support. From this perspective, Facebook groups offer social support that can exert a positive influence for people who have doubts at the beginning of this new phase as a vegan. I've seen some comment like "I'm new vegan and I need information" with many answers where they shared videos, blogs, recipes, places to go, etc.

In general, the members use more the group to share information than to ask, but when there is a post asking for help, users are really enthusiastic offering many ideas and solutions. Moreover, some doubts are solved with that information that users share.

The investigated group of Facebook suggests that the virtual environment is appropriate for the exchange of information, knowledge and experience. Users also contribute to increased knowledge through publications and comments.

As one interviewee said, the Facebook group is better than Google search. In the Facebook group you get quick answers from people with similar interests and lifestyle. Other members respond with experience so you have the assurance that someone has already tried before.

Why do the group members have the idea that the information received by the group is so important? Looking back to the theory, I could understand the influence that virtual networks, where there is a mutual understanding, have over the actions of the members.

Related with connectivism, Siemens (2005b, p. 5) presents an interesting notion that the knowledge that resides in a database needs to be connected with the right people in the right context in order to be classified as learning. It seems like that previous remark also is to be found in the group of Facebook. Group members acquire knowledge because they follow the same lifestyle and are in the same situation. Therefore, they are in an environment where continuous learning is provided which is necessary when different challenges and concerns arise in their daily life.

Kropf (2013, p. 15) explains that according to the principles of connectivism, individuals acquire information through modern-day reservoirs of information. She continues explaining that there are currently three major reservoirs where individuals can acquire information: online classrooms, social networks and virtual reality platforms. Kropf (2013, p. 17) cites the work of Kijkuit and Van Den Ende (2007, p.863) arguing that social networks are built on mutual understanding, which is the “ability to understand and build on each other’s knowledge base”.

According to my understanding there is a correspondence with what Kropf (2013) claims and what the group of vegans expressed in relation to vegans interactions performed in the Facebook group. I cannot know the reason why they have joined the Facebook group, but by the observations I have done I can conclude that they are still members of this social network for the quality and quantity of information they receive, the diversity of opinions from other members, besides learning they also teach and because they have built a network where knowledge is shared. In similarity with Kropf (2013), I can conclude that these interactions are happening mainly because there is a mutual understanding, so group members feel comfortable sharing their experiences with other members.

8. Conclusions

With online ethnography I could explore other ways of seeing how people connect and interact. Perhaps the results would have been different or not even possible if the investigation had been carried out face to face.

I chose Facebook as context in which the action takes place, as my field. But thanks to this research and the use that people give to this social network site, I could see Facebook from other perspectives. Facebook has been my source of data where all the information that users share and the interaction with other users is registered. In addition, Facebook provides me a tool for my investigation due to the potent search engine.

In the Facebook group I've seen some comments that asked where to find information about veganism because either they just became vegan or they are thinking about making the step. But I have not seen a pattern to conclude either vegans for a long period of time write publications sharing knowledge and comment more or vegans for a short period of time ask more about problems that are arising.

Overall, the Facebook group is a favourable environment for the exchange of information and experiences. Personal situations and problems are shared very often where there are immediate answers with supportive and motivational messages. Broadly, group members find solutions to the problems they share with the other members of the group.

My research has focused on one group of Facebook that addresses the issue of veganism in Spain which has been chosen by the large number of members. This research is not intended to present generalizations about all groups of Facebook or other countries around the world. Neither is it to generalize about the behaviour of members of the culture of veganism. It is possible that in groups with fewer members, the activity is less. As an exploratory study, it also serves to suggest further research in other groups of Facebook, other social networks sites or other types of culture. I must emphasize the importance of the types of posts that have not been analyzed for this research. Videos, pictures and links to other web pages that have been shared among the members of the Facebook group can be analyzed, as well as a possible link with the types of knowledge between them.

References

- Agar, M. H., 1986. *Speaking of Ethnography*. Sage University Paper series on Qualitative Research Methods, Volume 2.. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Anon., 2016. *The Vegan Society*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.vegansociety.com/>
[Accessed May 2016].
- Atkinson, P. et al., 2001. *Handbook of ethnography*. London: SAGE.
- Castells, M., 2001. *The internet galaxy : reflections on the Internet, business, and society*. s.l.:Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Cherry, E., 2006. Veganism as a Cultural Movement: A Relational. *Social Movement Studies*, Volume 5(2), pp. 155-170.
- Davis, J., 2012. *World Veganism – past, present, and future*. [Online]
Available at: www.ivu.org/history/Vegan_History.pdf
[Accessed May 2016].
- Dijk, J. v., 2012. *The network society*. 3., [revised] ed. ed. s.l.:Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage Publications.
- Downes, S., 2005. An introduction to connective knowledge.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I. & Shaw, L. L., 1995. *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Series: Chicago guides to writing, editing, and publishing. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Evans, L., 2010. Authenticity online: Using webnography to address phenomenological concerns. *New media and the politics of online communities*, Volume 11.
- Facebook, 2016. *Company information*. [Online]
Available at: <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>
[Accessed April-May 2016].
- Facebook, 2016. *Help Center*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/help>
[Accessed May 2016].
- Fetterman, D. M., 1998. *Ethnography : step by step*. 2 ed. s.l.:Thousand Oaks, Calif. : SAGE.

Firat, M. & Yurdakul, I. K., 2011. VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH ON SECOND LIFE VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES. *The Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, Volume V12(3/2), pp. 108-117.

Google, 2016a. *Google Trends*. [Online]

Available at:

https://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=Vegan%2C%20%2Fm%2F07_hy&cmpt=q&tz=Etc%2FGMT-2

[Accessed April 2016].

Google, 2016b. *Google Trends*. [Online]

Available at:

<http://www.google.com/trends/explore?hl=en#q=vegan&date=1%2F2016%2012m%2C%201%2F2015%2012m%2C%201%2F2014%2012m%2C%201%2F2013%2012m%2C%201%2F2012%2012m&cmpt=date&tz=Etc%2FGMT-1>

[Accessed April 2016].

Google, 2016c. *Google Trends*. [Online]

Available at:

<http://www.google.com/trends/explore?hl=en#q=vegan&geo=ES&date=1%2F2016%2012m%2C%201%2F2015%2012m%2C%201%2F2014%2012m%2C%201%2F2013%2012m%2C%201%2F2012%2012m&cmpt=date&tz=Etc%2FGMT-1>

[Accessed April 2016].

Grytics, 2016. *My Facebook Groups Dashboard*. [Online]

Available at: <https://grytics.com/>

[Accessed 18 May 2016].

Hagel, J., 1999. Net gain: Expanding markets through virtual communities. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Volume 13(1), pp. 55-65.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P., 1995. *Ethnography: principles in practice*. Second ed. London: Routledge.

Hine, C., 2000. *Virtual ethnography*. s.l.:Sage Publications.

Hine, C., 2012. *The Internet*. s.l.:OUP USA.

ITU, 2015. *International Telecommunications Union*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2015.pdf>

[Accessed May 2016].

Kozinets, R. V., 2010. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. s.l.:Sage Publications.

Kropf, D. C., 2013. Connectivism: 21st Century's New Learning Theory. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, Volume 16(2), pp. 13-24.

Libin, A. & Libin, E., 2005. Cyber-anthropology: a new study on human and technological co-evolution. *Studies in health technology and informatics*, Volume 118, p. 146.

Paccagnella, L., 1997. Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 3(1).

Pink, S. et al., 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. 1st edition ed. s.l.:London: SAGE.

Puri, A., 2009. Webnography: Its Evolution and Implications for Market Research. *International Journal of Market Research*, Volume 51 (2), pp. 273-275.

Radnitz, C., Beezhold, B. & Dimatteo, J., 2015. Investigation of lifestyle choices of individuals following a vegan diet for health and ethical reasons. *Appetite*, Volume Vol.90, pp. pp.31-36.

Siemens, G., 2005a. Connectivism: Learning as network-creation. *ASTD Learning News 10*, Volume no. 1.

Siemens, G., 2005b. Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(1).

Taylor, T. L., Pearce, C., Nardi, B. & Boellstorff, T., 2012. *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. s.l.:Princeton University Press.

Wellman, B., 2001. Computer networks as social networks. *Science*, 293(5537), pp. 2031-2034.

Wilson, S. M. & Peterson, L. C., 2002. The anthropology of online communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Volume 31, pp. 449-467.

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- Tell me a little about you
 - Age
 - Where do you live?
 - Where are you from?
 - Family
 - Work/Studies
 - Hobbies
 - Pets
 - Languages
- What is to be vegan for you?
- How did you start being vegan?
- How long have you been vegan?
- Are there people in your environment that are vegan?
- Tell me about your first experiences being vegan and what challenges or concerns emerged at those moments:
 - Going to the supermarket
 - Going shopping
 - Buying cosmetics or personal care products
 - Buying cleaning products
 - Going on vacation
 - Hanging out with friends
 - Eating out
 - Going to the doctor
 - Buying B12
- (Questions related with their background)
 - Living with someone non-vegan
 - Buying pet's food
 - Work/university environment
- Was there any need that was not covered?
- Anything else you want to add?



UNIVERSITY WEST
School of Business, Economics and IT
Division of Informatics
SE - 461 86 TROLLHÄTTAN
SWEDEN
Phone +46 (0) 520 22 30 00
www.hv.se