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# Mediating lifestyle movements: the ethical ecologies of digital veganisms

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## ABSTRACT

This article sets out a framework, 'ethical ecologies,' for researching and conceptualizing the role of media in lifestyle movements. Understanding lifestyle movements is important due to their growing prominence as a site of ethical and political agency, and media are integral in materializing this agency. The framework I develop to research these movements combines three bodies of work: media ecological scholarship (which emphasizes relations between media and social contexts), app studies (which foregrounds the mediation of consumption practices), and feminist STS (which elucidates how infrastructures materialize ethical possibilities). Using digital veganism as a case study, I combine interviews, documentary analysis, participatory action research, and what I describe as a 'historicized' app walkthrough, to trace how the move away from grassroots activist-produced media – and widespread use of apps and social media to support vegan practice – is entangled with its dramatic popularization. Yet, while veganism more visible, its position as a holistic philosophy with connections to wider social movements has been troubled by a socio-technical emphasis on vegan *eating* practice. Through this analysis of digital veganisms, I elucidate how an ethical ecologies approach can be utilized to reveal shifts in the mediation of lifestyle movements that have profound ethico-political implications.

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Media ecologies; app studies; ethical consumption; lifestyle movements; veganism; ethical ecologies

## Introduction

Alex browses their local vegan Facebook group and sees a post about a discounted brand of cashew cheeze; after skimming the comments (which began with a debate about palm oil that was swiftly stopped by a moderator), they head to their nearest supermarket. While searching for the cheeze, they see a new brand of mock-chicken and scan the barcode with the IsItVegan app to confirm the additives are vegan. On the way home they crave an oat milk latte, so open the HappyCow app to find the best local café, but none are in walking distance so they go to Starbucks for coffee and a plant-based muffin.

The above account of everyday vegan practice in the UK is an ethnographic compound derived from materials gathered over the past five years, including interview data, digital observations, app walkthroughs, and secondary literature. What is striking about this vegan narrative, is that it is markedly different – in terms of the media, places, and products involved – from observations I made in fieldnotes a decade and a half earlier. In 2007, for instance, HappyCow still existed (but as a website rather than an app); information about local vegan events was often restricted to

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anti-capitalist news-sites or animal liberation email lists; and campaigners made their own DIY pamphlets and how-to guides with tips on accessible recipes. Just as narratives about veganism were constrained to niche alternative media, so too were vegan foods: It was a challenge to purchase cashew cheese or oat milk in a supermarket rather than specialized health food stores, and vegan cake was unimaginable outside of small, independent cafés (which were likely also adorned with animal rights and environmentalist posters).

These snapshots of two very different moments in time illustrate how relationships between media and ethical practices can evolve in complex, co-constitutive ways. Some media persist and some fade away, other media emerge as influential, and relationships between technologies and practices are reconfigured in sometimes surprising ways. In this article, I use digital veganisms as a case study to interrogate the ethical stakes of changes in social movement media-use and offer a framework, ‘ethical ecologies,’ for conceptualizing and researching these stakes. In simple terms, an ethical ecologies approach examines how particular media sustain prefigurative ethical practice in everyday life, interrogating how evolving relations between media materialize certain ethical practices while foreclosing others. As I describe in this article, an emphasis on ethics necessarily expands the remit of how activist media are conventionally understood: beyond the use of media for the purpose of identity construction and mobilization, toward platforms that support ethical practice in everyday life. This expanded focus, in turn, requires a more expansive set of conceptual and methodological tools.

There have been debates surrounding what veganism is and means, but the simplest definition is perhaps: ‘the practice of not eating or using any animal products’ (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021, 2). Although this definition of veganism might seem straight-forward, its implications are complex, far-reaching, and often controversial. Non-human animals are central to everyday life, in contexts ranging from consumption to companion species and laboratory experimentation. While the characteristics of these relationships vary significantly across national and cultural settings, in calling for commonplace relations between humans and non-human animals to be re-worked, veganism offers significant provocations for the organization of social life (Giraud, 2021: 2; Oliver 2021a; Hodge et al. 2022). Veganism, therefore, has historically been more than a diet both due to its concern with human-animal relationships beyond eating and because of its historical links with other forms of activism, especially environmental and anti-capitalist movements (White 2018). It is, however, precisely this status of veganism as more than a diet that has been troubled by contemporary digital veganisms, where factors ranging from the growing prominence of food apps to the moderation guidelines of online communities have placed the emphasis on *eating*.

In this article, I utilize the framework of ethical ecologies to elucidate the multi-faceted role of digital media in materializing some expressions of vegan ethics while foreclosing others. I position this framework – and associated methods – as a broader means of grasping the mediation of ‘lifestyle movements’ that operate in the messy space between liberal-individual consumerism and organized social movements (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). Ethical ecologies synthesizes and intervenes in theoretical frameworks from several existing bodies of work. Firstly, this approach draws upon scholarship at the nexus of media and social movement studies, which focuses on activist media ecologies, or the dynamic, co-constitutive relationships between different platforms and practices that mediate the action of social movements (Costanza-Chock 2014; Mattoni 2017; Tréré 2018). Secondly, ethical ecologies brings media ecological approaches into dialogue with scholarship from app studies that focuses on digital food politics and ethical consumption, which is itself informed by a wide range of influences, especially cultural studies, science and technology studies (STS) and the sociology of consumption (Feldman and Goodman 2021; Lewis 2020; Lupton and Feldman, 2020; Schneider et al. 2018). Concepts and methods from a media ecological tradition offer valuable ethnographic insights about the contexts and histories that inform the affordances of apps and their ethical implications. Conversely, app studies offer a vital rejoinder to media ecological work that has overlooked the significance of ‘gray media’ (Fuller and Goffey, 2012) – such as ordering systems and interfaces – for sustaining the everyday practice of activists. Thirdly, my

overarching motivation for thinking across media ecological and app scholarship is that, together, these fields can address questions central to feminist STS, regarding how power and inequality can become baked into socio-technical infrastructures (Star 1990; Mol, 1999).

The substantive body of the article demonstrates how an ethical ecologies approach can reveal the entanglement of media ecologies and ethics. Combining interviews with long-term vegans, participatory action research with vegan food activists, and a ‘historicized’ walkthrough of the most popular vegan food app (HappyCow), I trace several overlapping themes. Initially, I outline how digital media normalize plant-based consumption (through increasing its visibility) and support vegan practice (as apps and food platforms make it easier to identify, select, and consume vegan options). I then discuss concern that these developments have led to veganism’s depoliticization, due to celebrating eating at the expense of holistic understandings of vegan practice. Next, I situate ethico-political shifts in contemporary veganism in relation to changes in media ecologies. Finally, I zoom in on HappyCow to illustrate how the process of accommodating vegan options into existing food infrastructures, as encouraged by contemporary media ecologies, complicates radical routes into contesting these infrastructures. Overall, this analysis underlines the value of centralizing ethics not just in the context of digital veganism, but activist media-use more broadly. Before developing my arguments in more depth, I provide an overview of existing literature about the relationship between lifestyle activism, consumption, and digital media, and how these themes relate to the popularization (and perhaps de-politicization) of veganism.

## Literature review

### *Lifestyle movements*

A number of fields (including cultural studies, sociology, media studies, critical theory, and social movement studies) have drawn distinctions between formalized social movements and lifestyles (see Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). Whereas social movements are understood as coordinated movements working toward shared goals, lifestyles have been perceived as neoliberal expressions of personal ethics, with this curation of political subjectivity often occurring through consumption practices (Carvalho and Ferreira 2022; Fletcher 2010). While critiques of the cooption and marketization of radical politics stretch back to Frankfurt School critical theory (Marcuse 2013 [1964]), in the wake of the marketization of feminist, queer, and subcultural politics, these critiques have intensified (Duggan 2002; McRobbie 2007). Critical scholarship on contemporary ‘postfeminist’ (Gill 2007; 2017) or ‘post-gay’ (Ng 2013) politics argues that these discourses are not simply problematic due to emphasizing individual expressions of empowerment. A focus on the individual is seen to *undermine* the preconditions for wider social transformation, by framing critiques of institutions that perpetuate patriarchal and heteronormative logics (such as the beauty industry) as extremist impingements on individual choice.

Similar arguments are, increasingly, made in the context of ethical lifestyle ethics. In the context of environmentalism, for instance, Meissner argues that radical sustainability narratives, which discourage consumption and promote ‘lifestyle minimalism’ often undercut their own aims. These discourses Meissner suggests: ‘discourage individual consumption and productivity’ (2019, 186) in some ways, but are often undergirded by ‘different forms and objects of consumption’ (191) – such as gadgets that promise efficiency or objects that save time and space. As such, even narratives that superficially seem to cut against accumulation ultimately promote ‘neoliberal ideologies of self-entrepreneurship’ (186) that ‘bypass the broader topic of political economy – including questions of de-growth and macroeconomic system change’ (186). Consumption-oriented food ethics has, likewise, been cast as a neoliberal enterprise that valorizes white, middle-class norms regarding how ethical empowerment can be attained through ‘good’ dietary choices, while neglecting classed and racialized inequalities about who is able to access this diet (Guthman 2008a; 2008b; Shotwell 2016).

However, a number of commentators have complicated neat distinctions between individualistic lifestyle ethics and political social movements. A growing body of scholarship notes that lifestyle practices – though not always offering radical forms of critique or structural change in themselves – still offer complex, and important, political potentials (Portwood-Stacer 2013), even if this politics is expressed primarily through consumption (Evans 2019; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). To capture these complex potentials Haenfler and colleagues (2012) put forward the term ‘lifestyle movement,’ a term which denotes a middle ground between personal lifestyle and collective action; marking an attempt to: ‘*consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change*’ (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 2; italics in original).

Elaborating on this definition, Haenfler et al argue that lifestyle movements can foster change in several key ways: through enacting a hopeful prefigurative politics (with individuals embodying wider change they want to see in the world); by gaining momentum that puts pressure on wider social structures, infrastructures, and institutions; and in creating a reservoir of individuals who have a sense of being part of a collective (even a loose, uncoordinated one) who are subsequently often more prepared to engage in contentious activism. The coupling of ‘lifestyle’ and ‘movement,’ therefore, is not intended in a derogatory sense but muddies the bifurcation of these categories, a recuperation of the personal as political. In the case of food, for instance, some scholars have found prefigurative potentials in lifestyle change for resisting norms and values imposed by Big Agriculture (Carolan 2016; Goodman, Maye, and Holloway 2010). Indeed, Haenfler et al argue that veganism has historically exemplified lifestyle movements, due to ‘fall[ing] outside the mainstream [and] explicitly challenging predominant cultural norms’ in ways that reveal ‘intersections of private action and movement participation, personal change and social change, and personal identity and collective identity’ (2012, 1–2; see also McGregor et al, 2023).

### **Veganism and ‘post-veganism’**

Just as veganism exemplifies lifestyle movements, contemporary developments in vegan practice amplify tensions associated with these movements. To understand these tensions, it is informative to turn to the UK Vegan Society’s 1979 definition of 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 animals, humans and the environment. (Vegan Society, ND)

This conception of veganism frames it as a holistic philosophy, with connections to wider environmental and social justice issues and points to the ‘enmeshed’ or ‘multidimensional’ relationship between human and nonhuman animal oppression (Ko 2019; Wright 2019). However, with veganism’s popularization, critical scholars warn that political commitments integral to earlier definitions of veganism are being reframed as an optional extra or personal choice (Stewart and Cole 2020). In other words, vegan ethics is becoming detached from wider projects of political solidarity and institutional change (Cochrane and Cojocarú 2023). These debates point to the existence of a wider semiotic battle over what veganism is and means, between those who understand veganism as more than a diet and commercial forces that are constructing veganism as an eating practice (White 2018).

Battles over the meaning of veganism are comparatively recent. For the second half of the twentieth century, and early years of the 21st, abstention from animal products was framed as a marginal practice, engaged with primarily by those with subcultural links (Cherry 2006; Clark 2004; Haenfler 2004). Perceptions of veganism as fringe and radical were compounded by mainstream media narratives that – likewise – framed the practice as something engaged with only by extremists prepared to deprive themselves of corporeal enjoyment (Cole and Morgan 2011). However, any sense that veganism is a fringe movement has been upended; in the UK there was a 40% increase in veganism

in 2020 alone, with half a million people pledging to experiment with a vegan diet in Veganuary (Anthony 2021). As a result, supermarket chains that were quietly dropping vegan labelling in the early 2000s (due to perception of insufficient markets) are now dubbing plant-based diets the ‘future of food’ and predicting over half of consumers will be ‘flexitarian’ by 2025 (Giraud, 2021, 143). Plant-based options have become ubiquitous in restaurants, with multinational fast-food corporations that were locked in litigious struggles with animal rights activists in the 1990s now offering vegan options (Utama et al. 2020). Debates about veganism have abounded on social media (Sanford et al. 2021), while vegan cookery programmes and documentaries have attracted significant attention in demographics (such as elite male athletes) formerly not understood as ‘typical’ vegans (Oliver 2021b).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rise of veganism has been entwined with marketization wherein vegan practice has shifted from being unworthy of catering for, to an increasingly lucrative niche, to a core component in marketing narratives about food futures (Sexton, Garnett, and Lorimer 2022). Material changes, such as the widespread provision of vegan options, are bound up with new meanings as plant-based burgers are dubbed ‘rebellious’ or even ‘revolutionary’ (Clay et al. 2020). These new meanings are crystallized by terms such as ‘plant-based’ rising to prominence and being used interchangeably with dietary veganism, in a move that appears to shift the focus from animal ethics and towards more ‘flexible’ modes of ethical conduct – such as going meat free one day of the week (Morris 2018).

For this reason, in previous work I framed the marketization of plant-based foods as ‘post-veganism’ (Giraud, 2021). As vegan practice shifts from being impossible to accommodate within existing commercial food systems, to something that is readily accommodated by these systems, the impetus to ask questions about social change – or indeed food justice – is undermined (see also White 2018). The risk of criticizing veganism’s commercialization, of course, is that it can descend into a form of purism wherein only the most politically righteous are rendered true vegans (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021). While recognizing the saliency of this point, I suggest that – in material terms – it is still valuable to acknowledge that different material-semiotic configurations organize worlds in different ways, with very different ethical and political implications: from attempts to create sustainable vegan food systems, such as veganic agriculture (Hirth 2021), to Facebook communities that celebrate foods produced by multinational corporations and ban debates about palm oil (Santaoja and Jallinoja 2021). The ethico-political significance of the struggles that surround vegan practice are brought into relief when turning to digital veganisms.

### **Digital veganisms**

As noted in the introduction, contemporary vegan practice is entwined with digitization. Cherry (2015) argues that tight social support networks have always been important in sustaining vegan practice (especially in contexts where veganism is difficult to accommodate within the existing organization of social life and practitioners might otherwise feel alienated or demoralized). Aside from interpersonal relationships, Cherry suggests, the consumption of popular media – from punk lyrics to zines – has historically held an important role in providing the sense of community and belonging that sustains veganism. This sense of community has been strengthened through veganism’s digitization, which has provided a wealth of opportunities to participate in online vegan communities and gain a sense of support and solidarity (Lupton 2018; Stano 2021; Wrenn 2019) – even if the norms promoted by these communities are often ambivalent (Mukherjee 2021; Scott 2020).

For instance, the perception of plant-based diets as accessible consumption choices (and growth of associated markets) has been consolidated by blogs, Instagram posts, vlogs, and TikTok videos of celebrities and lifestyle influencers (Doyle 2016; Oliver 2021a; O’Neill 2021; Pirani and Fegitz 2019). Some of these developments have led to a diversification of representation, both in terms of who a typical vegan is and what they eat. Santaoja and Jallinoja’s (2021) analysis of Finnish Facebook

group ‘Crisps and Beer Vegans,’ for example, argues that the community disrupts gendered stereotypes attached to veganism. These stereotypes have proven especially persistent in the wake of what Winch (2011) describes as ‘postfeminist conduct books,’ such as recipe/self-help text *Skinny Bitch*, that linked veganism to specific norms of thinness and healthism (tropes also regularly restaged in campaigns by NGOs; see Wrenn 2015; 2017). Yet, while ‘Crisps and Beer Vegans’ disrupts particular postfeminist discourses it still shares similarities with the dynamics of postfeminism. Although the group celebrates individual consumption, it purposefully excludes animal ethics on the basis that it spoils community spirit through casting judgement on others’ consumption choices – with ethics banned from discussion by moderators (Santaoja and Jallinoja 2021, 64).

An underexamined element of digital veganisms – echoing what Lupton (2018, 1361) describes as a ‘lacuna’ in digital food scholarship more widely – are media that do not just communicate about veganism, or express vegan identity, but sustain food practices themselves. The backdrop to these apps and platforms are what Fuller and Goffey term ‘gray media,’ ‘things such as databases, group-work software, project-planning methods, media forms, and technologies’ that affect ‘the habits of government, business, and culture’ but are often overlooked (2012, 1).<sup>1</sup> The value of understanding gray media is underlined by the burgeoning body of research on ethical consumption apps, which elucidates how their affordances can intensify tensions associated with lifestyle movements (Lekakis 2022, 35–37).

On one level, ethical consumption apps could be perceived as discouraging collective action by ‘reassur[ing] the ethical consumer that they need do no more than consult and depend on their app’ (Humphery and Jordan 2018, 536). Yet, as Lewis (2020, 137) argues, even as apps reflect a shift in ‘the center of political life [...] toward the private sphere,’ they have also precipitated a – potentially productive – move from ‘consciousness raising to enabling *practices* of engagement’ with food ethics. Echoing tensions with lifestyle movements more broadly, then, the politics of ethical apps is complex. Those producing these apps (often in conjunction with NGOs) position them as tools for redressing asymmetries of information between consumers and corporations, affording users agency to reconfigure markets by making more informed ethical choices (Sörum 2020). This agency, however, is contingent on the labour of consumers (Schneider and Eli 2022), and their capacity to follow ethical ‘scripts’ provided by apps that offer normative models of ‘what ethical consumption is or can be’ (Fuentes and Sörum 2019, 147; see also Hansson 2017). This process of script-following is in turn complicated by limitations in the apps themselves – such as the accessibility of corporate data upon which they make decisions (Soutjis 2020) – and to what extent these scripts are compatible with users’ existing routines (Fuentes 2019). In the next section, I build on insights from this body of scholarship by asking how it can be drawn into dialogue with work about activist media ecologies, in order to conceptualize and research shifts in the mediation of lifestyle movements and the ethico-political implications of these shifts.

## Materials and methods

### *Working across social movement media studies and app studies*

At present there is often a methodological division, which accompanies a difference in focus, between research focused on the promotion of lifestyle ethics on social media and scholarship analyzing the media practices of social movements. Thus far, research into digital veganisms has tended to engage in detailed textual analysis of social media content, mapping the ethical discourses mobilized in contexts such as celebrity websites or blogs (Doyle 2016; O’Neill 2021), Instagram influencing (Scott 2020), and vlogging (Pirani and Fegitz, 2019). Wider explorations of lifestyle activism, such as environmental and anti-consumerist influencing (Abidin et al. 2020; Wood, 2021; Hautea et al. 2021), has, likewise, focused on content to examine the common frames, discourses, and themes that characterize these texts. Much of this scholarship is informed by core principles of cultural studies: that it is vital to interrogate often overlooked or trivialized aspects of popular culture,

to reveal their ethico-political complexity. Influential work in app studies has followed similar principles, emphasizing the interplay between technological artefacts and consumer agency and analyzing commonplace narratives mobilized by developers and designers (Duguay, Burgess, and Suzor 2018; Humphery and Jordan 2018; Lupton 2018).

In contrast, research into organized social movements is usually grounded in qualitative social scientific methods (such as participatory research, interviews, and ethnography). These methods are used not just to trace the practices associated with particular platforms, but situate these practices within wider ecologies of relations between other media and practices (e.g. Barassi 2013; Costanza-Chock 2014; Treré 2018). The affordances of platforms are understood as emerging dynamically through these ecologies and evolving over time. This, equally important, body of scholarship has been informed by two slightly different principles: firstly, that it is important to move beyond the content of media texts to examine how different media technologies are used in practice (because this might alter how their politics are interpreted). A second, related, contention is that it is important to resist examining media in isolation, to instead focus on their co-constitutive media ecologies.

To understand contemporary lifestyle movements it valuable to think across both media ecological scholarship and research examining how ethics is mediated by platforms and apps; to an extent, therefore, capturing the dynamics of digital veganisms might require combining commonplace methods associated with these approaches into a cultural studies framework. However, something more is perhaps also needed. As noted above, is important to include 'gray media' in analysis of digital veganisms – such as apps that enable users to scan supermarket products to see if they are vegan, lists of 'accidentally vegan' items on websites, or options on food ordering systems. To gain a full grasp of how ethics is materialized through particular media ecologies, then, it is important to extend the expansive view of media that is already central to media ecological scholarship, to reflect on more mundane forms of mediation that are intrinsic to developing the know-how and skills to navigate (vegan) consumption. Insights about which methods are appropriate for researching the expansive ethical ecologies of lifestyle movements can be drawn from existing small, but highly productive, overlaps between social movement media studies and app studies.

Apps have been discussed within media ecological research, but predominantly in the context of enabling private 'backstage' communication for activists, e.g. WhatsApp being used to share jokes and express anxieties, or backchannels on platforms such as WeChat and Twitter being used to coordinate tactics (Kavada, 2015; Treré 2018; Yu, Treré, and Bonini, 2022). Due to this scholarship focusing on contentious activism, it has given less consideration to the way these platforms support broader practices related to activist identity and prefigurative politics (cf Kirby and Özkula 2023). Conversely, scholarship on ethical consumption apps has combined user ethnography and interviews with developers to trace the ethico-political affordances of apps (e.g. Fuentes and Sörum 2019; Hansson 2017). This research has provided in-depth exploration of emergent socio-technical relations between users and apps, but has had less focus on wider media ecologies and political histories. Allied with Schneider and Eli's (2021; 2022) calls for thicker ethnographic accounts of app-use, in order to understand contemporary lifestyle movements it is fruitful to combine textual analysis, qualitative social scientific research, and digital methods to reveal different facets of ethical media ecologies. Here, for instance, I draw on insights from interviews, participatory action research, an app walkthrough, and textual analysis to grasp the ethical ecologies of veganism.

## **Interviews**

Central to this article are semi-structured interviews I conducted with 'long-term' vegans (who have practiced veganism for 10 years and over), between May 2019 and June 2020. I oriented the interviews around three cross-cutting themes: what people felt about veganism's popularization; potentials and problems created by this popularization; and what people thought needed to be done to negotiate any tensions that they had identified. The interviews ranged from just over an hour to

90 min and were recorded on Dictaphone, then transcribed by me. Though I had initially conducted a small number of interviews in person, to suit participants' schedules – and later due to the COVID-19 pandemic – the majority were online. The last question I asked all interviewees (with two exceptions when this topic naturally arose earlier in the interview) was whether they felt the Internet had played any sort of role in veganism's popularization. However, the topic of digital media often arose *throughout* interviews – particularly in relation to discussions of veganism's newfound accessibility and visibility. In this paper, therefore, I do not just discuss responses from one question but also reflect on the way that digitization was entwined with other core issues that interviewees raised about contemporary veganism.

Although the interviews were part of a larger project (see Giraud, 2021), which also combined textual and theoretical analysis, this article draws primarily upon 15 interviews that were with UK-based vegans. Other research on vegans notes that those from an activist background have historically been wary of engaging with academics, resulting in a struggle to recruit interviewees – a particular issue in UK contexts where animal rights activists have been subject to extreme forms of state surveillance (Stephens Griffin 2017; 2021). Due to focusing on the very small demographic of long-term vegans, I was concerned that recruitment would be a particular problem for my research so used snowball sampling. Initially I contacted colleagues I had engaged with in previous participatory action research (see Giraud, 2018, 2019), through my own involvement in particular vegan communities, or those whose work I was familiar with via informal social networks. At the end of these interviews, I then asked for recommendations of other people who might be willing to participate and followed up these recommendations. Although snowball sampling is not representative, its capacity to engage with hard-to-reach demographics meant it was invaluable for this project.

The interviews gained ethical approval by Keele University's faculty ethical review board (reference: HU-190013), and I adhered to their ethical principles of transparency, anonymity, and secure information storage. For instance, I gave a sense of key themes in advance and pseudonymized all names (asking interviewees whether they would like to select their own pseudonym or whether they would prefer me to generate one), and simply refer to people in-text in accordance with how many years they are vegan (e.g. Saskia, vegan 25 years).

### ***Participatory action research***

To contextualize my interviews, at relevant points in the analysis I also reflect on ethnographic insights from earlier participatory action research (PAR) with local food activist groups, where I gained a sense of the core media platforms deployed by vegan activists and the practices associated with them (see Giraud 2015, 2018, 2019 for more detail). This work took place over a three-year period (2007–2010) and, in line with the principles of PAR, was designed to actively contribute to the work of activists rather than be a more extractive relationship (Mason 2015). PAR is often fraught and generates tensions because researchers' positions both in and outside academia make it impossible to resist all sense of extractivism or hierarchy (Chatterton, Hodkinson, and Pickerrill 2010). I attempted to navigate these tensions by not only participating in the routine activities of the groups I worked with (helping with preparing and disseminating vegan food, for instance) but drawing on skills and experience developed through academic work to support activists. For instance, I successfully applied for a small grant from a charity to fund a particular food activist project, facilitated cookery skill-sharing workshops at a local autonomous social centre, and wrote online reports about protest actions. I draw on these materials at key points in the analysis to contextualize changes in activists' ethical ecologies.

### ***Historicized app walkthrough***

The limitation of my interviews and PAR, is that the types of platforms that I witnessed being used, or that were discussed, tended to be those oriented toward internal organization and debate (email

lists, Indymedia reports) or social media platforms for communicating with wider publics. The requirement that participants were vegan for 10 years plus – and time period in which I conducted my earlier research – also meant that the platforms people discussed were relatively limited (such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs). As touched on above, however, to grasp the relationship between media and ethico-political practice, in this instance in relation to veganism, it is necessary to incorporate analysis of consumption apps and gray media. To capture these elements of lifestyle movement media ecologies, therefore, I complemented more conventional social scientific findings with the relatively recent digital method of app walkthroughs (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018).

Informed by actor-network theory and Star's critical analysis of infrastructures, app walkthroughs examine how specific elements of apps mediate – that is, make a difference – in social action. In particular, the method turns attention to the 'environment of expected use' that characterizes an app, i.e. its expectations in terms of how it will be received by users, generate revenue streams, and govern user activity (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018, 883). Once this backdrop is established, the walkthrough itself draws on semiotic and discursive methods from cultural studies to interrogate the app's imaginaries about its user-base, how it seeks to profit from these imaginaries, and how it implements governance. This approach, in other words, constitutes a 'step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features and flows of activity – slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis' (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018, 882). Walkthroughs have been used to analyze different facets of apps, from privacy policies (Jia and Ruan 2020) to the construction of subjectivity in health-care contexts (MacLean and Hatcher 2019). Most pertinently to this article is Schneider and Eli's (2022) work on ethical consumption apps, where a walkthrough is not only used to elucidate features of the Buycott app – or the user-app relation more specifically – but as an entry point to discuss the wider socio-technical contexts that frame these interactions.

The walkthrough method thus gave me a framework for conducting a sustained analysis of tools that were mentioned only in a peripheral way in interviews (such as general mentions of finding vegan restaurants on Google Maps or using the HappyCow app). I focus on HappyCow because, as well as being one of the few apps actively mentioned by interviewees, it is also the most popular vegan food app (with over a million downloads on Playstore) and one of the earliest food apps in general: first released as Android and iPhone versions in 2009, which were themselves based on a longstanding website launched in 1999 (HappyCow, ND). However, my broader concern with media ecologies necessitated further reflection on how to contextualize the app within longer movement histories and media environments. As a long-term user of HappyCow, and registered community member of the website from 2008, I was able to situate the app's environment of expected use, vision, and funding model by drawing on e-newsletters (or 'MooZines!') and correspondence from the platform received over this 14-year period. Combined with interviews and earlier insights from PAR, I was able to historicize the app walkthrough to provide a complex picture not just of the communication ecologies that surround contemporary veganism but how these ecologies had evolved.

### **Analysis: An ethical ecologies approach to veganism**

For many participants, veganism's rise in popularity was inextricable from digital media, with several interviewees making broad comments about the expansion of veganism, as crystallized by statements such as 'the community is a lot bigger, certainly a lot better connected, than it was before' (Colin, vegan 14 years), or describing the value of social media as

an online place of solidarity [...] people genuinely asking 'I'd like to become vegan, how should I go about doing this?' and you get popular people... individuals and it's quite easy to kind of reference draw upon their sort of advice and insights. (Will, vegan 10 years)

Len (vegan 10 years) perhaps articulated this argument most strongly, arguing that the Internet lay at the root of veganism's popularization:

To be honest I think it's *the* most significant factor, I think that breaking down of gatekeeping roles for traditional media, keeping many things hidden that once people see and understand and start to recognize and engage with – there is no shutting that door once it's been opened. And so the visual role of breaking down those gates, that Facebook particularly and then Twitter and now Instagram have played in terms of opening ... the visibility of the treatment and the suffering of animals, and the exploitation that happens within the industry, I actually think that's the number one reason for the change [...] And you've married that visibility with the opportunity to organize across disparate geographic places and organize much more easily than perhaps was done beforehand.

There is a lot to unpack in this statement; the overcoming of media gatekeepers, the capacity of social media platforms to make both veganism and animal suffering more visible, and the value of social media in coordinating action. In general terms these insights underline that to understand the dynamics of lifestyle movements, you need to understand media.

Below I flesh out three interrelated themes that emerged across my datasets and which elucidate my more specific argument: in order to grasp the role of media in materializing lifestyle movement ethics, it is necessary to develop more expansive understandings of activist media ecologies that foreground apps and gray media. First, I discuss the capacity of digital media to normalize and diffuse lifestyle movement ethics. I then turn to more critical questions about which norms, precisely, are being promoted in the contemporary moment, which echo debates outlined previously about the shift from veganism as a holistic philosophy toward a depoliticized post-veganism. Finally, I outline how these new vegan norms are entangled with shifting media ecologies, which I then contextualize drawing on PAR and a historicized walkthrough of HappyCow. In doing so, I underline the value of thinking across different methodological traditions to develop insight into how media ecologies enable and constrain ethico-political action; here for instance, situating apps in social movement histories and media ecologies is necessary in grasping how evolving uses of media enable certain enactments of veganism, while foreclosing others.

### ***Normalizing and diffusing lifestyle ethics***

Echoing Len's positive appraisal of social media, a number of participants reflected on platforms that they felt had contributed to the accessibility of veganism in specific ways. For instance, Ali (vegan 12 years) described Facebook communities as playing an important role in enabling vegans to 'interact with one another,' noting the value of support networks for people of colour in countering depictions of 'typical vegans' as white and middle class (see Ko and Ko 2017). From a slightly different perspective, Thomas (vegan 14 years) suggested that 'Instagram as a visual space has been important for this early normalization of veganism, the sharing of hashtags, and food images and so on [...] some of those vegan hashtags are ridiculously popular, in the millions.'

The normalizing potentials of digital media are significant in light of the social awkwardness, and even alienation, that vegans have often experienced at social events, due to vegan practice historically being both misunderstood and difficult to accommodate (Stephens Griffin 2017). Interviewees reflected on their personal relief as veganism has become more widely understood. Saskia (vegan 25 years) was made to feel ashamed for being vegan as a teenager, after a stranger intrusively suggested she must have an eating disorder, and stated: 'I'd rather have popularization than pathologization!' Ginny (vegan 14 years) explicitly connected social media to this process of normalization suggesting that veganism's online visibility means that, when offered non-vegan food, 'you can [now] say "no thanks I'm vegan" and people know what it means!' Collectively, therefore, interviewees underlined how widespread visual depictions of vegan consumption were countering historic media representations of it as esoteric or extreme lifestyle (Cole and Morgan 2011), while the proliferation of vegan communities offered the sort of support networks that are critical in sustaining – and perhaps, as Ali notes, diversifying – vegan practice (Cherry 2015).

This theme of network-building was prominent throughout interviews. One of the key observations was that veganism had shifted from being a tight-knit community to a far more dispersed

network. Benny (vegan 24 years), for example, described how, two decades earlier: ‘You could go to a big vegan fair, in London say, thousands of people there, I could look across a crowded hall, and see hundreds of faces, and be able to name at least half of them [...] And so it felt like we were still within a very small world.’ In contrast, he suggests, over ‘the past few years, as is largely evidenced on social media [...] things have exploded.’ While describing these shifts as ‘brilliant,’ Benny was also honest about it being a strange experience to see an ethical practice he had been committed to so long when ‘it was so few of us [...] and it was painful,’ suddenly becoming ‘the most searched word on Google’ or ‘vegan Facebook groups that have only been going for a year or two [getting] hundreds of thousands of members.’ These reflections culminated in Benny articulating concern about the political implications of these changes, describing how he: ‘thought of veganism as a small glass of water that had volume and substance to it and now it’s become a huge, huge pool that’s growing exponentially at the edges, but it’s very, very thin. It’s a shallow puddle now.’ Indeed, although almost all interviewees saw the normalization of veganism via social media as a positive development, they also shared concern that these changes resulted in more diffuse ethical communities. Another narrative articulated by interviewees deepened these critical reflections still further, this time in relation to the *types* of vegan practice were being normalized through social media.

### **Concern about which norms are being promoted**

Immediately after describing the value of specialized Facebook communities, Ali (vegan 12 years) emphasized their small scale and vulnerability, noting that although the ‘network for vegans of colour in the UK has 600 members [...] compared with some of the other groups that have like 20,000 members, that’s not very big! So, we can look out for ourselves a little bit more, but it also means that we get heavily targeted by those who disagree with our politics.’ In addition, Ali worried that other forms of social media marked a shift away from veganism being situated within ‘lefty’ and social movements, toward more individualistic expressions of post-veganism – remaining deeply reflexive about their own practice in this context: ‘I think maybe the world has just gotten more individualistic [...] I can’t speak! I run Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat ... all of these things, where all I literally do, all day, every day, is talk about my life ...’ Ali suggests, in particular, that the promotion of vegan practice by influencers is problematic when it becomes a form of ethical self-branding wherein ‘people are set on being an individual and [presenting themselves as though] they’re doing as much as they can do,’ while neglecting structural inequalities that surround ethical consumerism ‘obviously when you’re a white, cis-het, western vegan you have so, so many more privileges than anyone else, it can be hard to see that what you’re doing is voyeuristic or tokenistic.’

A slightly different point was underlined by Will (vegan 10 years), who joked that older stereotypes about veganism are far removed from Instagram depictions of the ‘spectacular, jet-setting, yacht lifestyles that the modern contemporary vegan obviously enjoys.’ While this point was made in jest, it speaks to wider concern that although there appeared to be a democratization of access to veganism, this was undercut by the dominance of relatively narrow representations of veganism and shifts in its ethical connotations. Benny (vegan 24 years), for instance, touched on the danger of veganism being associated with online brands such as Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop – and the narrow models of entrepreneurial femininity it promotes – suggesting that this could lead to people dismissing veganism as part of marketized wellness culture (see Conor 2021). Scotty echoed these sentiments, reflecting on the risks and potentials of veganism being used as a form of self-branding on social media in relation to an influencer who was: ‘a very high-profile vegan celebrity athlete who then renounced veganism and went back to eating meat, because he said it was necessary for his diet or health or whatever.’

While interviewees were often concerned with the imagery and meanings being attached to vegan influencing culture, it is important to understand these semiotic shifts as entangled with the affordances of specific platforms. As early critical digital scholarship underlined, the capacity for anyone to publish does not equate to being heard, read, or engaged with (Shirky 2006). More

recent scholarship about influencing has offered in-depth explorations of the tactics used to gain visibility in information landscapes where attention is such a scarce resource (Abidin 2016; 2020). In the context of sustainability, for instance, Wood (2021) describes these tactics as ‘algorithmic culture jamming’ wherein – akin to Situationist appropriations of the language of advertising to parody and critique its logics – ethical YouTube influencers appropriate the visual language of influencing to critique conspicuous consumption. Hautea and colleagues (2021), likewise, analyse how humorous memes are used tactically by young climate change activists (though as much to parody the lackadaisical attitudes of ‘boomers’ as to mobilize for concrete action). While this scholarship doesn’t dismiss the political potentials of social media activism, what it ultimately underlines are the narrow, platform-specific strictures that environmental influencers are forced to adhere to garner attention.

### **Shifting media ecologies**

Although participants often focused on the discursive meanings attached to veganism as its representation expanded online, these shifts were sometimes articulated in relation to wider socio-technical dynamics. Dani (vegan 13 years), for instance, was originally from Israel and had a long history of being involved in Palestinian solidarity movements, and later the Global Justice Movement, contrasting his experiences in these contexts with more recent campaigns:

I remember when I had to go to Gleneagles in 2005 to demonstrate against the G8 with other vegans and activists: it was so complicated! The way you had to use the internet! You had to send an email, you need to make a phonecall, you have to coordinate together ... it was so complicated, but if there was Facebook in 2005 the way it works today and, I dunno, snapchat and Instagram ...

Others with a long history in vegan campaigning made similar observations about the accessibility of social media, drawing positive (though not uncritical) comparisons with earlier activist media. For instance, when asked what he felt about social media, Scotty (vegan 34 years) responded:

Treat with caution, but it is what’s driving veganism. It’s totally social media I think. People post *Earthlings*, *Cowsspiracy* and stuff on social media, whereas on one time you just stood outside a supermarket holding out flyers, holding out posters, whereas if you do that, every time someone goes to their timeline, another vegan posing [incomprehensible] definitely what’s driving veganism forward, why it’s become understood and commonly accepted out there in the real world is because social media’s put it out there, more so than animal rights people on the streets, I’m sorry to say. (Scotty, vegan 34 years)

Some long-time activists, however, emphasised what had been lost as social media platforms increasingly became entry points to both information and community. Sol (vegan 43 years), for instance, first became vegan after watching a BBC documentary about the Vegan Society in the 1970s which ended with an address to write to if viewers wanted further information: ‘My Mum and I did this and they sent us a brown envelope with some leaflets and a magazine in it! There was no Internet!’ While acknowledging the value of accessing information in more accessible ways, Sol also worried that the nature of this information has changed:

I don’t want to sound like a boring fart, but when say you were dealing with, you know, typewriters, and telephones, and air mail, you know, we just didn’t have the resources that exist today! The ability for us to be able to do this is unbelievable, you know! And so I think social media has really helped spread the word, there’s no doubt in my mind about that, but I do question why it hasn’t had a much larger impact than what it has, and I recognize that it has had a positive impact, but I’m not congratulatory about it ... as more information gets available the quality of that information gets reduced and it feeds into a depoliticization of people’s awareness and consciousness and understanding issues as political issues.

Sol’s observations relate to some of the subtle ways that interviewees speculated about whether the affordances of particular social media platforms shut down more critical reflections of activist history. For instance, the capacity of Facebook communities to bring together people with very different social and political backgrounds was perceived to generate friction between people with

contrasting understandings of what veganism entails. Several people mentioned the sorts of moderation practices observed by Santaoja and Jallinoja (2021) in vegan junk food communities, wherein individual consumption choice was prioritized over more complex critique that focused on inequities within food systems. Some interviewees, for instance, were critical of Facebook community policies that encouraged people to celebrate plant-based burgers, while prohibiting criticism of chains that sell them:

The dilemma comes when people then start saying ‘hey, McDonald’s have got a vegan burger!’ [...] but of course when you try to raise it [sighs] ... when you try and raise this on vegan forums and say ‘McDonald’s though?’ there’s a danger of getting shouted down by all the new, supposedly ethical ‘ooh yes, we’ve been vegan for 10 minutes and we know all about it, why are you banging on about McDonald’s when McDonald’s is so great for doing vegan burgers’ and of course they’ve never heard of McLibel, never heard of rainforest destruction, and the fact they’re the biggest killers of animals on the planet and all the other things, they just want to get a vegan burger ... (Scotty, vegan 34 years)

The McLibel case referred by Scotty (and others) was a landmark UK trial in which McDonald’s attempted to silence critiques of its labour practices, environmental track record, and culpability for animal cruelty, by suing activists who produced a pamphlet criticizing the corporation (Vidal 1997). Will, Ginny, and Sol, likewise, stated that consuming burgers at McDonald’s was an ethical line they refused to cross, with Ali again criticizing Facebook communities in which ‘... people are happy that veganism is accessible because they can go to McDonald’s and they can eat a vegan burger [...] but that doesn’t mean it feeds into what McDonald’s does across the board – and the McLibel case; vegan history has been lost!’ What these discussions reveal is a paradoxical situation wherein the desire to make veganism more inclusive, has resulted in more critical questions about food systems – from the ecological destruction wrought by palm oil to corporate aggressiveness towards activists – being excluded from online communities to avoid antagonism. What interviewees argue, however, is that the act of excluding antagonism, by framing it as damaging for community, results in a situation whereby community norms are entirely dictated by the marketplace. The focus on preserving individual consumption choices and pleasure at all costs, leads to discussion being reduced to promoting products and evacuated of any sense of collective discussion about what vegan ethics means in terms of food justice.

What can be traced throughout these interviews is a sense that the media ecologies surrounding veganism have gradually shifted. There has been a move away from small-scale, grassroots, activist-produced media (such as pamphlets, letters, posters, stickers, and even person-to-person dialogue in public space) that are explicitly critical of animal agriculture and associated with more organized social movement building. These ecologies have been complicated by the increasing prominence of social media platforms, where influencers promote veganism as a lifestyle and communities celebrate new vegan products. Entangled with these platforms are practices – such as moderation policies designed to exclude conflict – that shut down debate, in contrast with the sustained dialogue and discussion that underpins activist media such as pamphlets (Barassi 2013).

These individual perceptions of changes in media ecologies, are corroborated by my participatory action research. When first participating in food activism (circa 2007), the dominant media were activist websites (including local food activist sites and McSpotlight, a hub for transnational anti-McDonald’s campaigning) and radical-participatory news network Indymedia, a series of interconnected websites run by local, autonomous anti-capitalist collectives (Pickerill 2007). At the time, these media were often talked about in celebratory terms in academic literature and seen to reflect the radical potentials of the Internet in supporting anti-capitalist protest (e.g. Juris 2008). However, even in the heyday of digital optimism, activists themselves grasped the limitations of online alternative media, recognizing problems such as the ecological impact of hardware, the limits of radical platforms in communicating with people beyond activist enclaves, and the risk of slacktivism (see Pickerill 2003).

Indeed, many of the tactics deployed in food activism were designed to ameliorate the limitations of digital media ecologies. While digital media were perceived as helpful resources to network between

activist groups or document protests, pamphlets, posters, and awareness-raising actions (such as vegan food give-aways in public space) were seen as necessary to support grassroots movement-building and create more meaningful dialogue with publics. There were often no neat distinctions between ‘on’ and ‘offline,’ with pamphlets available to download on websites for other activist groups to print off and use as resources, in-person events promoted on Indymedia, and publics given activist web addresses during these events to find out more information (see Giraud, 2018, 2019).

By 2010, Facebook and Twitter had assumed an increasingly prominent role in activist media ecologies, particularly in the context of events promotion, while Indymedia had started to fade away (in the wake of the global decline of the network; Giraud, 2019). Yet, again, there was not a straight-forward process of commercial platforms displacing activist media. Twitter and Facebook were often used to draw traffic to activist websites – where full details of events were published – while Indymedia retained an archival role, documenting past events. In 2010, for instance, a series of vegan food actions I participated in were coordinated through in-person meetings and email lists, promoted on Facebook and Twitter, and images of the events were shared on YouTube, Flickr, and Indymedia. The hub for documenting these actions was the local website of a prominent campaigning group, which contextualized these actions as part of longer local histories (through including links to previous years’ events that had been written about on Indymedia) and international campaigns (thorough linking to the McSpotlight website). Yet, although alternative media hadn’t been entirely displaced, its affordances had certainly changed – with activist-led media often assuming an archival function, rather than used for mobilization purposes.

Ten years later these dynamics have intensified still further, as brought into relief by Graham (vegan 12 years) who went beyond reflecting on the affordances of platforms to link these affordances to value-extraction – drawing comparisons with the platformization of music:

I feel like I think it links to a lot of other things that are part of my life, like being involved with music and playing music in a way that Spotify and Apple music and these corporate essentially forces, actors ... Twitter and Facebook and Instagram have become completely indispensable to anyone who want to play music in a way that they weren’t before, and part of those businesses, part of their strategy is to appear as neutral, blank, invisible almost: we’re just a way of talking, Twitter is just like sending an email, but it’s always filtered through a prism of the corporate, surveillance capitalism.

Likewise, in the case of veganism, Graham suggests that now: ‘everything is filtered through ‘surveillance capitalism’ [...] this not neutral space that is positioned as neutral, and so my experience is that I do not come across ardent images of the balaclava clad animal liberation activists’ (see Zuboff 2019). Notably, he suggests parallel shifts have arisen in relation to vegan food outlets wherein the desire to be open, inclusive and (perhaps more pertinently) widen a consumer base has resulted in a removal of ethical signifiers, giving the example of the

vegan menu at Zizzi [a pizza chain] as compared to like going into a little vegan café that has posters for your local environmental group, ALF stickers, hunt sab stickers, you know, cultural signifiers of something that goes further than just ‘this is about what I spend my money on.’

The final section of the analysis builds on Graham’s insights to reflect on the implications of social media shifting from being part of activist media ecologies to the central terrain where meanings about veganism are consolidated. To examine how ethics is co-constituted in this context, it is necessary to turn to an aspect of vegan media ecologies that was rarely discussed in the interviews, but nonetheless critical to interrogate: the role of food apps. In existing research, food apps have been seen as the apex of processes outlined by interviewees wherein collective discussions of what food justice means are replaced by predefined ethical scripts constructed by developers (for an overview see Schneider and Eli 2022). Yet the approach I take here complicates this bleak conclusion; rather than focusing purely on the app-user relation, contextualizing HappyCow in relation to interviews, PAR and materials gathered from over a decade of using the app, reveals how more complex ethical affordances can be materialized through media ecologies.

## **Materializing vegan ethics**

In response to my opening question of which aspect of veganism had changed the most over the past decade, every single interviewee gave the same answer: the accessibility of vegan food. Some participants also suggested the Internet had contributed to food accessibility, as with discussions of how Instagram has normalized imagery of vegan consumption, or Facebook communities had been used to promote vegan products. However, despite the importance of mundane software infrastructures in enabling vegan consumption, the role of gray media was not discussed in depth.

The exception to this lack of reflection on apps was Dani, who made an informative comment about some of the wider relationships between digital media and veganism:

... today there are vegan dating groups, people post from recipes for food, when I go to Manchester I put on the group 'what is the best waffle, pancake' and immediately people give me a list of things around, around me, but you don't even need to ask there's apps like HappyCow and, and Google now is much more vegan friendly! So you click vegan on Google and it shows all the food around you, so I would say that it's definitely more easy and more convenient to be vegan, and also to be part of a community.

In pointing to some of the less obvious ways in which digital media render vegan food accessible – from search engine results to apps – Dani's reflections offer a springboard for reflecting on how exactly apps do this.

What is especially interesting when turning to the app Dani mentions, HappyCow, is that it underlines how there is often not a straight-forward displacement but reconfiguration of media platforms and the ethical norms they are entangled with. Though Dani articulated HappyCow in relation to a new wave of vegan media, the app is based on a longstanding website of the same name that was launched in 1999 after its founder, Eric Brent, struggled to find vegan food when travelling. HappyCow is a user-generated content and location-based platform, with community members able to add listings, write reviews, and rate consumer outlets that sell vegan/vegetarian food or products in a given town or city.

To draw on Light, Burgess, and Duguay's (2018) terminology, the app clearly articulates a sense of HappyCow's 'vision' (in terms of its user-base and 'scenarios of intended use') being place-based consumption by those with a commitment to veg\*n ethics (with veg\*n here designating 'vegetarian or vegan', a term used frequently in online spaces dedicated to these movements). On opening the most recent version of the app (as of August 2022), users are confronted with a logo of a smiling purple cartoon cow, before going straight to a Google Maps view of their local area (if users have given the app geolocation permissions) or the option to search for a specific city/region. The map itself is covered with location pins coded into three colours: vegan (green), vegetarian (purple), or vegetarian options (red), with simple icons designating different subcategories of shops (e.g. a leaf for food outlets, cupcake for a bakery, market awning for a shop). If users swipe up, the map can be replaced by a list view of businesses that is initially ordered by proximity but can be re-organized to prioritize other factors (such as most-reviewed or highest-rated) and narrowed down with a range of additional filters also available (from 'outdoor seating' and 'accessible' to 'organic' and 'gluten free') as well as categorized by different food types. Though shops that sell non-food products are listed, the icons, interface, and key categories on the app are thus primarily oriented towards eating.

On one hand, HappyCow is straight-forwardly a tool to make purchasing vegan food easier for users when they are in new environments; akin to a veg\*n version of review sites such as TripAdvisor. The way the app does this appears to segue neatly with the sense that veganism is a predominantly food-based practice that does not necessitate delving into wider debates about food justice. It guides users so that they can find vegan food wherever they are, be this in chain restaurants or local specialized cafés, and is readily integrated with other tools of (as Graham puts it) surveillance capitalism – such as Google Maps, Instagram (where it documents delicious images of vegan food), or Amazon (where it sells HappyCow merchandise). Broadly speaking, therefore, the environment of intended use is for a particular subcultural community of people to successfully navigate a commercial food environment, allowing them to fit into existing infrastructures of food-provisioning.

This sense of HappyCow as aligned with consumer capitalism is reinforced by its operating model. Originally the site relied on user donations (with a pop-up box inviting people to become paid members or donate to the community, similar to Wikipedia). It then charged a small fee for its app, before dividing this into a free and premium version. Over time, however, HappyCow has shifted to a model funded by businesses themselves and gradually reintroduced premium functionality into the free version of the app in order (in their words) to make the app more ‘accessible’ (HappyCow, ND) – though, due to the sharp rise in popularity created by this decision, as of September 2022 the app reverted back to charging a small one-off fee. This model is distinct from food apps like Uber Eats and Deliveroo, who charge businesses to use their platform, in that non-affiliated businesses can also be listed by users and highly-ranked. Nonetheless, changes to the app’s funding model give businesses more agency over how users navigate the app and hence, the local commercial landscape.

At the time of writing, HappyCow offered three models for businesses; Premium (\$35 a month), Plus (\$25 a month), and Supporter (\$15 a month). Each of these options maximizes visibility on the app, with different payment levels offering varying degrees of promotion: ranging from enabling businesses to appear at the top of city listings (Premium), to offering a degree of control over how they are represented by deciding which photographs to highlight (Supporter). Other perks include promoting particular restaurants as ‘friends’ on Facebook or Instagram and providing friend of HappyCow stickers for outlets to display in their physical locations. The final attribute businesses are promised if they offer monetary support to the website, however, is ‘good karma.’ While this label raises longstanding questions about veganism and cultural appropriation (see Ganesan 2017), it also hints at the longer history of HappyCow in a way that complicates straight-forward narratives of commercialization.

The reference to karma speaks to the way that Happy Cow’s environment of imagined use – and particularly the audience it speaks to – maintains remnants of longer vegan histories. The imagined users of HappyCow were made clear in early welcome emails, which placed an emphasis on being part of an online community with shared ethical values and encouraged active participation to sustain this community (encouraging users to write reviews regularly, notify of restaurant closures, and donate to support the site if possible). This sense of community is still an important feature of HappyCow, which departs from other review apps by maintaining quasi-social network attributes. Though the landing page is the map and local business list, the bottom menu bar enables users to toggle onto a tab entitled ‘community’ that displays recent posts by nearby users and enables members to send messages to one another. Another tab enables users to develop their own profiles, which displays their contributions to the HappyCow community (points accrued through reviewing which translate into bronze, silver, or gold status), alongside other demographic information, food preferences, and a brief explanation of why they are veg\*n. HappyCow, then, appears to be a contradictory space where an emphasis on community is complicated by competitive logics of gamifying contributions via points and awards.

In a sense, therefore, HappyCow speaks to wider shifts away from veganism as a social movement, towards a liberal-individual identity marker expressed through consumption. Yet this analysis deserves some complication. On one hand, HappyCow does appear to be less overtly radical. There are fewer traces in recent communications, the app, or website, of critiques of Big Agriculture that characterized early newsletters (which contained stories explicitly critical of Monstanto, for instance). At the same time, HappyCow’s account of veganism is decisively not a flexible, plant-based menu-choice – akin to post-veganism – but a decisive ethical commitment. What is especially significant about user profiles, for instance, is that veg\*nism is presented not just as part of user identity, but the defining element. Clear tags of ‘vegan’ or ‘vegetarian’ appear immediately below usernames and do not just feature on profile pages, but below user icons whenever they review webpages. Moral hierarchies are conveyed still more strongly by other aspects of the site’s infrastructure. Unlike TripAdvisor, HappyCow’s ratings are entangled with specific ethical values, as the maximum ranking of 5 stars (or 5 cows!) is only attainable for fully vegetarian or vegan shops and restaurants. It is structurally impossible, then, for multinational food corporations who

profit from animal products to appear at the top of local rankings. In more subtle ways, the imagined community of users is one who is perceived to ally vegan ethics with other political commitments, with one of the major filters of the site – that is given a category of its own, removed from more fine-grained options – is whether users want to include chain restaurants in their searches.

In many ways, therefore, HappyCow crystallizes the complex ways that vegan ethics are manifested in lifestyle movement media ecologies, and the role of digital media in materializing (or dematerializing) this ethics in specific ways. While the site is broadly uncritical of consumerism, which complicates attempts to make overt links between veganism and wider social justice issues, the affordances of the app are nonetheless modulated by – and mediate – distinctive ethical values that make plant-based food indissociable from vegan ethics. As such, the app elucidates how more radical histories can persist in unexpected places within the digital food landscape.

It is important to note, however, that the complexity of HappyCow should not signify that all apps enabling vegan consumption hold productive frictions with Big Agriculture. The app, after all, originated and remains as a dedicated veg\*n space, in contrast with other food delivery platforms – from Deliveroo to Uber Eats – that have incorporated ‘veganism’ into their local search functions as just another menu option. Moving forward, it is these – overlooked – aspects of ‘mainstream’ food apps that deserve attention when analyzing the dynamics of not only digital veganisms or digital eating, but the mediation of lifestyle movements more broadly.

## Conclusion

Susan Leigh Star’s (1990) canonical analysis of the difficulty of contesting large-scale socio-technical infrastructures underlines how, when publics move from being non-users of socio-technical systems to being enrolled by these systems, it can become difficult to explore whether oppressive norms and standards could be ‘otherwise.’ If Star’s argument is rearticulated in the context of lifestyle movements, this suggests that at the very moment when practices such as veganism are being popularized through accommodation into existing (digital) food infrastructures – indeed, perhaps *because* of this accommodation – their potential for contesting structural violence risks being undercut. Following Star, this article sought to articulate the ethico-political significance of digital veganisms, by utilizing an ethical ecologies approach.

On their most basic level, ethical ecologies can be understood as social movement media ecologies, which enable ethical practices in everyday life. As underlined when turning to veganism, to trace these ecologies it is necessary to expand the remit of what is conventionally accommodated within the analysis of activist media ecologies: a task that requires an expanded set of conceptual and methodological tools. Here, I have elucidated the value of drawing together approaches from app and social movement media studies, to acknowledge the importance of apps in media ecologies while providing broader contexts and histories to grasp how these apps mediate practice.

Shifts in the media ecologies that materialize and sustain vegan practice, for instance, have made it easier to consume vegan food, participate in communities that offer moral support, and render veganism more visible. At the same time, earlier activist expressions of veganism – many of which root it in narratives and practices related to food justice – are foreclosed or reconfigured. These different modes of communication do not just mediate eating practices, moreover, but are in turn shaped by them. Situated social and cultural norms about what veganism means informed the design of HappyCow and wider subcultural trends have created novel possibilities for ethical self-branding on Instagram and reshaped food ordering platforms. It is, in other words, increasingly impossible to separate vegan food practice from processes of (digital) mediation. Within these ecologies, the prominence of consumption and other practices that are primarily enacted on an individual level accentuates the significance of grey media and mundane infrastructural features. It is not enough, however, to simply bolt on another layer of technological affordances to the study of activist media ecologies, as this does not capture the integral role of ethics within these ecologies or the dispersed way in which ethical action is expressed.

Framing the mediation of lifestyle movements as ethical ecologies is intended to amplify the ethical dimensions of mediated politics, by considering both how ethics informs the dynamics of media ecologies and how these ecologies go on to mediate ethical possibilities. Centralizing ethics foregrounds how participants in lifestyle movements are often guided by a broad ethos and set of practices rather than specific set of situated objectives. In lifestyle movements people might be united by shared practices, but their social ties are far looser (if they exist at all); likewise, the media networks that bind lifestyle movements together are often far looser and fragmented than conventional understandings of activist media ecologies. This is not to say that more purposeful forms of praxis can never emerge; as illustrated by anti-McDonald's activism, for instance, sometimes far more interconnected clusters of media, activists, and practices exist, which lend themselves to coordinated action. At other points, however, these potentials are undermined as moderation policies, app affordances, and algorithms reinforce norms that are compatible with consumer-capitalism while making critical expressions of food justice difficult to realize. Yet, despite the pessimism of some interviewees – and on my own part, when beginning to write this article – what is revealed here is not a neat displacement of food justice as veganism has been popularized and ever more intimately entwined with digital media. Instead, there are ongoing struggles over what vegan is and means. Understanding these struggles is important in maintaining a sense of what veganism *could* be, which recognizes longer histories, maintains some of the hopeful, transformative potentials of prefigurative activism, and resists the sense that plant-based consumption which is compatible with existing food systems is all there is.

## Note

1. Jo Littler made this point as a discussant at the workshop Digital Food Cultures (convened by Zeena Feldman and Mike Goodman at King's College London, July 2017). Littler's example was that the food we were eating that day was enabled by online form-filling and digitized catering systems that constrained – or enabled – particular ways of eating. Several papers from this workshop were turned into a special edition of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (see Feldman and Goodman 2021).

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