

# Veganism and Feminism on Social Media Today

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## Abstract

While not new, veganism has gained popularity via social media. In particular, certain individuals and social groups on social media seem to play an especially important role in the spreading information about veganism and encouraging acceptance of the lifestyle. Additionally, feminism is another key concern among those key individuals. In this paper, I investigate the correlation between veganism and feminism on social media. I find that while veganism and feminism are both popular, they are accepted as lifestyles, rather than for ideological reasons.

**Keywords:** feminism, social media, veganism

## 1. Introduction

Veganism has become popular in recent years with technological breakthroughs in the plant-based food industry along with an increased awareness of issues surrounding sustainability and animal agriculture. According to research conducted by Global Data, only 1% of the US population was vegan in 2014. Interestingly in 2017, a rising 6% of the same population identified as being vegan (SinglePlatform, 2018). Clearly more people are transitioning to plant-based lifestyles as, in three short years, the vegan population in the country has increased sixfold. Following the trajectory of veganism's popularity, I wonder how this restrictive diet continues to influence communities and people's lives in 2020, specifically through social media. Veganism seems to be represented and displayed online by particular groups of people more than others. For example, Pew Research found that younger white women speak out about their plant-based diets and "cruelty-free" lifestyles the most; they dominate the internet conversations regarding vegan, healthy living (Pew, 2021).

In this paper I investigate the correlation between veganism and feminism. The research questions I address in this paper include: How was veganism related to feminism historically? How have conversations about the two topics shifted over time, especially since the 1980s when ecofeminism became well-known? How are conversations about both veganism and feminism taking place today? How are they related today? More specifically: In 2020, a time when social media strongly shapes society, how are female and non-female influencers spreading messages about veganism? Do discourses of feminism appear in the overall branding of and discussions encompassing veganism? I argue that the residual relevance of ecofeminism is hard to find in today's sphere of vegan influencing and social media in general. Additionally, even though women take on the leading role of spreading inspirations of veganism, these influencers only superficially highlight aspects of feminism with the goal of growing their platforms. I do so first by reviewing literature on ecofeminism and its modern critiques. I then outline my study's methods. Next, I present and analyze my data, focusing on a diverse selection of social media influencers and their respective internet presences. The presence of current day vegan influencers reflects nothing pertaining to the interconnectedness of feminism and veganism fostered by the study of ecofeminism. I conclude by drawing attention to the depoliticized yet capitalist nature of diet and health culture.

## 2. Debates Surrounding Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism became popular in the 1980s and first connected the two ideas of veganism and feminism. The study is "a branch of feminism that sees environmentalism, and the relationship between women and the earth, as foundational to its analysis and practice" (Wikipedia, 2021). Another source defines ecofeminism as "a philosophical and political movement that combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society" (Lexico, 2021). Essentially in order to be a feminist, ecofeminists argue, one must care for aspects of the environment including animals. Therefore, one perhaps takes on a harmless vegetarian or vegan diet. Ecofeminists are concerned with how women's rights are interconnected with animal

rights—as well as those of the environment. Different individuals and sources articulate different perspectives on ecofeminism. Here are two pieces that explain and advocate for ecofeminism as well as two that are critical of and deconstruct ecofeminism. Texts both advocating for and critiquing eco feminism allows for a holistic understanding of the connection between the ideas of plant-based consumption and female empowerment.

Carol J. Adams is one of the most influential scholars in the field of ecofeminism. She wrote a book, published in 1990, enlightening readers on how cultural misogyny has direct correlation to patriarchal consumption and obsession with meat. In the opening chapter of *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Adams explains the value in being feminist and also vegetarian or vegan (Adams, 2015). She also has her own website providing insightful analysis and helpful resources concerning various aspects of ecofeminism. For example, an article on her website elaborates some of her reasons for being a vegan feminist, as opposed to being a mere vegetarian feminist. Adams mentions topics of victimization of domestic animals and aims to enlighten the public on how sexual slavery is part of the production of familiar household products such as milk and eggs. While she acknowledges the essentialist viewpoints challenging ecofeminism, her main goal in writing is to rationally develop thinking geared towards animal ethics and care. Ultimately, Adams argues for the interconnectedness of oppression as a whole regardless of whether it is towards women or any other living being (Adams, 2015).

It is valuable to also learn about the support for ecofeminism from a more contemporary and recent point of view. Exploring *Vilda: Luxe Vegan Living* lifestyle magazine article “Let’s Talk About the Intersectionality of Veganism and Feminism,” it is evident ecofeminism has some supporters. This article was written by Marina Colorado in 2016 and opens with asking, “Why do feminists still have so much trouble seeing the similarity between oppression of animals and human females?” Colorado is passionate about and extremely concerned with rights and the livelihoods of female animals; she reveals the exploitation of female animals’ bodies and reproductive systems in the food industry. Colorado believes that women are comparable to animals in terms of their inferiority to male figures (Vilda, 2016). She, like Carol J. Adams, refers to the connection between misogyny and culturally motivated meat consumption. Therefore, breaking away from meat and dairy is a form of activism. She considers veganism to be a method of defying oppression in a feminist manner just like denying marriage, heterosexuality, monogamy, and motherhood. This piece of writing concludes with a call to action and encouragement for further thoughtful discourse. Colorado trusts that more vegan feminists speaking up about the intersectionality of veganism and feminism will make a significant difference moving forward in today’s society (Vilda, 2016).

More recently, scholars have begun to deconstruct and resist ecofeminism for a variety of reasons. For example, an academic paper titled “A Critique of Ecofeminism” was avidly constructed by Anne Archambault (Archambault, 1993). This piece critically analyzes the domination of women in western culture. According to Archambault, claims about ecofeminism include: “There is an inherent connection between oppression of women and animals. A proper approach to feminism will include considering the ecology; a proper approach to ecology will include consideration of feminism. Ecofeminism fundamentally bridges the gap between two areas of study” (Archambault, 1993). But she doesn’t necessarily agree with all of those statements. In fact, Archambault is skeptical of the belief that because women reproduce they therefore possesses an intrinsic connection to nature—more so than men. As she puts it, “The claim that women are biologically closer to nature reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and limits ecofeminism’s effectiveness” (Archambault, 1993). She firmly believes that biological experiences vary amongst individuals, and the distinction drawn between gender binaries are culturally motivated. Furthermore, placing generalizations, expectations, and strict social norms upon women makes it extremely difficult for women to break out of and strive for more than a merely nurturing and serving role. Overall, arguments against the effectiveness and legitimacy of ecofeminism have challenged the idea that “biology is destiny.” Fundamental and scientific differences between male and female do not always support cultural phenomena.

Criticism of ecofeminism also exists in a contemporary setting. In *The Feminist Wire* article “Food is a Feminist Issue” by Heather Laine Talley, the author expresses how restrictive consumption such as veganism is detrimental to women. Talley begins the conversation by exploring the underlying problems and misconceptions caused by the USDA (Talley, 2011). False and biased information is unfortunately dispersed to the public. Talley then argues that food is typically a high-pressure and problematic ordeal for women, especially those accustomed to or who grew up with consistent diet restrictions. “Food is a Feminist Issue” emphasizes that there is no way to eat which is un-feminist, and women should eat what they want until they are full. For decades, it was difficult and shattering for influencers, gurus, and celebrities to promote healthy limitless eating because of ideas like ecofeminism. Talley articulates that it is empowering to uncover anti-feminism deeply ingrained in well-established institutions such as the USDA. Ultimately, it is only un-feminist to impose stubborn eating expectations upon women, and new hopes of feminism will only arise when women are free of consumption rules and regulations (Talley, 2011).

### 3. Methods

To explore the correlation between veganism and feminism in today's world where social media flourishes and dominates, I investigated a number of vegan social media influencers on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. I conducted my research and data collection in two parts. The first was accounting of basic information of influencers from lists on the internet. The second was focusing in on specific influencers who utilize feminist language. I began by typing into Google search keywords such as “teenage,” “vegan,” and “influencers;” multiple sources immediately appeared providing me with a variety of social media individuals to examine. With many options, I chose two intriguing lists filled with Youtubers and Instagram content creators: “Women of Color are the Future of Vegan Instagram... And Here are 15 Accounts that Prove it” published by *Veg News* and “40+ Best Vegan Youtubers and Influencers in 2020” curated by *Nutritiously*. The first list specifically highlights women in the healthy influencing industry while the second list demonstrates relevancy as it is about the year 2020. With this compilation and diversity of 55 and more influencers, I documented their basic data on Google Sheets. I examined the names of social media platforms, numbers of followers, race, gender, whether influencers are described as activists, and whether influencers identify themselves as activists of any kind. If an influencer identifies or is described as an activist, I asked further questions: Does this activist specifically identify as a feminist? If so, does this feminist utilize explicit feminist language? I accounted for different surface-level information about all these influencers, but more importantly, answering questions one by one gave me the opportunity to look closer at only a few fascinating young women.

The second phase of data collection was to dive deeper into platforms of specific vegan influencers who identify as feminists and utilize explicit feminist language. Four influencers stood out to me, and they all happened to be female and between the ages of 20 and 30. I wondered about how they use feminist language in their job and how the overall relationship between feminism and veganism is represented on social media. The Edgy Veg or Candice, Jenny Mustard, Nisha Balsara, and Haile Thomas harnessed feminism as a part of their healthy lifestyle and vegan brand. For each of these allegedly feminist vegan influencers, I raised questions upon further exploration of their internet presence: what does the most recent 100 posts on her Instagram feed tell us? Which posts receive the most attention from her audience? How does feminist language and female empowerment inform her work as an influencer? How does she spread her feminist message? Lastly, could we tell she is a feminist if she did not outwardly declare feminism as a part of her brand? I took note of my findings. Zooming in on particular vegan influencers who also claimed to be feminists answered my ever-growing questions providing me with special insight on both veganism and feminism.

#### 3.1 Vegan Social Media Influencers Who Are Feminists

By observing a total of 60 flourishing vegan influencers in 2020, a combination of individuals listed by *Veg News* and *Nutritiously*, I gained conclusions about veganism's representation in the media as well as its dwindling direct correlation to feminism. There has been a history of connecting vegetarianism or veganism to feminism academically, hence the existence of ecofeminism decades ago. However, whether this connection remains prevalent and influential is questionable. First of all, the majority of vegan social media platforms I evaluated are minimally politicized if not completely un-politicized. More specifically, influencers tend to steer away from topics related to gender studies or feminism. I surveyed a wide spectrum of men and women vegan Youtubers, and the small fraction of whom inspire activism of any form is more passionate about issues of mental health, sustainability, minimalism, and animal ethics—more so than feminism. In other words, vegan influencers choose to be vegan but do not credit their lifestyle decision to being an activist for feminist ideals. All of this comes to show that values of and reasons behind ecofeminism is less popular today; it is less empowering in the present for women specifically to have restrictive diets. This is further demonstrated through a thorough examination of only four female vegan influencers who claim to be feminists. Two of them are from “Women of Color are the Future of Vegan Instagram... And Here are 15 Accounts that Prove it,” and two of them are from “40+ Best Vegan Youtubers and Influencers in 2020.”

The first feminist vegan influencer that stood out to me throughout research was The Edgy Veg or Candice from “40+ Best Vegan Youtubers and Influencers in 2020.” Candice is explicitly described by *Nutritiously* as a feminist, and female empowerment pertains to her influence and overall brand: “Candice, the edgy Canadian woman behind this channel, wants us to revolutionize how we think about food, eco-conscious living and feminism” (*Nutritiously*, 2021). In addition, YouTube About page describes: “Edgy by nature, both her popular YouTube channel, and Instagram page have disrupted the vegan community with her candid and humorous take on activism not only for animals and food built differently, but also mental health, the environment, and female empowerment” (Youtube, 2021). Candice enthusiastically talks about veganism in her YouTube videos and wrote the cookbook “138

Carnivore-Approved Vegan Recipes.” This influencer with 400k YouTube subscribers and 91k Instagram followers utilizes feminized language; however, how she projects her feminist message and precisely what that message entails is difficult to articulate. Upon review of Candice’s most recent 100 Instagram images, vibrant fruits and cheat-day meals embroider her feed. She hopes to spread the idea that it is practicable to eat comfort foods and treats while being vegan. It is also meaningful to mention that The Edgy Veg shares significant content of her pet, plants, fashion, and beauty. Simply, her aim is that her lifestyle will inspire others to eat vegan, look pretty, and have fun.

Next, Jenny Mustard is also a proud vegan who has 435k YouTube subscribers and 110k Instagram followers (Instagram, 2021). This influencer is popular amongst the online vegan community, and she inspires others with her unique minimalist fashion and lifestyle, as shown by her presence in the *Nutritiously* list referenced above (Nutritiously, 2021). I scrolled through her recent social media posts, and common themes include simple decor, natural makeup with bold lip color, and body confidence. Her monochromatic aesthetic on Instagram along with her opinionated YouTube content that often contains controversial topics, demonstrate the way in which she views the world. Jenny Mustard seems to embrace difference, and unlike other female influencers, she speaks out about issues she cares about. For example, the homepage of her YouTube channel broadcasts a video about lies content creators tell. She exposes, “We influencers are accused of being fake like all the time. So, am I lying to you? Short answer, yes. The question is why am I lying to you?” Jenny is vaguely individualized, modern, expressive, and an audience can assume she is passionate about aspects of feminism. According to YouTube, this creator is a “Swedish design lover, feminist, and vegan – currently based in London” (Instagram, 2021a). Nonetheless, like The Edgy Veg previously mentioned, it is challenging to find her platforms directly confronting specific issues of feminism. Nothing stands out on Instagram besides a mere mention of being a feminist. Jenny Mustard is a podcast creator and published author, so perhaps she addresses feminist issues comprehensively through other outlets.

“Women of Color are the Future of Vegan Instagram... And Here are 15 Accounts that Prove it” by *Veg News* has a greater ratio of individuals who are feminists compared with “40+ Best Vegan Youtubers and Influencers in 2020” by *Nutritiously*. There are two influencers from each list, either out of a total of 15 or 40 influencers, that utilize feminized language and value female empowerment; this fact suggests something about the politics of these online vegan influencers list-making. One of the two feminist vegans provided by *Veg News* is Haile Thomas (VegNews, 2019). She is a young influencer of color with 119k followers, and she energetically vocalizes messages of self-help and general empowerment. Looking at her recent 100 posts on Instagram, Haile is passionate about the environment and specifically the Black Lives Matter movement; however, those are not the only topics she spreads awareness about. Some title pages of her popular posts display “A Guide to Putting Love into Intentional Action,” “An Essay on Embodying Vulnerability to Ignite Change,” “A Guide to Having Revolutionary Conversations,” and “Recipe for Creative Resistance” (Instagram, 2021b). These short phrases may indirectly suggest at or advocate for particular feminist causes. This influencer loudly and clearly highlights relevant social issues on her platform while her messages remain unclear when it comes to dieting and feminism, especially when conversations go beyond simple and light-hearted recipes. Overall, Haile eats colorfully and completely plant-based, and she also consistently promotes her books. In her publications it is possible she elaborates upon her vegan and simultaneously feminist lifestyle as her book dives deep into women affirmations and positivity.

The fourth and final feminist influencer I observed was Nisha Balsara. Fortunately, in developing their lists, *Veg News* and *Nutritiously* incorporated influencers of varying followings: Nisha is an example of someone who is getting started on social media (VegNews, 2019). She does not have the largest fan base but provides us with helpful perspective. She has 34.5k YouTube subscribers and 19.2k Instagram followers. I discovered Nisha Balsara through The Vegan View, a group YouTube channel where three women collectively share vegan recipes and aspects of their lifestyles. Nisha stands out in The Vegan View. For example, she presents “collective liberation” and “interconnected liberation” in her Instagram bio; she values these ideas as a part of her internet image. She writes on YouTube, “I started this channel as a way of bringing about awareness to the health, delicious food, and the ethics of eating meat, eggs, and dairy, all while creating a positive safe space for vegans and non-vegans to ask questions, get answers, and interact with other like-minded people” (Instagram, 2021c). The main takeaway from Nisha’s platforms is: It is desirable to eat healthy, and it is fulfilling to live with a smile on your face. This influencer is undoubtedly uplifting with her delicious recipes and vibrant colors. She also mentions mental health and beauty products occasionally. However, her content as a whole seems surface-level, and it is difficult to articulate where and how she elaborates upon feminist issues and liberation. All in all, although she calls herself a feminist, Nisha Balsara generates similar content as influencers who are not political or an activist at all.

#### 4. Lack of Feminism Demonstrated through Veganism

Through accounting basic information about 60 vegan influencers of different race, gender, and popularity and subsequently closely examining four supposed feminist vegans, I ultimately gained valuable perspective on the connection between feminism and veganism today; I learned about the portrayal in the media of the two ideas woven together. Also, this research teaches how the concept of health and well-being is displayed to society. A general conclusion can be made: The majority of influencers prefer to nurture individual notions of growth instead of directly tackling social and systemic issues. A historical and political connection specifically between plant-based diet and women indeed existed. This fact is proven true by the academic field of ecofeminism. Nonetheless, ecofeminism was far more popular decades ago and less so in the present. Today's reality and the way society functions is vastly different compared to the 1980s. Consequently, restrictive diets like veganism have an ambivalent if not no correlation to political aspects of women's rights and female empowerment. The world in 2020 is intertwined with social media and seems to be immensely influenced by neoliberal individualistic ideals as well as a special emphasis on capitalism and consumption. Social media influencers, who most successfully grasp the public's attention, promote their own lifestyle and simultaneously value superficialities as distraction from confronting political and activist aspects of living.

Very few if any of the vegan influencers in my research puts forth genuine effort for causes of feminism. This gives us insight on the mainstream connection between veganism and feminism today. I observed 60 individuals, and other than lack of feminist activism, common themes on social media pages include animal ethics, "cruelty-free" beauty, sustainability, minimalism, and self-care. All content I visited is energetic and visually appealing; however, they are unfortunately merely that. Even if an influencer claims to be feminist, she hesitates from diving into topics of controversy and political dispute because she needs to maintain a light-hearted and unproblematic internet existence. Superficial posts and messages on social media act as a distraction from and excuse for influencers failing to engage in realistic conversations, perhaps conversations about gender equality. Influencers provide encouragement for consumption of certain products and empty reassurance of success purely based on their individual lifestyles; this concept seems to have little tangible correspondence to female empowerment--the female empowerment, independence, and strength ecofeminism tries to implement. At the end of the day, it is difficult for Youtubers and Instagramers to partake in authentic feminist conversations because it is at the risk losing followers. Alarming social issues are muted and undermined while everything comes back to capitalism; the attention of the public gets sold to companies and for the success of brands through social media. In this way, responsible and powerful ways of eating have turned into a strategy of our capitalist society. Today, when women partake in vegetarian or vegan diets they are blinded by a desirable but elusive image and an attractive method for spending money rather than truly recognizing the value and meaning in eating like an activist for a cause.

#### Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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