The Life of Consumption Communities: A Study on Vegan Communities

Ana Hungara and Helena Nobre

Abstract
Marketplace cultures, one of the main theoretical frameworks within consumer culture theory (CCT), offers grounds for the study of consumer interactions with the marketplace. One kind of consumer interaction occurs inside consumption communities. Most of the consumption communities nowadays are online. Consumers go online to get information and advice from peers on their consumption options and processes. They participate in online forums and communities to connect with like-minded individuals, discuss topics of interest and share experiences. Taking the interpretive lens of CCT, we propose to analyse the ‘life’ of online consumption communities in the context of vegan consumption communities. We present the research agenda for this in-progress study and the suggestions for further research on consumption communities and, more specifically, vegan communities, as identified in our literature review.

Keywords
Consumption communities, consumer culture theory, vegan community, online communities

Introduction
Since the 1980s, the studies on consumer behaviour have abandoned the classical economic theory approach in which consumers are seen as isolated individuals who seek utility maximisation. The new approach, rather, puts the focus on the psychological and social processes embedded in consumption and, therefore, on the symbolic dimension of marketing. With this paradigm shift, a new research tradition emerged, coined as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) by Arnould and Thompson in 2005 (Bode & Østergaard, 2013). One of the main theoretical frameworks proposed by the CCT is marketplace cultures, which is particularly suitable to understand the phenomenon of consumption communities.

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Consumption communities can exert positive aspects of a consumption object or consumption interest, or they can influence negatively, for instance, the development of a brand (Hook et al., 2018).

Ethical and political concerns are increasingly putting pressure on brands (Cherry, 2015). In this context, and since brands are the result of value co-creation experiences (Payne et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and activities (Merz et al., 2009), it is important for marketers to understand how consumption communities are born and sustained over time. The literature on consumption communities is still recent, with most of the studies focusing on brand communities. The dynamics and interactions that emerge from an online community still lack investigation. In particular, vegan consumption, which is an actual phenomenon, is increasing every day (Cherry, 2015) and is inspiring the creation of online communities where vegan consumers come together to share their experience and learn from others. Thus, it constitutes a good case to analyse the ‘life’ of consumption communities, in terms of community practices and norms, types of consumers, and styles of participation and interaction.

This article examines the theoretical backgrounds of CCT, consumption communities and vegan communities. This is an in-progress study that aims to provide a template for other consumption communities’ studies by analysing how communities are created and sustained over time. Through the observation and study of real cases of vegan communities, we pursue the development of typologies of consumers according to their goals, motivations, interactions and communication styles in consumption communities that can contribute to fill a gap in the literature and support practice. Since new members are generally invited by older ones (Hook et al., 2018) and not all members are equally active (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), we are also interested in empirically analysing the communication processes within members of the community and new ones.

### Theoretical Background

#### Consumer Culture Theory and Consumption Communities

The CCT, coined by Arnould and Thompson in 2005, is a new research tradition in consumer behaviour that provides a theoretical ground to study the dynamism of consumer action, the marketplace and cultural meanings, embedded in cultural complexity. CCT is a multidisciplinary approach, grouped into four research domains that constitute four theoretical frameworks: (a) consumer identity projects, (b) marketplace cultures, (c) the socio-historical patterning of consumption and (d) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). According to Askegaard and Linnet (2011), consumer identity projects refers to the consolidation of consumers’ identities with the structural imperatives of a consumer-driven global economy. In terms of marketplace cultures, consumers create value through brand communities (Schau et al., 2009). Consumption is also influenced by ‘institutional and social constraints, such as […]class, community, ethnicity and gender’ (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 874). Finally, regarding mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies, consumers are seen as interpretive agents rather than mere receivers of ideological instructions.

The co-productive activities between consumers and marketers are studied by consumer culture theorists in terms of consumer collectives or communities (Schau et al., 2009). Research on consumption communities has been associated with different research streams, among which is CCT (Schau et al., 2009). These communities can be of various types, such as subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes (Canniford, 2011). Subcultures of consumption are defined through
alternative and strong social ties, shared rituals and beliefs. Brand communities are more predictable, since they are focused around a brand, while consumer tribes interact around diverse brands, products, activities and services (Canniford, 2011). However, these distinctions are not static. For instance, Hook et al. (2018), in a study on brand communities, used the literature on consumer tribes, focusing on a brand. Usually, the brand community literature, which represents the main body of the literature in the field, integrates consumer tribes.

However, more recently, the linkages between a consumption community and a specific brand or consumption interest are being questioned, as there is an increasing focus on social interaction happening in online communities (Weijo et al., 2014). Since the online environment is changing fast, there is a need to constantly access environmental and conjectural trends. The development of an online consumption community leads to increasing connectivity between its members. This impacts the community’s structure and offers an opportunity for the community to develop further and independent from the consumption object or brand that inspired it. Since consumers may have diverse consumption interests, they can follow and establish memberships with different online communities, which boundaries tend to become blurred (Weijo et al., 2014).

Even though vegan consumption can be seen as a consumption interest, according to Lawo et al. (2020), it is much more than that. Indeed, it can be seen as part of an effort to convert society and consumers into green consumers, or anti-consumers. In the endeavour, vegan consumers use online communities not only to discuss what they eat and wear but also to share personal experiences and gather support for different causes. This phenomenon is referred to by Weijo et al. (2014) as the new type of consumption community.

**Vegan Consumption**

The first vegan society was founded in the United Kingdom in 1944, followed by the American Vegan Society in 1960. This movement has become popular all over the world, showing common grounds with animal rights movements and the attitude of refusing to consume animal products (Arppe et al., 2011). In several European countries, such as the United Kingdom or Germany, among others, veganism used to be seen as a niche market (Lawo et al., 2020). However, this situation is changing rapidly in recent years, which is causing a market growth for vegan products and restaurants, as well as the spreading of the vegan label in food and non-food consumption (Lawo et al., 2020).

In modern societies, there is an increasing concern with politically and socially responsible consumption. Environmental and economic concerns are putting pressure on governments, and consumption habits are changing. Diverse information reaches out to consumers and are interpreted according to their specific contexts and within their specific constraints. People are now aware that their dietary choices have an environmental impact and may represent health benefits (Lawo et al., 2020). Regarding eating habits, this translates into different diets, such as veganism (Arppe et al., 2011). Veganism is also a critique of modern capitalism, seen as a system that still promotes inequality between humanity and nature and the exploitation and killing of animals (Arppe, 2011). It differs from traditional political mobilisation to focus more on everyday lifestyle choices into what is known as lifestyle movements (Cherry, 2015). This movement is related to identity-seeking efforts, in which consumers look for ethical consistency in their actions and practices. However, it is still a product of postmodern culture, since opting for this lifestyle is only possible in a situation where there are enough food resources available (Arppe et al., 2011).
There are three main motivations, nowadays, for consumers suppressing meat consumption: (a) concern with health; (b) environment and (c) animal welfare (Armstrong Soule et al., 2019). Greenebaum (2012) distinguishes three types of vegans: health vegans, environmental vegans and ethical vegans. Lawo et al. (2020) also refer that criticism of industrial large-scale livestock farming can be a reason for becoming a vegan. According to Greenebaum (2012), the environmental vegan is specifically concerned with the environmental impact of the meat industry. Environmental concerns are well documented in the literature since food consumption plays a substantial role in environmental degradation and climate change. However, this is not the main consumers’ food concern and, usually, is only part of a combination of motivations (Armstrong et al. 2019). The impact of diets in health and the development of diseases represent another motivation to adopt veganism, as old biases questioning the healthiness of a meat-free diet have been/are being eliminated (Armstrong Soule & Sekhon, 2019). According to Greenebaum (2012), health vegans focus on health improvement but they do not incorporate veganism in aspects of their lives other than the shift to a plant-based diet. Finally, moral motivations also play an important role in explaining the adoption of veganism. These concerns are related to animal suffering and killing. Consumers with this kind of concerns are normally the ones who follow the most restrictive diets (Armstrong et al., 2019). Greenebaum (2012) also considers that consumers that adopt an animal welfare perspective are more likely to become vegan than those who only present health concerns.

These motivations are found in different degrees and combinations for different consumers, thus creating a heterogeneity of motivations. While for some vegans the most important thing is to eliminate animal products from their diet, assuming other aspects as irrelevant, for others, veganism cannot simply be disconnected from animal rights (Greenebaum, 2012). The adoption of a vegan diet affects not only eating but also different aspects of life, such as cooking and buying food (Lawo et al., 2020). Thus, Cherry (2015) outlines three aspects of consumers’ change to a vegan lifestyle and how this change is maintained: recruitment, social support and retention, and the ‘virtuous circle’ of veganism.

Recruitment generally involves reading about animal cruelty and cookbooks, among others. McDonald (2000, cited in Cherry, 2015) also describes how a catalytic experience can influence the change of a whole lifestyle. For example, by learning about the cruelty of methods used by the meat industry, many consumers decided to move to veganism (Cherry, 2015). This catalytic experience can happen, for instance, through YouTube videos and Netflix documentaries. The availability of such media stimuli, such as news and documentaries, among others, and consumers’ evaluation of its credibility induce emotional responses and behavioural intentions (Wang & Hickerson, 2016). In the study carried out by Lawo et al. (2020), respondents referred the documentaries such as Cowspiracy, Earthlings and What the Health, among others, as having an important role in their change of consumption habits. Other examples of life-changing experiences include, for example, the lasagne horse meat scandal in 2013, referred by one of the participants in this study as an event that influenced his consumption habits. Habit transformation through stimuli can be facilitated by green advertising by exploring guilt and guilt-induced feelings (Jimenéz & Yang, 2008). Indeed, vegans experience guilt for the way that humanity treats animals, which influences their habit transformation.

Social support from friends and family plays an important role in the adoption of a vegan lifestyle, as it affects many aspects of daily life, such as shopping for groceries or eating out with friends (Cherry, 2015). To reach a consistent vegan diet, vegans usually search for information, particularly regarding their eating habits. According to Lawo et al. (2020), this information can be provided by YouTubers, diet tracking devices and books.

Inside vegan social networks and groups, members can get information on practices and shape their own identity accordingly, forming a ‘virtuous circle’ (Cherry, 2015). Deviations from these normative indications are possible: in some of the cases in the study by Cherry, the participants, although identifying
themselves as vegans, still purchase or consume non-vegan products. This represents a common transition to a vegan diet. Vegans can impose all dietary restrictions at once or they can become vegan by a ‘step-by-step’ process (Lawo et al., 2020). Arppe et al. (2011) note that there can be some ambiguity in a vegan lifestyle. On the one hand, vegan consumers feel repelled by meat; on the other hand, they feel tempted by some products that are seen as forbidden in vegan circles. Also, even consumers searching for an exclusively vegan lifestyle feel the need to make concessions sometimes, since not all non-vegan products can be avoided (Greenebaum, 2012). However, vegan consumers struggle to resist temptation, mainly out of moral principles, due to group pressure. The result can be the questioning of their whole identity inside of the vegan community and their moral integrity as vegan consumers (Arppe et al., 2011).

The Vegan Consumption Community

The change to a vegan diet involves habit transformation. According to Lawo et al. (2020), transformation comes with the appropriation of new artefacts and learning new practices. However, the resources for transformation are generally not present in society. From a legal perspective, there is no definition for vegan food at the European level. Sustainable consumption is mostly treated as a matter of consumer choice. Moreover, the media, in the West, helps to perpetuate an image of meat consumption as a sign of prosperity. In this context, vegans find themselves in a position where they need to justify their consumption choices and, thus, they find support within the community through ‘enculturation’ (Lawo et al., 2020).

The enculturation can happen through a virtual community. The dissemination of vegan-related information and lifestyle change are further facilitated by social networks (Cherry, 2015). It is inside these communities of practice, or virtual/online communities, that newcomers acquire the knowledge and skills, and enter into a shared practice with specific competencies, materials and meanings (Lawo et al., 2020). Indeed, vegan communities, although not specifically focused around a brand, share aspects of brand communities, such as shared rituals and traditions. There is also a morality aspect regarding meat anti-consumption and a sense of responsibility towards other members (Arppe et al., 2011; Cherry, 2015).

Consumers accept joining online communities where they find support and mutual recognition from other members of the lifestyle movement, as well as get access to diverse material such as books and documentaries (Cherry, 2015). Consumers engage with media to satisfy their needs that reflect social and psychological dispositions (Al-Kandari et al., 2016). Through online communities, vegans receive support from peers and can actively participate in online discussion forums, express their opinions (Patra, 2015) and debate attitudes of omnivorous consumers or fellow vegans. It also allows individuals to construct their own ‘cyber-selves’, which can be different from physical ones (Patra, 2015), and through which they interact with other members of the vegan community. Moreover, since vegans face issues regarding the ingredients of meals normally offered by restaurants and traditional recipes, digital media helps to reduce the knowledge gap. For instance, through apps such as HappyCow or Vanilla Bean, where consumers share information on vegan and vegan-friendly restaurants and cafés, as well as websites, and blogs (Lawo et al, 2020). More recently, related information can also be found in online communities, for example on Facebook. Inside these social media-based communities, information is exchanged regarding not only eating but also other consumption practices associated with a vegan lifestyle, such as buying shoes (see, for instance, Lawo et al., 2020). Other practices such as vegan sexuality and cooking of vegan dishes, which also support a vegan lifestyle, are visible within these.
groups. Vegan sexuality refers to the intentional choice of vegan partners, which is an increasing practice in European countries such as Portugal that is supported by vegan-related dating apps such as Veggly and Green Singles (Monteiro, 2020). Another current practice is cooking and presenting vegan dishes to omnivorous consumers to encourage them to change their eating habits (Lawo et al., 2020).

The role of social networks in encouraging and supporting the change to a vegan lifestyle and consumption choices has already been acknowledged by Cherry (2006, cited in Cherry, 2015) and Kennedy (2011, cited in Cherry, 2015). It is this learning process that can lead consumers to a catalytic experience and, consequently, convert them into veganism (Cherry, 2015). Moreover, informative tools, such as the app HappyCow, are important in the learning process of veganism, whereas communication tools, such as in the aim of an online community of practice, provide reassurance and defensive strategies ‘against’ the omnivorous majority (Lawo et al., 2020). Thus, socialisation in the context of veganism represents an important via for engagement with causes. However, it is important to note that, for the online community to remain relevant and vibrant, members need to contribute with content. In social media, consumers can become active users through content creation rather than passive receivers of information (Al-Kandari et al., 2016). Rahman and Kamboj (2017), in a study on online brand communities, note that there is a difference between community members and ‘one-shot’ participants of an online community. Lawo et al. (2020) recognise that group membership is not necessarily given a priori and that it may even sometimes involve ‘offline’ contact. Therefore, it is increasingly important for marketers to understand and differentiate the typologies of consumers in the co-creation process so that companies can encourage the right ones to post content.

**Objectives and Research Agenda**

The main purpose of this research is to analyse a vegan consumption community and understand the dynamics and mechanisms that it embodies, through the lens of CCT. We intend to develop a system of classification of consumers having in mind their different styles of interaction and participation in the community. As the research setting is the vegan communities, the study also aims at understanding how an online vegan community is born and remains active over time, and how their members stay engaged. Hopefully, this study will also contribute to expanding the theoretical frameworks presented by Arnould and Thompson in 2005. The categorisation of consumers, according to their participation and interaction style with the community, and the different processes of communication involved, can work as a template to analyse consumers in other consumption contexts, as suggested by Belk and Sobh (2019). Hence, the study contributes to the body of studies on CCT and marketplace cultures from a consumer point of view.

Research proposes to analyse the vegan community through one of the main theoretical frameworks by Arnould and Thompson, in 2005: the marketplace cultures. Vegans are organised around shared beliefs regarding their consumption habits. The vegan community offers a social space where vegan consumers can interact with each other while learning, absorbing values and sharing experiences. Through ritualised modes of expression and traditions (Canniford, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013), the vegan community can educate and encourage members to adopt norms of behaviour and transmit lifestyles.

Schau et al. (2009) state that a community can only be sustained through its practices. They compare the way practices work in a community with the way gears work in a car (Schau et al., 2009). Moreover, a consumption community constitutes a ground for the development of processes of value co-creation with consumers. Practices involve procedures, perceptions and behaviours that contribute to the development of a shared understanding and competencies’ demonstration among members.
(Schau et al., 2009), and, therefore, common norms of interaction. In online communities, all activities are linked to social interaction and communication (Patra, 2015). The role of consumer’s community practices in maintaining the integrity of a vegan community deserves to be analyzed. Moreover, we support that the way vegan consumers share stories with other members, as a kind of community practice, offers context for the implementation of storytelling communication strategies for brands (Dhote & Kumar, 2019). This research will examine the ‘life’ of a vegan community, its sustainability, by observing its members, in particular, their level of engagement. Hence, the main study’s research question is as follows:

How can a vegan community endure over time and boost the engagement of its members?

**Implications and Future Research**

Cherry’s (2015) study departs from the punk subculture, which is vegan-friendly, to explain mechanisms of recruitment and retention in a community. Thus, only a limited group of consumers, members of a well-defined punk subculture, are considered, instead of a larger population. Different people with different backgrounds and purposes regarding their participation in the vegan community can be more or less engaged within the community and have more or less extreme behaviours. They can also have different motivations to join the community. The author also suggests that mechanisms of recruitment and retention should be further studied in different contexts.

Lawo et al. (2020) present a broader approach to consumption communities, specifically focusing their attention in the context of vegan consumption. The role of online consumption communities in supporting veganism is mentioned throughout the study. Notwithstanding, this study did not use the netnography method, which could provide further insights into the way community members interact within the group. Netnography is a naturalistic, context-focused method that consists of analysing online interactions (Kozinets, 2010). It is used to access symbolism, meanings and consumption patterns inside a virtual community (Lima et al., 2019). A netnography is less expensive and obtrusive than traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2002), and it is a flexible method that allows different adaptations Its application to brand communities has been prolific in the literature (e.g. Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Burgess & Jones, 2020; Schau et al., 2009). Hence, we plan to complement the previous research by applying a netnography combined with semi-structured interviews to members of the community to advance the understanding of how vegans interact with the community. Since, nowadays, consumption communities are recognised as impactful not only at a personal but also at a societal, even global, level, marketers should be able to understand the groups of consumers who are more prone to engage in communities and their motivations.

Moreover, the success and dissemination of value co-creation activities are facilitated by social media. According to Armstrong et. al. (2019), the study on the role of social media in promoting value co-creation activities represents an avenue for future research. Weijo et al. (2014) suggest that research should now focus on online consumption communities and consumers’ interactions within them. With this study, Weijo et al. offer a problematisation of consumption communities, in this case, a brand community or a community specifically connected to a consumption object or interest.

Another interesting avenue for research would be to explore how consumers showing a more polarised attitude towards meat consumption react to these appeals as opposed to more moderate consumers. The degree of commitment also varies: once, occasional or complete cessation. In fact, within veganism, there are different levels of commitment or extremity that can be classified as the so-called health vegans,
who only follow a vegan diet, or the ethical vegans, who do not consume non-food animal by-products also. Even though the latter is still a small segment of the worldwide population, it is growing fast (Armstrong et al., 2019).

Finally, although Lawo et al. (2020) study vegan consumption from a logic of practice transformation, they only focus their study on community practices on the food industry. They emphasise, therefore, the need to understand other infrastructures for change, such as cosmetics, and how they can be connected to the satisfaction of everyday basic needs of vegan consumers.

Conclusion

The article analyses the concepts of CCT, consumption communities and vegan consumption. We suggest that consumers seek online communities to interact, through creative communication, with like-minded individuals, with the same motivations, to exchange opinions and experiences, in line with Al-Kandari et al. (2016). Since veganism involves habit transformation, consumers can find support in these communities (Cherry, 2015). Departing from an online vegan community context, this in-progress research aims to understand how consumption communities are created and sustained over time. We plan the development of typologies of consumers in consumption communities that can contribute to fill a gap in the literature and support practice. This work attempts to serve as a template to be applied to other consumption community contexts and, thus, advancing research in CCT and consumption communities.

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