

# THE PROMOTION OF VEGANISM BY INFLUENCERS. A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED INSTAGRAM PROFILES

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## Abstract

*Social media functions as a space for various activities, not only in the personal or business dimension, they are also a tool for promoting important ideas. Social media can be used by both institutions and private individuals – especially influencers who reach a wide audience with their message. The article discusses the issue of the promotion of veganism by (social) influencers. The author analyses, in a form of a case study, selected Instagram profiles in terms of content and form of messages in order to do this. The starting point for the considerations is the characteristics of social media (with particular emphasis on Instagram) and the explanation of the term influencer and other related issues. The article also introduces the issue of the multidimensionality of veganism.*

**Key words:** social media, Instagram, influencers, promotion of veganism, multidimensionality of veganisms

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## Introduction

The topic of veganism appears in social discourse in various contexts and dimensions. One of such contexts is the issue of social activity undertaken by people living on a plant-based diet. It can be noted that vegans can be, in general terms, a potential source of social change. They set an example for other people by signing petitions or participating in protests related to the issue of veganism. This type of activity is written into the broader psychological literature on minority influence, according to which a minority of committed individuals presenting a coherent message can contribute to a wider social change over time (Judge, Fernando & Begeny, 2023, p. 2).

Madeline Judge, Julian W. Fernando and Christopher T. Begeny describe two orientations of veganism. The first of these, deontological, has the dimension of a moral duty. It means that inflicting harm on animals is perceived by vegans of this orientation as intrinsically evil and they base their beliefs on this foundation, regardless of other consequences of veganism. The second orientation is related to the positive consequences of veganism for the environment or human health (Judge, Fernando & Begeny, 2023, p. 4) (discussed later in the publication).

The wide range of plant-based products available for at least a few years now and the consumers' interest in them almost all over the world had made the "plant-based

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diet" popular and adopted by the general public. The interest of media in this area is also important. Veganism, generally speaking, is a lifestyle promoted especially by celebrities, athletes and even politicians (Cader & Lesiów, 2021, pp. 10-11).

People associated with the broadly understood vegan movement take action in various areas. Currently, the Internet has become a significant area of activity of individuals. An important place on the Internet is occupied by influencers, i.e. the Internet content creators are building a community around themselves. Typically, they work with different brands, primarily for commercial purposes, but they can also promote certain ideas or beliefs among their audience, thus using their influence.

The main goal of this article is to outline the role of (social) influencers in the promotion of veganism, in the context of the issues they raise in this area. The achievement of the goal of the study required formulating research questions. The main research problem was formulated in the following question: "How do Instagram influencers promote veganism?". In addition, the following specific questions were raised:

1. What type of veganism content do the influencers post on their Instagram profiles?
2. What is the thematic range of messages published by the influencers on their Instagram profiles?
3. Which dimensions of veganism do the materials published by the influencers on their Instagram profiles refer to?

In order to answer the questions, a qualitative analysis of the messages on selected Instagram profiles in terms of content and form will be carried out as a case study.

The subject of research, consisting of profiles of vegan influencers, requires the introduction of the most important concepts in the area of social media. The question about the multidimensionality of veganism indicates the need to discuss its individual dimensions. An outline of this issue will form the background to these considerations.

### **An outline of the multidimensionality of veganism**

According to the original definition created by Donald Watson and The Vegan Society (founded in 1944 in the UK), veganism is: "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. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals" (*The Vegan Society*). This quoted definition is still valid. It is, therefore, necessary to elaborate on its individual elements, indicating the multidimensionality of veganism.

Veganism in the ethical dimension refers primarily to not harming animals, as a consequence of which, these beings should not be used or exploited by people in any form. This question is addressed in the arguments of various philosophers and ethicists. Nonetheless, it is generally based on two basic approaches or directions of ethics, namely the theory of animal rights and the idea of animal welfare, which are two strands within the Animal Liberation Movement. According to the first concept, represented by the American philosopher and theologian Tom Regan, animals (like people) have basic rights – to live and not to be harmed, due to the fact that their life has an intrinsic value (Regan, 1985). The second concept, on the other hand, is based on a utilitarian philosophy, of which the main proponent is the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. It must be understood above all in the context of the equal interests of all creatures, and therefore also of non-human animals, because of their capacity to feel pleasure and suffering (Singer, 2004, pp. 17-19). It is worth adding that the above postulates are reflected in the increased activity of various organisations (especially belonging to the third sector) dealing with animal rights and improving their welfare.

Nowadays, veganism in the ecological dimension also performs a special role, which is related to the progressing climate and ecological crisis, for which responsible is, among others, large-scale industrial farming. The production and consumption of meat and dairy products is one of the factors contributing to global warming, hence the elimination (or at least a significant reduction) of animal products from the diet is beneficial for the environment (Hayek, 2019, p. 10).

In addition, it cannot be ignored that veganism is also associated with the health benefits of being on a plant-based diet. Health specialists emphasise that people adopting a diet excluding animal products are less likely to suffer from cardiovascular diseases than people on a traditional diet, but it is necessary to properly balance the plant-based diet (Parol & Mamcarz, 2015, pp. 92-99).

Veganism is, therefore, understood as a philosophy, a lifestyle or a diet, which indicates its multidimensionality. However, not all vegans share the same values and norms attributed to veganism; hence, Jessica Greenebaum distinguishes three groups of vegans: health vegans, environmental vegans and ethical vegans (Greenebaum, 2012, p.130). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that researchers such as Christopher J. Hopwood, Wiebke Bleidorn, Ted Schwaba and Sophia Chen developed the Vegetarian Eating Motives Inventory (VEMI) in their study. They included three main themes for adopting a plant-based diet: health, the environment and animal rights. Based on the study, they noted that the most common reason for people following a traditional diet to consider a plant-based diet is health, followed by environmental and animal rights reasons (Hopwood et al., 2020, pp. 1-20). However, a person may have more than one reason for becoming a vegan. Individual reasons can also cross permeate and complement each other. At the same time, it should be mentioned that in the literature on the subject, there are other motivations for going vegan, such as (Cader & Lesiów, 2021, p. 11):

- a. practised religion (Jedlecka, 2016);
- b. a set of moral principles (Collier et al., 2021; Gadzała & Lesiów, 2019);
- c. a cultural factor, influence of tradition on the consumed food (Maj, 2018);
- d. rejection of mass production due to unwillingness to consume globally-produced goods (Urbański, 2016);
- e. a protest against the way of conduct of dishonest concerns and large production companies, e.g. through exploitation of the labour force (Mamzer, 2018).

It should be emphasised that the widespread trend of eating in a meat-free way requires both a lot of awareness and specific knowledge. Vegans often acquire this knowledge on the Internet, especially from various social media platforms (Kozioł & Błońska, 2021, p. 80). In general, there are various messages about veganism on the Internet, covering different dimensions. In order to discuss its individual aspects<sup>2</sup> in the online space, an inseparable element of these considerations is to introduce the specificity of social media and related issues – constituting the area of research.

### **Characteristics of social media their creators**

According to one of the most popular definitions, developed by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenleinen, social media are a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In general, the definition of social media is broad, because it also includes not only basic social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, but also dating applications, discussion forums, messengers (such as the popular WhatsApp or Snapchat) and even online games

<sup>2</sup> In this study, they are limited to three main dimensions, covering health, environment and ethics.

(Roguski, 2020, p. 15).

Instagram is one of the social networking sites owned by Facebook (now rebranded as Meta), where visual content dominates. This platform has a wide range of functionalities and a growing number of users, which makes it an extremely attractive place not only for marketers (Grzechynka, 2021, p. 52) but also for all other network users. Especially for those who want to share photos, video materials and content attached to them with other users of this medium. This application is a kind of a phenomenon, because it "affects the behaviour of recipients in the real world, redefines life attitudes or motivates to act" (own translation) (Roguski, 2020, p. 117). It also allows gaining popularity and, consequently, earning money.

A special place on Instagram is occupied by influencers. The term influencer means a person who: "thanks to their activities on the Internet, including social media, gathered a community of fans around themselves and became recognisable outside the circle of their closest friends. In addition, their actions have an impact on the decisions or attitudes of people whom they reach with their message" (own translation) (Roguski, 2020, pp. 59-60).

Influencers, therefore, perform an important role in marketing, hence discussing the phenomenon of influencer marketing is worthwhile. Radosław Wilusz defines this concept as "searching for popular and influential people in a given field and cooperation with them on the promotion of a brand or product through the use of a community organised around this persona" (the author's translation) (2017, p. 250). The researcher also drew attention to the benefits of using influencer marketing. These may include:

- relationships – the possibility of continuous contact of the influencer with their followers;
- active participation of recipients – social media users are sensitive and responsive to the message, which is conducive to their mobilisation;
- trust – consumers trust someone who arouses sympathy in them more than the traditional message. And the influencer's personality traits can inspire general sympathy in the audience, which leads to trust;
- authenticity – the influencer is seen as the voice of the consumer. This allows assigning a human dimension to a brand, which in turn is appreciated by the recipients (Wilusz, 2017, pp. 251-252).

It should be noted that there is no consensus among researchers on how many followers of a profile on a given social network are needed to have the influencer's status. However, it has been assumed that it should be at least 10,000 followers on Instagram to enjoy this status (Roguski, 2020, p. 60). Kinga Stopczyńska (2021, p. 140) distinguishes six types of influencers – according to the criterion of the number of their followers on social media. Their market potential is determined on this basis. These include:

- Nanoinfluencers – the number of followers of their profile ranges from 1,000 to 10,000;
- Microinfluencers – they have from 10,000 to 50,000 followers of their profile;
- Macroinfluencers – they have between 500,000 and 1,000,000 followers of their profile;
- Topinfluencers – the number of followers of their profile exceeds 1 million;
- Megainfluencers – the number of followers of their profile ranges from 1 to 5 million, they are referred to as celebrities;
- Stars – these are well-known personalities who, due to fame, reach over 5 million followers of their profile.

The term "influencer" is often intertwined with the term "celebrity", but there are some differences between them. In general, society admires celebrities, they are an in-

spiration to people. On the other hand, they are perceived as rather inaccessible. Influencers, on the other hand, are perceived as “ordinary” people with whom it is easier for the recipients to identify (Biesalska, 2022).

In addition to the quoted typology, there is also a division of influencers according to the type of content they create. According to this division, following Artur Roguski, we can distinguish (2020, p. 60): bloggers, podcasters, YouTubers and social influencers – operating on social media, i.e. Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook or Instagram.

## Profiles of vegan influencers on Instagram – a case study

### Characteristics of influencer profiles and the criteria for their selection

As it had already been mentioned, social influencers operating on Instagram are the subject of research in this study. However, it is the material they post on their Instagram profiles that had been analysed. Due to the fact that it is not possible to trace all the profiles of vegan influencers on Instagram, it was necessary to choose their exemplification. This selection was made arbitrarily, in accordance with the following criteria:

- the user’s description (“bio”) and materials posted on a given profile indicate that it is mainly devoted to the issue of veganism;
- the number of followers of the profile is at least 10,000, which means that the person running the account has the status of an influencer (Roguski, 2020, p. 60);
- profiles are varied in terms of the number of followers. One profile belongs to a creator referred to as a microinfluencer, while the other belongs to a macroinfluencer;
- profiles are varied in terms of the nationality of the influencers (one profile belongs to a Polish influencer and the other to a foreign influencer).

After the initial observation of vegan influencers’ Instagram accounts<sup>3</sup>, two profiles meeting the above criteria were selected for analysis. They are briefly characterised in the context of profile description or the number of followers’ criteria.

The first of the Instagram profiles selected for the analysis is the profile of Orestes Kowalski (@everydayheropl). He is a Polish vegan activist who also runs a YouTube channel and TikTok account, where he promotes a plant-based diet and educates about the situation of livestock on large-scale farms. The number of followers of his Instagram profile is 14.8 thousand, while the total number of posts on his profile is 734<sup>4</sup>. The account was created in August 2015. In the description of this user’s profile (“bio”) there is a link under which, among others, information about the possibility of purchase of a book on veganism of which he is the author – *Go vegan! 17 powodów, dla których porzucasz jedzenie mięsa* (*Go vegan! 17 reasons why you give up meat eating*) can be found. There are also links to his other social media profiles, including also his other pro-vegan publications. Moreover, he described himself as a digital creator, as well as a vegan, atheist and a supporter of street epistemology<sup>5</sup>.

The second profile examined belongs to Ed Winters (@earthlinged). This UK user describes himself in his “bio” as a vegan activist and educator speaking on the topic of veganism even at the British universities. He has 597,000 followers and 805 posts on his Instagram profile<sup>6</sup> (it is the total number). The account was established in February 2016. The influencer advertises his book on the subject of veganism entitled *This Is*

3 According to the selected lists of Polish and foreign (in English) vegan influencers available on the following websites: [https://infovege.com/listing\\_category/aktywisci-influencerzy/](https://infovege.com/listing_category/aktywisci-influencerzy/) and [https://influencers.feedspot.com/vegan\\_instagram\\_influencers/](https://influencers.feedspot.com/vegan_instagram_influencers/)

4 As of 05.11.2023.

5 Information taken from @everydayheropl Instagram profile.

6 As of 05.11.2023.



*Vegan Propaganda* on his profile. In his profile description, there is also a link redirecting to the page where the book can be purchased. In addition, there are links redirecting users to an online store offering several products like clothes with a veganism motif, or to an Instagram profile advertising the clothing brand<sup>7</sup> I.D.E.A Studios (Instagram profile @i.d.e.a.studios) – they indicate the cooperation of this influencer or an advertising contract with this brand (Instagram profile @earthlinged).

### **Characteristics of the research material and research methodology**

The research material was collected in three months – August, September and October in 2022. The selected messages were analysed in the context of their content and form, based on the author's categorisation key consisting of three parts. In the first part, the profile from which the message came, the date of its posting and the type of message – photography, video, and boomerang – were coded. In the next part, the subject matter of the material was coded (categories: recipe, product promotion, opinion on a given topic, ethical issues, environmental aspects, an event in the life of an influencer, "mixed"<sup>8</sup>, other). The last part covered the dimension of veganism in the message. This part of the categorisation key, in accordance with the considerations regarding the multi-dimensionality of veganism includes: health veganism, ethical veganism, environmental veganism, mixed, other.

The study used the media content analysis method, which is "a set of various techniques for the systematic study of streams or collections of messages, consisting in the most objective (...) distinguishing and identifying their possibly unambiguously specific, formal or content, elements and on the most precise (...) estimation of the distribution of the occurrence of these elements and mainly in comparative inference. Such an analysis is to move through getting to know the content of messages towards getting to know other elements and conditions of the communicative process" (Pisarek, 1983, p. 45). The study was carried out in accordance with the method of a qualitative paradigm.

### **Profile of Orestes Kowalski (@everydayheropl) – content analysis**

During the analysed months, Orestes Kowalski published 37 posts on his profile. On average, he published 12 pieces of material per month. The footage was slightly dominated by photos – 21 in total, while 16 videos were posted.

The topics of this user's messages included the following issues:

- Plant-based diet – 1 material (photos) in a form of a recipe.
- Opinion on:
  - a. ethical issues (animal welfare) – 21 materials (photos and videos, including influencer's statements);
  - b. environmental aspects – 4 materials;
- other – 11 materials. Several posts including an undefined topic, some referring to other values of the influencer, unrelated to veganism or to events from his life, and also concerning the topic of pets.

Distance and a playful approach to individual topics can be observed on this creator's profile. This is expressed in some humorous visual and audio-visual messages, such as the one shown in Figure 1. This post refers to veganism in an environmental dimension. It contains a video created by this influencer that shows scenes involving animals and funny captions.

7 Also with motifs referring to the idea of veganism.

8 This means that a given message relate to the different dimensions of veganism.



**Figure 1. An example of a post on Orestes Kowalski's Instagram profile having a humorous and creative form. Source: Orestes Kowalski's profile**

On the other hand, Orestes Kowalski refers to scientific research in some posts, as illustrated in Figure 2. In this post, this influencer also used a video he had created. He cited the results of scientific research on the topic relating to environmental issues in the context of mass farming in it. It is presented in the form of specific graphs/tables.



**Figure 2. A post on Orestes Kowalski's Instagram profile (referring to the environmental dimension of veganism), which received the highest number of likes in the surveyed period Source: Orestes Kowalski's profile**

The above message received the highest number of likes on the @everydayheropl

profile (1059)<sup>9</sup>. The following comments on this post (3 out of 29 comments) have (randomly) been selected and may indicate the potential impact (similar to other materials published by this user):

“Więc hodowle zwierząt są nieopłacalne pod jeszcze większą liczbą względów niż do tej pory myślałam xd” (So animal farming is unprofitable in even more ways than I thought so far xd), (Instagram profile of Orestes Kowalski).

“Dlatego dieta roślinna jest najlepszą opcją!” (That’s why a plant-based diet is the best option!), (Instagram profile of Orestes Kowalski).

“Niech to idzie w świat!” (Let it go out into the world!), (Instagram profile of Orestes Kowalski).

### Profile of Ed Winters (@earthlinged) – content analysis

During the analysed months, Ed Winters published 23 posts, i.e. an average of about 8 materials per month. These messages constitute a thematically diverse content, especially videos – a total of 22. During the selected period, only 1 post with four photographs containing text was recorded on his profile.

Materials from the period covered the following topics:

- plant-based diet – in the form of 2 videos containing culinary recipes;
- opinions on such topics as:
  - a. ethical issues (animal welfare) – 1 photo; 17 videos (including interviews, influencer statements and edited videos. Some of them have a positive overtone<sup>10</sup>);
  - b. environmental aspects – 1 video;
- politics in the context of animal welfare – 2 videos;
- event promotion – 1 video.

Ed Winters’ messages apply to all dimensions of veganism, as do Orestes Kowalski’s messages. In the examined time period, ethical topics also dominate the profile of this user but drastic or shocking visual or audio-visual materials were not used. Figure 3 illustrates selected visual messages published by this author.

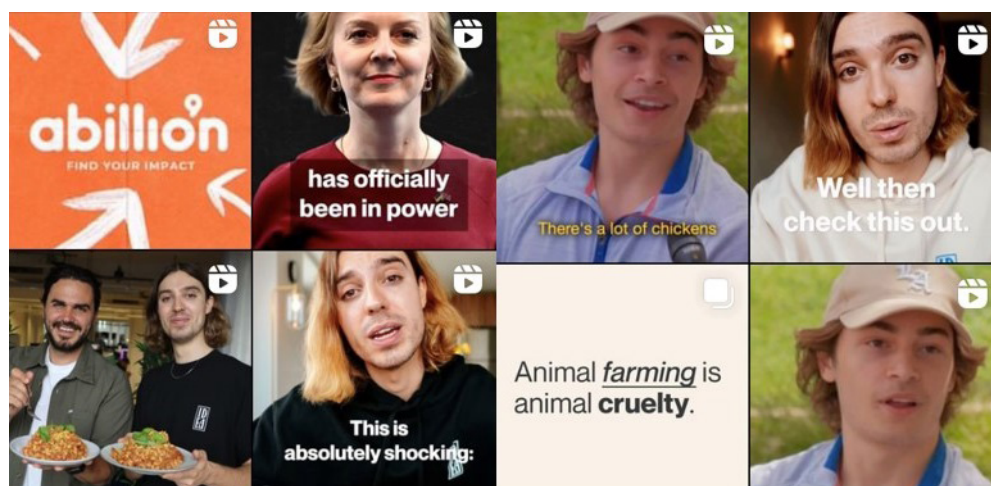


Figure 3. Examples of visual messages on Ed Winters’ Instagram profile  
Source: Ed Winters’ profile

<sup>9</sup> As of 10.11.2023. It should be added that the post in which Orestes Kowalski promotes his book received more likes. However, this post was categorized as ‘mixed’, so the author did not choose it as an example.

<sup>10</sup> The positive tone of the message should be understood as evoking emotions such as curiosity or delight.



The potential impact of materials posted on the profile of this user can be evidenced by the content of comments to the message that received the most likes in the examined period<sup>11</sup> (number of likes – 43 515). This material refers to veganism in the ethical dimension. The following 3 out of 1108 comments are listed (randomly):

“All animals deserve respect”, (Instagram profile of Ed Winters).

“so sad but so true – people need to make the connection, all animals deserve kindness”, (Instagram profile of Ed Winters).

“Very well said”, (Instagram profile of Ed Winters).

Figure 4. shows the post discussed above. The author cited scientific data relating to the scale of animal suffering on factory farms. He put this issue in the context of an incident that had occurred in the UK at that time - the killing of a dog by a famous person while hunting. In this post, Winters condemned hunting, focusing on some paradox - social outrage over the death of this dog while the killing of huge numbers of farm animals is accepted. He expressed it in the following words: “So if the death of one dog is morally wrong, the question we have to ask ourselves is, how can we possibly morally justify the deaths of hundreds of billions of animals every year who feel and suffer in the exact same way”, (Instagram profile of Ed Winters).



**Figure 4. A post on Ed Winters' Instagram profile (referring to the environmental dimension of veganism), which received the highest number of likes in the surveyed period**  
**Source: Ed Winters' profile**

### Common features and differences in the discussed case studies

One of the key elements present in the messages of both influencers is the reference to scientific research (in both cases foreign research). In this type of a message, influencers present their own opinions on a given topic based on scientific research – most often in the form of quotations attached to visual and audio-visual materials or links redirecting to their source. In both Orestes Kowalski and Ed Winters' cases, this element is used within the two dimensions of veganism – ethical and environmental one. In the ethical dimension, arguments based on scientific facts relating to the suffering of animals on factory farms are mainly presented. In the context of the environmental

dimension of veganism, on the other hand, they present the results of scientific studies showing the negative impact of factory farming on the environment and the climate.

Another element that plays a special role in the messages of both influencers is the promotion of a book on veganism, by each of them. The posts are used both to promote the idea of veganism (in various dimensions) and to increase the sales of these books, which makes them also a form of advertising. It should be added that in the posts of both authors there are also political issues related to the topic of farm animals.

It is worth noting that the influencers did not share content from other influencers or organisations on their profiles during the studied period. Instead, there were links redirecting to other communication platforms where they also have their profiles, as well as websites related to their activities.

In general, despite the fact that the analysed profiles are diverse, the messages on their profiles are similar in terms of content and the forms of communication used, as discussed above. The main difference, however, is that on the @everydayheropl profile during the period studied, some of posts (almost one third) were categorised as 'other', which are not related to the topic of veganism, whereas on the @earthlinged profile all posts are dedicated to this issue. This may indicate that his followers include people for whom issues related to veganism are distant. In this way, Orestes Kowalski could promote the idea to different audiences.

### **Summary and conclusions**

To sum up, social media are a good space for various activities, not only in the personal but also in the business dimension. Social media can also be a tool for promoting important ideas and can be used by both institutions and private individuals – especially influencers, who have a great potential to reach a wide audience with their message. This makes vegan influencers good promoters of the idea of veganism on the Internet, mainly by inspiring others to adopt a vegan lifestyle. On the other hand, the promotion of a book of their own authorship, strictly on veganism, noted on both profiles, is one of the possible forms of promoting this idea. The cooperation of one of the creators with a brand offering clothing with the motif of broadly understood veganism also has a similar overtone.

The materials published on the influencers' profiles refer to all three dimensions of veganism indicated above, in various scopes. Animal welfare materials prevail on both profiles. In the context of a plant-based diet, they take the form of recipes, accompanied by attractive photographs or videos of vegan dishes. If, on the other hand, ethical issues are raised in a given post, the visual materials attached to it take a subtle, often humorous or creative form, which is intended to attract the attention of recipients and, consequently, lead to the problem being noticed. This is confirmed by the sample of illustrative materials. The advantage of this type of content also results from the specificity of Instagram, which is a communication platform on which drastic photos or videos are not posted.

It should also be noted that the promotion of veganism by influencers takes place in various ways, for example by inspiring their followers to try new plant-based dishes or making them reflect on important ethical topics and social issues, in the area discussed, as reflected in specific posts on their Instagram profiles. The potential of influencers' impact in the area can be evidenced by the reactions of recipients to their publications, as exemplified by the selected comments to them. They are a kind of interaction between the creators of pro-vegan content and their audience. The messages published on social media by vegan influencers stimulate discussion on various aspects of veganism.

It should be emphasised that the issues discussed in this article and the study carried out are an introduction to the in-depth research in this thematic area. This ap-

proach to the issue of promoting veganism serves to outline this issue and indicate one of possible directions of research. The profiles are not representative. Their analysis was aimed at identifying trends in the area of social influencers with this specific profile. This type of research is justified and desirable due to the growing popularity of veganism and the importance of the media in its promotion.

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