

Sociology and Veganism: A Systematic Literature Review

RŪTA PELIKŠIENĖ

Civil Society and Sustainability Research Group, Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Kaunas University of Technology, 37-1105 A. Mickevičiaus Street, 44244 Kaunas, Lithuania
Email: ruta.peliksiene@ktu.edu

Veganism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In addition to being viewed as a dietary choice, it is also studied in various disciplines as a cultural movement, lifestyle, or even as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy. Due to its complexity, there is a growing interest in studying veganism through sociological lenses. The aim of this research is to provide a systematic overview of the current sociological literature on veganism. This analysis follows the PRISMA systematic literature review protocol and includes academic articles published in English between 2000 and 2022. The study has been organised around 3 main research questions to reveal the scope and intensity of sociological research on veganism, its methodological aspects, and the conceptualisation of veganism. The results suggest an emerging discourse of veganism as a lifestyle movement and the orientation of studies toward qualitative research. A variety of veganism concepts used in the sociological literature indicate the potential of different strands of research.

Keywords: veganism, sociology, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Veganism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Transforming food systems toward less animal-based food consumption pathways implies grand-scale social changes. Due to its wide scope and impact in various fields, dietary changes are considered an important social science topic, as transformations are often seen as a key lever in solving planetary crises, such as climate change (Morris et al. 2021: 1). In addition, apart from being viewed as a dietary choice, veganism is also studied as a personal choice, identity, ideology, cultural and political movement, lifestyle or as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy (North et al. 2021; Cherry 2006; Gheihman 2021; Vestergren, Uysal 2022).

This paper focuses on veganism as the phenomenon of total rejection of animal-based foods and non-food products and practices. A vegan diet is considered to have the least negative impact on the environment and climate (e.g. Chai et al. 2019; Kortetmäki, Oksanen 2021). Due to the complexity of the topic, there is a growing interest in studying veganism through sociological lenses. However, the expansion of the academic literature on veganism is quite sporadic. There is a lack of systemic analysis of sociological contribution

to vegan studies. Such an analysis is crucial not only to outline directions and guidelines for further research but also to establish a greater use of sociological knowledge. The article aims at filling this gap by systematically organising and providing an overview of the scope and intensity of the current sociological literature on veganism. Three main research questions (RQ) are used to achieve this aim: What is the intensity and scope of the sociological discourse on veganism? What methods are used in the studies? How is veganism defined in studies?

This article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the theoretical aspects of situating vegan studies within the sociology field; the following section presents the methodology of the systematic literature review; the further section covers the discussion of the results, and the final section provides conclusions and offers directions for future research.

VEGAN STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND SOCIOLOGY

The roots of vegan studies could be traced from the interdisciplinary fields of critical animal studies (CAS) and ecofeminism (Wright 2021). The core standpoint of CAS is the normative and ethical stance against animal exploitation (Pedersen, Stanescu 2014: 263). Ecofeminism holds a wider view where all forms of oppression are linked and codependent (Wright 2021: 12). As such, animal exploitation is viewed as an important aspect of ecofeminist studies. Such issues could be considered a pathway toward introducing vegan studies in the field of sociological research.

Another important precursor to vegan studies in sociology is the New Ecological Paradigm developed by Catton and Dunlap. This concept marked the turn toward less anthropocentric sociology and thus enabled the emergence of vegan studies in sociology (Cherry 2021: 151). A remarkable attempt to delineate a specific field of vegan studies is 'The Vegan Studies Project'; however, it is mostly limited to identity issues (Cherry 2021: 150). Although vegan studies are generally agreed to be related to sociological research (Twine 2018: 166), it could be concluded that this field lacks a more comprehensive outlook, as research is often related to studies of identity, culture, and social movements (e.g. Cherry 2021; Gheihman 2021).

METHOD

A systematic literature review (SLR) of the current sociology literature on veganism was conducted to address the research questions. SLR can be used to synthesise existing knowledge, help identify future research directions, and provide answers to questions that could not be addressed in individual studies (Page et al. 2021). This study follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis) protocol (Moher et al. 2015) for the rigorous review process.

Data for this study was collected in three stages: database search, bread crumbing and pearl growing. The database search stage was divided into three parts: initial search, abstract screening and full text review. First, Scopus and Web of Science electronic bibliographic databases were used to perform literature search based on set inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table).

Eligibility criteria were based on formal publication criteria and thematic relevance. Only articles published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals between 2000 and 2022 were included. Furthermore, the articles must have been directly related to the sociology

Table. Eligibility and inclusion/exclusion criteria

| Criterion type | Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Research area | Sociology | Not related to sociology |
| Topic | Directly related to veganism | Not directly related to veganism |
| Year of publication | Between 2000 and 2022 | Outside the set range |
| Publication source | Peer-reviewed academic journals | Other types of sources |
| Language | English | Other language |
| Type of publication | Journal articles | Other types of publication |

area, and veganism must be the main topic. Articles were considered related to sociology if they explicitly mentioned sociology and/or such sociological concepts as identity, norms, social theories, etc. The following search string was used in both databases to address inclusion criteria: ('sociology' AND 'vegan*') OR ('socio*' AND 'vegan*') OR ('vegan*') OR ('vegetar*') OR ('plant' AND 'based' AND 'socio*'). The Scopus and Web of Science databases search resulted in 1,213 and 146 publications, respectively.

The second step of the database search was abstract screening. Only publications related to veganism and sociology were included for further review. Abstract selection in the Scopus and Web of Science database resulted in 49 and 30 publications, respectively. A duplicate publication search was then conducted, and the number of articles further decreased. In total, 51 publications from both databases were selected for the full text review.

Then, the full texts were read to evaluate if veganism is the primary topic in the publications. After a rigorous review, 32 publications were rejected. 16 Scopus publications and 3 Web of Science publications were selected for SLR.

The second stage of data collection included the bread crumbing method, a technique in which the references of a publication are screened to find other relevant publications (Fisher et al. 2017). 3 publications were identified as suitable and included in the SLR. Then, the pearl growing method was applied, which refers to searching reference databases for citations to identify articles citing a publication that has already been included in SLR as relevant (Fisher et al. 2017). 1 publication was included.

All three stages of data collection resulted in a total sample of 23 publications included in the SLR and analysed (Fig. 1).

The selected publications were coded and analysed using the MAXQDA software. The coding logic was designed based on RQs. For RQ 1, descriptive codes were used to capture metadata such as geography and publication years. For RQ 2, descriptive codes were used to code data collection, data analysis methods, methodological approaches and target population. Analytical codes were used to answer RQ 3 and capture the concept of veganism. Thematic analysis was used to explore and identify emerging themes and patterns that were then transformed into coding categories (Fereday, Muir-Cochrane 2006).

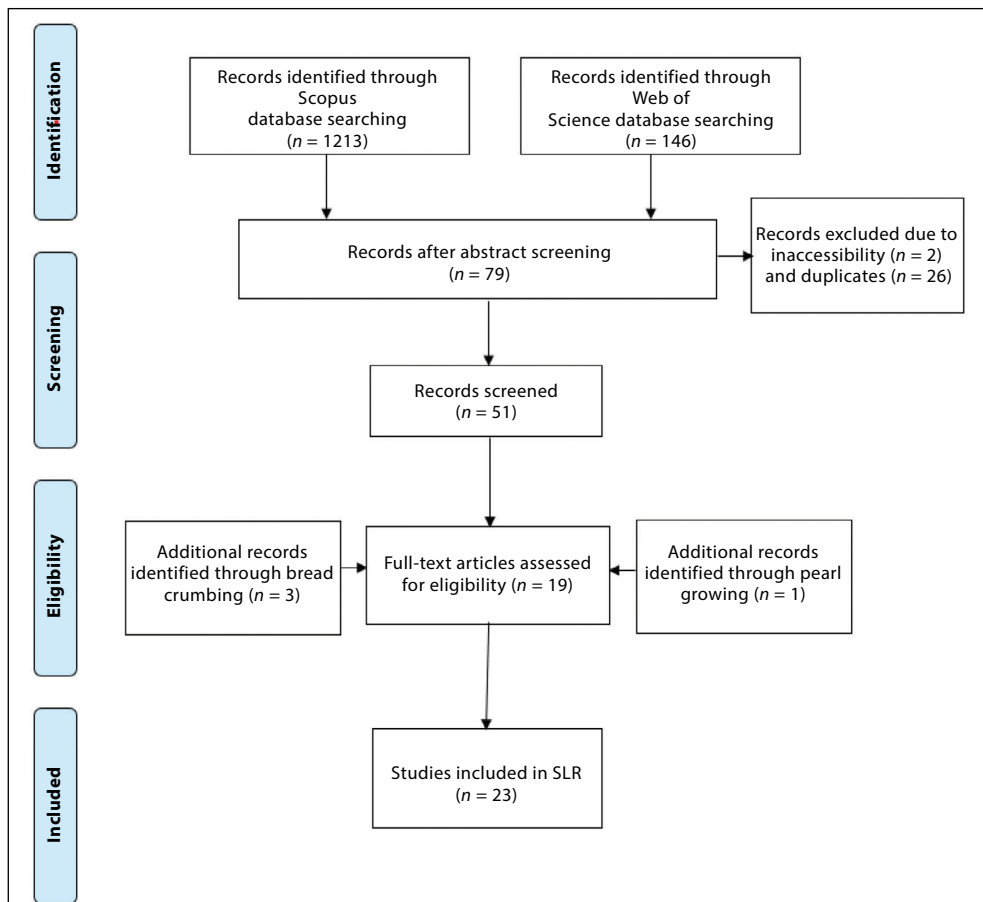


Fig. 1. Data collection process. Developed by the author based on the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al. 2009)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Intensity and Scope of the Sociological Discourse on Veganism

The time interval between 2000 and 2017 could be characterised as a low-intensity period when no or only one vegan publication was published, the only exception being the year 2011. The years 2018–2021 mark a higher intensity period when on average 3 to 5 sociological publications focused on veganism were published. It could be concluded that the overall intensity of the sociological discourse on veganism is low. The volatility of intensity demonstrates that the discourse is still in a forming stage and has not yet reached consolidation (Fig. 2).

The scope of the sociological discourse on veganism was analysed through geographic coverage at the country level. The code was assigned according to the country in which the empirical research was carried out. The geographical coverage includes 8 countries. Most empirical studies were conducted in the United States (6 publications) and the United Kingdom

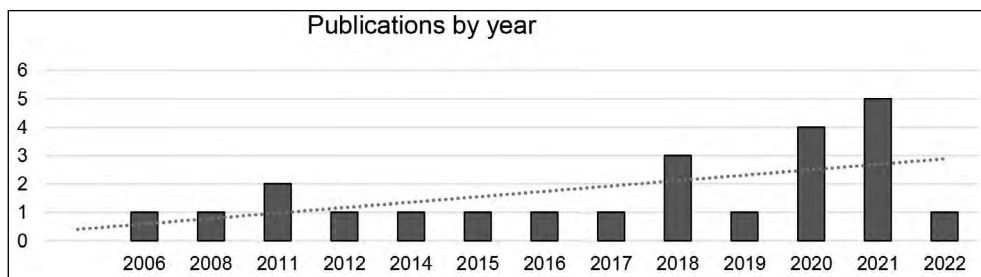


Fig. 2. Publications on veganism in the sociological literature 2000–2022 (years when no publications were published are not shown)

(4 publications). 3 countries were studied more than once: France (2 studies), Israel (2 studies) and Italy (3 studies). The rest of the countries (Chile, Australia and Finland) were studied once. It could be noticed that geographic coverage hints at euro- and western orientation, as only two countries (Israel and Chile) could be considered non-western.

The results indicate not only a low intensity of discourse, but also a narrowness in geographic scope and its western orientation. Sociological discourse on veganism could be characterised as nascent and in its formative stage, while veganism is an emerging topic in sociology.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF VEGAN STUDIES

The following methodological aspects of vegan sociology studies were analysed: methodological approach, data collection method, data analysis method and target population.

The methodological approach most used in the analysed publications was the qualitative research, used in 19 of the 23 publications. Mixed methods were used in 4 publications, while the purely quantitative research was not applied at all.

7 different data collection methods were identified in the analysed publications. The interview was the most widely used data collection method (17 studies). The second most widely used data collection method was document analysis (5 studies), followed by a survey and observation. Visual and audiovisual document collection, autobiographical essay, and focus group discussion methods were also used. Such a variety of data collection methods indicates that veganism offers different directions of sociological research. However, the prominence of the interview method suggests the existing gap in understanding the phenomenon of veganism and the need to study it through the authentic experiences of individuals. The lack of quantitative methods indicates the lack of quantifiable data.

Qualitative content analysis was the predominant data analysis method, applied in 10 publications. Discourse and thematic analysis methods were applied in 5 publications each. Other methods included statistical analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, case studies, extended case methods and relational analysis. Although data analysis methods were combined in several publications, no predominant patterns of combinations were identified. The choice of qualitative data analysis methods corresponds to the predominant data collection methods. The strong orientation toward the need for thematic, discursive and content analysis suggests that veganism is an emerging and wide-ranging concept in need of classification and categorisation.

The target population in the analysed publications ranged from quite vague to rather specific. Men and young people are examples of vague target population. Animal rights organisations and/or activists (NB: this category was merged in the analysis) and physicians are examples of specifically defined target populations. The predominant population was self-defined vegans, i.e. individuals who identify themselves as vegans or belong to vegan communities (12 publications). Three publications did not have clear definitions of their target populations; however, all of these publications aimed at discursive analysis.

The self-defined vegans as the most frequently selected target population indicates that researchers seek to understand the authentic first-hand experiences of vegans. Furthermore, such a 'self-definition' suggests that there is currently no widely accepted definition of veganism and that people are free to identify themselves as vegans based on individual attitudes.

THE CONCEPT OF VEGANISM

This subsection attempts to organise and provide an overview of concepts of veganism currently used by sociologists in the analysed research articles. Some of the concepts identified in the literature were merged into other categories for a more comprehensive analysis: 'ethics' was merged with 'philosophy'; 'lifestyle' and 'lifestyle movements' were combined; 'cultural movement' was merged with 'social movement' category as the cultural movement concept occurred only in one article where veganism was also defined as the social movement concept; 'subculture' was merged with 'cultural practice', since there was only one publication for each concept, and subculture can be understood as a part of wider cultural practices.

The most common concept of veganism in the analysed publications is related to movements (15 publications). Three different categories of movements were distinguished: lifestyle, social and food movements. It was decided not to merge the latter with other categories due to its unique position between dietary choice and movements; such a concept was found in a single publication. Most of the concepts of movement were related to lifestyle movements, emphasising individual choices and personal identity (e.g. Giacomani et al. 2021; Gheihman 2021). It corresponds to existing literature on lifestyle movements, where they are defined as primarily oriented toward personal identity (Haenfler et al. 2012: 8). While lifestyle movements also have wider social implications, e.g. could be seen as a tactic for social change (e.g. Gheihman 2021), the primary difference from the social movements is the focus on personal choices. Therefore, it could be concluded that there is a tendency in the sociological literature to associate veganism with identity, individuality, and personal choices, by positioning veganism as a lifestyle movement.

Dietary choice was the second most widely used definition of veganism (13 publications). It hints at a rather narrow prevailing understanding of veganism, as it lacks a sociological perspective. Such a definition continues to be used even in the most recent research, published as recently as 2022 (e.g. Fidolini 2022). It indicates a lack of a more comprehensive definition of veganism, especially when studied through sociological lenses. However, such a narrow interpretation of veganism in some of the analysed publications is complemented by additional concepts.

The analysis of veganism conceptualisation dynamics in sociological research over time suggests no notable changes; no patterns of significance emerged. Combinations of veganism concepts most often comprise dietary choice or lifestyle movement concepts with

other notions. There is only one occurrence in the analysed publications of a combination of different definitions of veganism in which neither of these concepts (dietary choice or lifestyle movement) were used.

Combinations of different concepts of veganism allow for a more comprehensive outlook of this phenomenon. Although veganism is undoubtedly related to food practices, it is crucial to look at a broader perspective. However, the current lack of a common sociological definition of veganism should not be considered a negative aspect. A common sociological notion of veganism, if based on the current understanding of veganism as a mere dietary choice or food practice, could potentially lead to the limited sociological research and thus should be considered with caution. The existing variety of veganism concepts provides an opportunity to study this phenomenon through various methods and directions, thus enriching the scientific and especially sociological knowledge.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The scope and intensity of the sociological research on veganism were revealed by analysing the geographic coverage and the number of articles published in the set period. The analysis shows that veganism discourse in sociology is emerging and of low intensity. The western-oriented approach is prevalent, as there is a lack of geographic coverage and non-western approaches in this field.

The analysis of methodological aspects revealed the predominance of qualitative studies. It could be argued that it indicates the need to build an understanding of this phenomenon, while the lack of quantitative methods suggests the lack of data that could be quantified.

The analysis of the conceptualisation of veganism revealed that the predominant concept of veganism is related to lifestyle movements. This tendency suggests that veganism in the current sociological research is primarily seen as related to personal identity and individualistic choices. While the analysed literature reveals other conceptualisations of veganism that expand such notion (e.g. veganism as philosophy or cultural practice), they are yet scarce and uncommon. Another prevalent concept of veganism is related to dietary choice, which could be interpreted as a narrow and limiting view on this phenomenon (when not used in combination with other concepts of veganism), lacking a sociological perspective. The analysis of veganism concepts in the sociological literature also revealed that there are no significant changes in the use of concepts over time. A variety of veganism concepts indicate the potential of different strands of research, especially in sociology.

The strength of this review lies primarily in its uniqueness. Currently, there are no systematic reviews of sociological research on veganism. This review provides a systematic and organised overview of the current body of sociological literature on an emerging and important topic. It also suggests potential methodological aspects for future research.

The SLR conducted in this study is subject to limitations. First, the search strategy was limited to two databases. Additionally, the search string used rather few keywords; therefore, some of the relevant studies that used different terminology may not have been included. Second, the selected inclusion criteria for the time frame, type and language of the publications could also be a limiting factor. One of the inclusion criteria required that publications be related to sociology; however, the interpretation of what sociology is and what publications should be included is rather subjective.

Future research could be directed towards more comprehensive inclusion criteria. A more refined strategy for including sociological studies could also be considered. As this is the first of its kind SLR on the nexus of sociology and veganism, there are many ways and opportunities to build on it and enrich sociological knowledge.

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Appendix. List of publications included in the SLR (in chronological order)

| No. | Reference |
|-----|---|
| 1. | Cherry, E. 2006. 'Veganism as a Cultural Movement: A Relational Approach', <i>Social Movement Studies</i> 5(2): 155–170. |
| 2. | Cole, M. 2008. 'Asceticism and Hedonism in Research Discourses of Veg*anism', <i>British Food Journal</i> 110(7): 706–716. |
| 3. | Arppe, T.; Mäkelä, J.; Väänänen, V. 2011. 'Living Food Diet and Veganism: Individual vs Collective Boundaries of the Forbidden', <i>Social Science Information</i> 50(2): 275–297. |
| 4. | Cole, M.; Morgan, K. 2011. 'Vegaphobia: Derogatory Discourses of Veganism and the Reproduction of Speciesism in UK National Newspapers', <i>The British Journal of Sociology</i> 62: 134–53. |
| 5. | Greenebaum, J. 2012. 'Veganism, Identity and the Quest for Authenticity', <i>Food, Culture & Society</i> 15(1): 129–144. |
| 6. | Twine, R. 2014. 'Vegan Killjoys at the Table—Contesting Happiness and Negotiating Relationships with Food Practices', <i>Societies</i> 4(4): 623–639. |
| 7. | Cherry, E. 2015. 'I Was a Teenage Vegan: Motivation and Maintenance of Lifestyle Movements', <i>Sociological Inquiry</i> 85: 55–74. |
| 8. | Véron, O. 2016. '(Extra)ordinary Activism: Veganism and the Shaping of Hemeratopias', <i>International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy</i> 36: 756–773. |
| 9. | Bertuzzi, N. 2017. 'Veganism: Lifestyle or Political Movement? Looking for Relations Beyond Antispeciesism', <i>Relations</i> 5: 125. |
| 10. | Mycek, M. K. 2018. 'Meatless Meals and Masculinity: How Veg* men Explain Their Plant-based Diets', <i>Food and Foodways</i> 26(3): 223–245. |
| 11. | Twine, R. 2018. 'Materially Constituting a Sustainable Food Transition: The Case of Vegan Eating Practice', <i>Sociology</i> 52(1): 166–181. |
| 12. | Christopher, A.; Bartkowski, J.; Haverda, T. 2018. 'Portraits of Veganism: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of a Second-Order Subculture', <i>Societies</i> 8(3): 55. |
| 13. | Stephens Griffin, N. 2019. 'Comics and Visual Biography: Sequential Art in Social Research', <i>Visual Studies</i> 34(4): 319–335. |
| 14. | DaSilva, G.; Hecquet, J.; King, K. 2020. 'Exploring Veganism Through Serious Leisure and Liquid Modernity', <i>Annals of Leisure Research</i> 23(5): 627–644. |
| 15. | Gvion, L. 2020. 'Generation V: Millennial Vegans in Israel', <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i> 49(5): 564–586. |
| 16. | Morelli, N.; Vitale, T. 2020. 'Take Politics off the Table: A Study of Italian Youth's Self-managed Dairy Restriction and Healthy Consumerism', <i>Social Science Information</i> 59(4): 679–703. |

Appendix. (Continued)

| No. | Reference |
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| 17. | Buttny, R.; Kinefuchi, E. 2020. 'Vegans' Problem Stories: Negotiating Vegan Identity in Dealing with Omnivores', <i>Discourse & Society</i> 31(6): 565–583. |
| 18. | Pendergrast, N. 2020. 'The Vegan Shift in the Australian Animal Movement', <i>International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy</i> 41(3/4): 407–423. |
| 19. | Motta, R. 2021. 'Social Movements as Agents of Change: Fighting Intersectional Food Inequalities, Building Food as Webs of Life', <i>The Sociological Review</i> 69(3): 603–625. |
| 20. | Giacoman, C.; Alfaro, J.; Aguilera Bornand, I. M.; Torres, R. 2021. 'Becoming Vegan: A Study of Career and Habitus', <i>Social Science Information</i> 60(4): 560–582. |
| 21. | Schwarz, O. 2021. 'Identity as a Barrier: Claiming Universality as a Strategy in the Israeli Vegan Movement', <i>Social Movement Studies</i> 20(5): 600–618. |
| 22. | Gheihman, N. 2021. 'Veganism as a Lifestyle Movement', <i>Sociology Compass</i> 15: e12877. |
| 23. | Fidolini, V. 2022. 'Eating Like a Man. Food, Masculinities and Self-care Behavior', <i>Food, Culture & Society</i> 25(2): 254–267. |

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RŪTA PELIKŠIENĖ

Sociologija ir veganizmas: sisteminė literatūros apžvalga

Santrauka

Veganizmas yra kompleksiškas ir daugialypis fenomenas, įvairiose disciplinose analizuojamas ne tik kaip mitybos pasirinkimas, tačiau ir kaip kultūrinis judėjimas, gyvenimo būdas ar klimato kaitos švelninimo ir prisitaikymo strategija. Dėl savo daugiapusiškumo veganizmo fenomenas vis dažniau analizuojamas sociologinėje perspektyvoje. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra sistemingai apžvelgti dabartinę veganizmo sociologinę literatūrą. Analizė atlikta pasitelkiant PRISMA sisteminės literatūros apžvalgos modelį ir apima 2000–2022 m. anglų kalba publikuotus akademinis straipsnius. Straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti sociologinių veganizmo tyrimų apimtį ir intensyvumą, metodologinius aspektus ir veganizmo conceptualizaciją. Analizės rezultatai atskleidžia besiformuojantį veganizmo kaip gyvenimo būdo judėjimo diskursą bei orientaciją į kokybinius tyrimus. Sociologinėje literatūroje vartojamų veganizmo sąvokų įvairovė rodo skirtingų tyrimų kryptių potencialą.

Raktažodžiai: veganizmas, sociologija, sisteminė literatūros apžvalga