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Erhan KORKMAZ  
Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi  
Ankara Üniversitesi/Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi /  
Halkbilimi  
[erhan.krkmzoglu@gmail.com](mailto:erhan.krkmzoglu@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9744-6484>



## Tıbbın Dönüşümünde Etiğin Yeri: Veganlık, Sağlık Uygulamaları ve Yeni Paradigmalar

*The Role of Ethics in the Transformation  
of Medicine: Veganism, Health Practices  
and New Paradigms*

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## The Role of Ethics in the Transformation of Medicine: Veganism, Health Practices and New Paradigms

### Abstract

This study examines the relationship between veganism in modern medicine and traditional healing practices through a focus on health and ethical considerations. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 15 vegan participants and a subsequent thematic data analysis. The findings indicate that veganism is not merely a dietary preference, but rather a holistic lifestyle choice guided by concerns for animal rights, environmental consciousness, and ethical principles. While the participants mostly regard animal-based medical practices and pharmaceuticals as ethically problematic, they acknowledge the necessity of resorting to such treatments in life-threatening situations, creating a moral dilemma. Similarly, traditional healing methods can also involve the use of animal-derived substances, posing further ethical challenges for vegans. Nonetheless, the existence of purely plant-based remedies sparks interest among participants as a potential avenue for alternative healing. The study underscores that meticulously planned plant-based diets can be nutritionally adequate and underscores the necessity for improved medical education and awareness regarding veganism. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of addressing veganism's ethical and health-related dimensions comprehensively, signifying the need for innovative approaches to formulate health practices free from animal exploitation.

**Keywords:** Veganism, Animal rights, Ethnomedicine, Traditional healing, Modern medicine, Health ethics.

### *Tıbbın Dönüşümünde Etiğin Yeri: Veganlık, Sağlık Uygulamaları ve Yeni Paradigmalar*

### Öz

Bu makale, veganlığın modern tıp ve geleneksel şifa yöntemleri ile ilişkisini, etik ve sağlık boyutları çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Araştırmada, nitel bir yöntem benimseyerek 15 vegan katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiş ve tematik analiz yoluyla bulgular değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, veganlığın salt bir beslenme biçimi olmadığını, hayvan hakları, çevre duyarlılığı ve etik kaygıları içeren bütüncül bir yaşam tarzı olarak benimsendiğini göstermektedir. Katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu, hayvan deneylerine ve hayvansal içerikli modern tıp uygulamalarını etik açıdan sorunlu bulmakla birlikte, hayati durumlarda bu uygulamalara başvurmak zorunda kalmaktan rahatsızlık duymaktadır. Geleneksel şifa yöntemleri de hayvansal kaynakları içerebildiği için veganlar için benzer ikilemler yaratmaktadır. Öte yandan, tamamen bitkisel reçetelerin varlığı, vegan bireylerde alternatif şifa yöntemlerine yönelik bir ilgi doğurabilmektedir. Çalışma, iyi planlanmış bitkisel diyetlerin sağlık açısından yeterli olabileceğini vurgulamakta ve doktor-hasta etkileşiminde veganlık konusundaki bilgi eksikliğinin aşılması gerektiğine işaret etmektedir. Sonuçlar, veganlığın etik ve sağlık boyutunu bütüncül olarak ele almanın gerekliliğini ortaya koymakta ve hayvan sömürüsüne dayanmayan sağlık uygulamalarının geliştirilmesi için yeni yaklaşımlara ihtiyaç duyulduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Veganlık, Hayvan hakları, Etnotıp, Geleneksel şifa, Modern tıp, Sağlık etiği.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Veganism is a rapidly expanding global lifestyle that draws interdisciplinary attention to its ethical, health, and environmental dimensions. Following the formal establishment of the Vegan Society in the UK in 1944 by Donald Watson, veganism was subsequently defined in 1979 as "a philosophy and way of living that seeks to exclude, as far as possible, all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals for food, clothing, or other purposes, while promoting animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals, and the environment" (Türkmen, 2015). This definition extends beyond mere dietary practices, encompassing a broader ethical and philosophical stance. However, completely avoiding the use of nonhuman animals<sup>1</sup>, -particularly within the pharmaceutical industry- remains a significant challenge. In essence, veganism represents not just a plant-based diet but a comprehensive rejection of animal exploitation, addressing its societal, environmental, and personal dimensions.

The theoretical discussions surrounding vegan philosophy have been enriched by new perspectives over time. Tom Regan, a prominent proponent of ethical veganism, contends that nonhuman animals possess inherent rights as "subjects of life." Regan emphasizes that nonhuman animals possess beliefs, desires, emotional experiences, memory, and an awareness of the future, as well as the capacity to experience pleasure and pain. These characteristics grant them intrinsic ethical value, independent of their usefulness to humans. Regan's approach advocates for recognizing nonhuman animals as members of the moral community (Regan, 1983; Türkmen, 2015). Gary L. Francione, with his abolitionist perspective, introduced a new dimension to animal rights debates. According to Francione, sentience is the fundamental criterion for inclusion in the moral community, rendering cognitive capacity irrelevant. He argues that as long as nonhuman animals remain property, welfare reforms serve only to ease human conscience rather than diminish exploitation, ultimately failing to curtail exploitation. In this regard, Francione advocates for the pre-legal recognition of nonhuman animals' right not to be treated as property. A distinctive feature of his theory is its emphasis on a nonviolent animal rights movement (Francione, 2000; Türkmen, 2015). Peter Singer, through his utilitarian framework, has shaped the critique of speciesism. He contends that all beings capable of experiencing physical and

psychological suffering hold equal ethical value and that discrimination based on species is no different from discrimination based on race or gender. In his book *Animal Liberation* (2018), Singer criticizes the use of intelligence or cognitive ability as a criterion for ethical consideration. He highlights that some nonhuman animals may possess cognitive capacities comparable to those of individuals with intellectual disabilities, thereby challenging the legitimacy of species-based ethics (Türkmen, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

The rise of veganism has become a part of a global transformation, positioned at the intersection of animal rights activism, environmental protection, and ethical health debates. Especially since the second half of the 20th century, the rise of environmental crises and growing awareness of animal rights have paved the way for its adoption by a broader audience. Beyond individual choices, veganism raises profound ethical and structural questions regarding its interaction with modern healthcare systems and medical practices. Consequently, the relationship between veganism, healthcare systems, and traditional medical practices offers a compelling domain for further exploration.

## 2. VEGANISM AND HEALTH: PERSPECTIVES FROM MODERN AND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE APPROACHES

Modern healthcare systems, which were shaped by the rise of scientific medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are built upon laboratory research and technological advancements. However, the widespread use of animal experiments and the inclusion of animal-derived ingredients in many pharmaceuticals present significant ethical dilemmas for individuals with heightened moral concerns. The assumption that animal experiments are essential for scientific progress creates a tension between the pursuit of objective knowledge and respect for the rights of nonhuman animals (Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024). From the perspective of feminist care ethics, this tension reflects a "false dilemma" suggesting that scientific advancement must inherently conflict with ethical values. Recent arguments emphasize that better treatment of nonhuman animals is not only an ethical necessity but also crucial for the reliability of scientific methods and outcomes. Improving laboratory practices can enhance research quality and reduce the suffering of nonhuman

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term "nonhuman animal" is employed instead of the more commonplace "animal" to refer to beings other than humans. This approach challenges the traditional ontological divide between "human" and "animal," as well as the reduction of all nonhuman animals into a single, generalized category labeled as "animal." However, terms such as "animal liberation," "animal rights," "animal welfare," "animal testing," and "animal-based..." are presented as they appear in the existing literature. The alteration of these established concepts could hinder the reader's understanding, given their conventional use in

academic discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, although Singer does not explicitly mention it in his writings, he is often associated with a scenario known as the "Paris Exception," where he is said to adopt a pragmatic stance, suggesting that minor ethical compromises can sometimes be acceptable if they lead to greater overall benefits (Türkmen, 2015). This utilitarian approach sets Singer apart from stricter ethical frameworks advocated by theorists like Francione and Regan.

animals (Despret, 2004; Haraway, 2008; as cited in Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024). The belief in the "inevitability" of animal experiments is increasingly being questioned on historical and methodological grounds. Çekem and Kamözüt (2024) stress how erroneous generalizations about human anatomy frequently stem from the misuse of animal models, occasionally hindering rather than propelling scientific progress. Conversely, alternatives such as synthetic substitutes for horseshoe crab blood have been shown to offer cheaper, more reliable, and sustainable solutions without exploiting nonhuman animals. Yet, institutional and legal constraints often delay their widespread adoption. This scenario highlights both the scientific and ethical implications of viewing animal experiments as the sole viable solution.

Most approaches in medical ethics assess animal experiments through either utilitarianism (maximizing overall benefit) or deontological ethics (recognizing animals as beings with inherent rights) (Singer, 2018; Regan, 1983). However, a more necessary perspective shifts the focus from merely "reducing suffering" to acknowledging nonhuman animals as subjects of life. This viewpoint advocates scientific practices that consider the emotions and behaviors of nonhuman animals, ensuring that conditions are established that respect their well-being alongside human interests. The recognition of nonhuman animals not as passive "test subjects" but as participants -or at the very least stakeholders whose harm must be minimized- offers a more ethically and methodologically consistent framework (Hadfield & Haraway, 2019; as cited in Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024).

In conclusion, ongoing debates over the scientific validity and necessity of animal experiments raise new ethical questions in medical discourse. Approaches such as feminist care ethics challenge the conventional, ethically indifferent stance of mainstream science by moving beyond the false dichotomy of "scientific progress vs. nonhuman animal welfare." They demonstrate that ethical and scientific goals can be pursued simultaneously. This perspective emphasizes that treating nonhuman animals not as mere "objects of care" but as sentient beings deserving of care and attention can also enhance research quality. Thus, the mounting criticism of animal experiments in modern healthcare systems is not merely a matter of "conscience" or "anti-science" sentiment but signals the potential for a more innovative and reliable scientific paradigm (Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024).

A significant proportion of contemporary pharmaceuticals and treatments have been developed and tested through the use of animal experimentation. Additionally, the pharmaceutical industry frequently utilizes animal-derived ingredients such as gelatin and lactose in drug production. The ongoing debates over the scientific foundations and necessity of animal

experiments go beyond ethical concerns, necessitating a comprehensive re-evaluation of medical ethics and practices. These discussions also require a deeper understanding of the historical and institutional underpinnings of healthcare systems, which reflect modern medicine's systemic reliance on animal-based research. Critiques from vegan individuals highlight this dependency, raising awareness about the need for developing viable vegan alternatives within healthcare systems.

Although modern medical science is a relatively recent development, research in medical anthropology indicates that folk medicine (ethnomedicine) and folk botany (ethnobotany) have been practiced for centuries, often integrating cultural, religious, and mystical beliefs with local knowledge (Kaplan, 2010). Various methods such as herbal remedies, acupuncture, homoeopathy, and Ayurveda have deep historical roots. In Anatolia, for example, practices involving *peganum harmala* reflect a convergence of medicinal and spiritual traditions (Kaplan, 2020). Similar to modern medicine, folk healing sometimes incorporates animal-derived materials. In traditional Chinese medicine, body parts of nonhuman animals like "rhinoceros horn" (Roth et al., 2024; Portala, 2024), "bear bile" (Feng et al., 2009), and "tiger bones" (Neme, 2010)- are frequently used. In Turkey, animal products like fat and bone are often added to healing mixtures. A study by Gönenç et al. (2024) on nonhuman animal-based folk beliefs in southeastern Turkey found that hedgehog fat is used to prepare drinks for treating diabetes, while turtle blood is sought for remedies against cancer and other diseases. Donkey milk is commonly consumed, especially for respiratory issues or certain types of cancer, and asthma sufferers and those with chronic coughs often drink boiled donkey milk. Moreover, materials derived from venomous animals, such as scorpions or snakes, are also incorporated into ointments intended for the treatment of hair loss and ocular diseases. These practices offer insights into the intricate relationship between humans and nonhuman animals, as well as the role of healing practices that are deeply intertwined with beliefs, symbolism, and rituals. Consequently, nonhuman animals become essential components of both physical healing and folk traditions in these regions.

On the other hand, folk medicine, particularly ethnobotanical research (also known as folk botany), has yielded a substantial body of knowledge regarding the medicinal use of plants. As seen in the example of *peganum harmala* (Kaplan, 2020), folk medicine in Anatolia predominantly relies on plant-based practices, thereby offering a relatively compatible alternative for vegans. Traditionally, *peganum harmala* has been used for protection against the evil eye and the treatment of various illnesses, believed to offer both physical and spiritual healing before the rise of modern medicine. In different regions, *peganum harmala* practices may be accompanied by magic, religious rituals, or animal-

derived additives -such as mixing with animal fat to create ointments. This approach underscores the importance of a holistic approach in folk medicine, where healing extends beyond the physical body to include the spirit, integrating spiritual and cultural beliefs with therapeutic practices.

A common challenge in both modern and traditional healthcare practices is their reliance on animal experiments and animal-derived ingredients. Vegan individuals emphasize that such practices are present not only in modern pharmaceutical industries but also within long-standing folk medicine traditions, leading many to seek alternative solutions. Ethnobotanical research can play a key role by exploring plant-based treatment methods from various regions, fostering the ethical and sustainable development of traditional knowledge. While folk remedies often combine medicinal plants with animal-based ingredients, it is argued that these plants alone could offer similar benefits, making them more compatible with vegan principles. A more inclusive and critical approach in ethnomedicine reveals that traditional healing practices are not merely "ancient" or "mystical" rituals but repositories of centuries-old knowledge that can be reinterpreted in light of modern ethical considerations. This reinterpretation has the potential to ameliorate the perceived contradictions between folk medicine and veganism, thereby fostering greater compatibility through plant-based treatments. Consequently, a shift in both modern medicine and traditional healing practices toward non-exploitative, plant-based alternatives could make healthcare systems more ethical and sustainable while concurrently deepening the discussions on veganism's role in health.

Finally, these ethical and practical critiques of healthcare systems also influence the broader social debates surrounding the dietary habits of vegan individuals. A common non-vegan argument<sup>3</sup> is the claim that "vegan diets are unhealthy." This assertion is often based on the assumption that plant-based diets lack essential nutrients like protein, iron, vitamin B12, or

calcium. In response, vegans frequently cite scientific evidence to counter these claims, using health-based research to demonstrate that well-planned vegan diets can meet all nutritional requirements and effectively challenge these misconceptions.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. THE EXTANT LITERATURE AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO IT

The extant literature in Turkey has addressed the interactions between vegan individuals and modern healthcare or traditional healing systems from a limited perspective. This narrow focus makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges vegans face within modern healthcare frameworks and their role in broader societal debates. Current research has yet to comprehensively explore the health-related discourses of vegan individuals or their responses to non-vegan arguments. Moreover, the absence of studies examining differences in vegans' health perceptions and the contradictions these perceptions create with modern medical systems reveals a significant gap in literature. Addressing this gap requires developing a fresh perspective to better understand the complex interactions between vegan individuals and healthcare systems. Both modern medicine and traditional healing practices contain conflicting dynamics that shape vegan perceptions of health. The reliance on modern medicine in animal experiments may conflict with the ethical sensitivity of vegans, raising a salient question "Could this ethical tension drive vegans toward traditional healing practices?" Answering this question demands a thorough examination of how vegan individuals approach these alternatives and the practical and ethical challenges they encounter when adopting such methods.

The existing literature addresses the relationship between vegan individuals and healthcare systems from various perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The study by Şener and Kaplan (2024) focuses on the potential health effects of vegan diets, evaluated from the perspective of halal nutrition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This study focuses exclusively on the relationship between veganism and health. Beyond being merely a dietary practice, veganism also represents an ethical stance that is rooted in animal rights and opposition to speciesism. Consequently, when responding to non-vegan arguments, vegans address not only health-related concerns but also ethical, environmental, and social dimensions. For instance, on the ethical front, vegans often confront claims such as "Nonhuman animals exist to serve humans." Environmentally, objections such as "The impact of animal agriculture on climate change is exaggerated" are frequently raised. On the social level, arguments such as "Veganism is inaccessible and classist" or "Veganism contradicts cultural practices" are often encountered. However, for the sake of narrowing the scope, this article focuses solely on arguments related to health.

<sup>4</sup> On online platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, prominent vegan medical professionals, including Suat Erus and Murat Kınikoğlu, frequently cite scientific studies to emphasize that a well-balanced vegan diet can meet all the essential

nutritional requirements often cited by non-vegans as being deficient. These medical professionals also highlight the effectiveness of vegan diets in preventing various chronic diseases, often citing the reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and hypertension. Plant-based diets are also recognized for their protective role in preventing obesity and certain types of cancer. For a more detailed analysis, see: Dr. Erus – VSP, 2025; Dr. Kınikoğlu, 2025, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Given the scope of this study, the existing literature has been limited to research conducted on vegans in Turkey. This limitation was necessary due to the study's phenomenological perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of halal in Islamic law refers to foods that do not contain alcohol, pork, blood, or the meat of nonhuman animals that have not been slaughtered according to Islamic guidelines. This concept is regarded not only as a religious requirement but also as an important standard for health and safety among Muslims. In Islam, halal consumption mandates that food be both halal (lawful) and tayyib (pure and wholesome), as stated

While the study highlights the risks associated with protein and calorie deficiencies, it also emphasizes the benefits of nutrients such as fiber, polyphenols, and antioxidant vitamins. Additionally, it discusses the positive effects of well-planned vegan diets on conditions like diabetes, obesity, metabolic syndrome, fibromyalgia, and cardiovascular diseases. However, this study does not offer a detailed analysis of the ethical and structural challenges that vegan individuals encounter within modern healthcare systems. Instead, it concentrates on the similarities and differences between vegan and halal dietary practices.

A study by Özer Altundağ and Payas (2024) examined the specific nutritional needs of vegan and vegetarian athletes, emphasizing the challenges of maintaining muscle creatine stores and adequate protein intake on plant-based diets. The study concluded that a well-balanced vegan or vegetarian diet can provide sufficient micro- and macronutrients for athletes, underscoring the importance of professional nutritional support. It also suggests that vegan and vegetarian athletes may gain an advantage in endurance sports due to their higher consumption of complex carbohydrates (Barnard et al., 2018; as cited in Altundağ & Payas, 2024). However, deficiencies in animal-based nutrients such as protein, calcium, iron, and vitamin D are more common in these groups, making professional guidance essential for addressing these gaps. The study also notes that while endurance athletes benefit from complex carbohydrates, strength athletes require higher protein intake (Ciuris et al., 2020; as cited in Altundağ & Payas, 2024). Nutritional supplements and ergogenic aids are recommended, along with sport-specific dietary plans. The authors emphasize the need for further research on sports nutrition to better understand athletes' dietary needs across different sporting disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

No studies have been found in the literature examining the relationship between traditional healing practices and veganism. Consequently, questions about how these practices are perceived and whether they are preferred by vegan individuals remain underexplored. A review by Akbulut and Yeşilkaya (2021) emphasizes that a vegan diet can be adequately and sustainably maintained at every stage of life. The study details the health benefits of plant-based foods while highlighting the importance of addressing potential nutrient deficiencies and the need for proper dietary planning. It also indicates that vegan diets, due to their high fiber content and low levels of total and saturated fats, are associated with positive health outcomes such as healthy body weight, lower blood sugar, reduced cholesterol

levels, and lower blood pressure. However, the study notes that if not carefully managed, deficiencies in vitamin D and vitamin B12 could lead to reduced bone mineral density, increased fracture risk, and osteoporosis. While the study discusses the advantages and drawbacks of vegan diets based on modern medical research, it does not explore the relationship between veganism and traditional medical practices. By presenting health solely through the lens of modern medicine, the study risks overlooking alternative approaches and the potential impact of traditional methods on health.

Tunçay's (2018) study highlights that veganism is not merely a dietary choice but also an ethical lifestyle. The research delves into the ethical, environmental, and health-related motivations behind vegans' decisions to abstain from animal products, offering a comprehensive perspective on how these choices impact daily life and overall health. Based on several studies, Tunçay concludes that ethical concerns and animal rights are the primary motivations for vegan and vegetarian individuals, with health-related reasons often being of secondary importance. The findings suggest that vegan diets can offer health benefits over omnivorous diets; however, without proper planning, potential risks such as vitamin B12 deficiency, anemia, obesity, and increased susceptibility to cardiovascular diseases due to high carbohydrate consumption may emerge. In a separate study with Bulut, Tunçay emphasizes the historical background of veganism as a philosophy of life and an ethical stance (Bulut & Tunçay, 2016). This research identifies various factors influencing the choice of veganism and vegetarianism, including respect for sentient life, ethical opposition to animal exploitation, ecological concerns, and religious beliefs. The study questions the societal and cultural uses of nonhuman animals, exposing the contradictions between these practices and the principles of veganism. The study also discusses how meat consumption is associated with masculinity and vegetable consumption is linked to femininity in gendered social structures. The findings indicate that vegan and vegetarian lifestyles are not merely dietary choices but life philosophies that are intrinsically linked to a profound respect for nonhuman animals, nature, and living beings. Additionally, individuals who adopt this lifestyle often oppose not only animal exploitation but also more extensive social inequalities. Topics such as the association of meat consumption with social status and gender constructs are also addressed (Tunçay & Bulut, 2016). While these two studies offer valuable insights into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of veganism, they also exhibit certain limitations. For instance, neither study directly

in Qur'an (Al-Baqarah) 2:168. The term "halal" signifies adherence to Islamic requirements, whereas "tayyib" encompasses the quality, safety, and nutritional value of food. This dual requirement serves as an essential criterion for Muslims, fulfilling both religious and health-related concerns (Latif & Rahman, 2022: 43; Iqbal et al., 2020: 17; as cited in Şener & Kaplan, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Although the study notes that deficiencies in animal-based protein, calcium, iron, and vitamin D are more common among vegan and vegetarian athletes, it appears to overlook the potential of plant-based alternatives—such as soy, leafy greens, and almonds—to address these nutritional gaps. This oversight may lead to the erroneous conclusion that nutrients like protein and calcium can only be obtained from animal products.

examines how vegan individuals define health or addresses their personal discourse on health. Moreover, there is no exploration of their interactions with modern or traditional healthcare systems. These gaps hinder a more comprehensive understanding of how vegan individuals approach health practices and engage with healthcare systems. Nevertheless, these studies make significant contributions by emphasizing that veganism should be considered not just a dietary preference but a broader social, cultural, and ethical phenomenon.

The study conducted by Tekten Aksürmeli and Beşirli (2019) aims to describe how veganism is shaped not only as a dietary practice but also as an element of identity. Focusing on personal narratives, the research explores how individuals decide to adopt and sustain a vegan lifestyle, while also examining how the concept of the "other" is constructed in interactions with non-vegan individuals. The field research data indicates that veganism does not represent a singular or homogeneous identity; instead, it encompasses various definitions and expressions that are unique to everyone. Despite this diversity, certain commonalities in vegan practices and identity formation have been identified. In alignment with the findings of Tunçay and Bulut (2016), the study emphasizes that veganism extends beyond avoiding animal products to encompass broader consumption choices, such as cosmetics, clothing, and cleaning products, thereby establishing itself as a comprehensive identity and lifestyle. The participants' experiences vary depending on whether their vegan choices are driven by ethical or health-related motivations. Health-related decisions tend to have looser connections with non-vegan social circles. Additionally, individuals' proximity to or distance from vegan activist movements contributes to diverse expressions of vegan identity. While this study draws directly from the participants' accounts, it does not thoroughly examine the influence of health practices or perceptions of health on identity formation. This limitation offers a narrow perspective on how vegan individuals engage with healthcare systems. Notwithstanding this limitation, the insights regarding the identity dimension of veganism serve as a complementary foundation for exploring the ethical and health-related aspects addressed in our study.

In light of the literature discussed above, the present study aims to explore vegans' approaches to modern medicine and traditional healing practices, their ethical stance toward animal experiment-based medications and treatments, and their responses to non-vegan arguments. Additionally, the study seeks to understand the formation of vegan identity and the ethical dimensions of its relationship with health. Existing research on veganism inadequately addresses how vegan individuals interact with modern healthcare systems and traditional healing practices. For instance, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the ethical dilemmas faced by vegans in medical practices that involve animal experimentation or their practical approaches to traditional healing methods. Furthermore, how vegan

individuals' perceptions of health are shaped within the context of identity formation and social interactions is a topic that remains underexplored. This study aims to interpret the differences in health perceptions among vegan individuals, their ethical critiques of modern medicine and traditional healing practices, and the individual and societal implications of these approaches. The methodology and the findings will be detailed in the following sections.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research project that aims to understand vegan individuals' approaches to modern medicine and traditional healing practices, their ethical stance toward animal experiment-based medications and treatments, and their responses to non-vegan arguments. The research employs thematic interpretation, a method commonly employed in social sciences, to explore participants' experiences in depth. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to interpret experiences. Participants' perceptions of modern medicine, traditional healing methods, and non-vegan criticisms are evaluated based on their personal experiences.

To ensure diversity, 15 individuals from different age groups, each with at least one year of vegan experience, were selected. The study's sample was formed using a combination of purposive sampling and subsequently snowball sampling techniques. Initially, the first participants who met the study's criteria (being vegan for at least one year) were reached through vegan social media groups, forums, and civil society organizations. Subsequently, other potential participants were reached through the referrals of these participants. The participants were selected from major metropolitan areas—specifically, from Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. The primary reason for choosing these cities is that they are the main centers where vegan communities, social networks, and resources are most concentrated in Turkey. This concentration facilitated access to participants determined by the purposive sampling strategy, in line with the nature of qualitative research. The "FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION" includes a table of demographic information, which provides readers with a clearer understanding of the diversity and structure of the research group.

The data was collected through semi-structured interview questions. Depending on the participants' availability, the interviews were conducted using various methods, including face-to-face interactions, online platforms, and written responses from a few participants. All data were recorded either as audio files or written responses and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview questions were designed to facilitate an in-depth examination of vegan individuals' responses to modern medicine, traditional healing practices, and non-vegan arguments. These questions are provided in the appendix at the end of the article to provide readers with

more insight into the research process and the content of the questions.

The collected data was carefully reviewed, with interview transcripts and written responses categorized around specific themes. Throughout this process, a careful evaluation was conducted while maintaining the integrity of the data set, and significant themes were identified. The goal was to meaningfully classify these themes and highlight key points reflecting participants' personal experiences. This methodological approach provided a suitable framework for comprehending both individual and societal trends.

Written consent was obtained from all participants, and the data was anonymized by confidentiality principles. Ethical standards were rigorously followed throughout the research process to ensure that no harm came to the participants.

## 5. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the findings derived from interviews with 15 vegan individuals. The demographic characteristics of the participants, summarized in Table 1, reveal several key features of the sample group. The age of participants ranges from 22 to 43, however, the mean age of 29.27 and the median age of 27 indicate that the sample predominantly consists of young adults in their late twenties and early thirties. Regarding the duration of their vegan practice, which spans from 1 to 11 years, the mean of 5.03 years and a median of 5 years suggest that the participants are not recent converts but rather individuals with substantial, long-term experience in veganism. This depth of experience strengthens the validity of the insights they shared. The gender distribution of the sample is nearly balanced, with 7 participants identifying as male (47%), 7 as female (47%), and one as non-binary (7%). In terms of educational attainment, the sample is characterized by a remarkably high level of education: 53% (8) of participants hold a master's degree and 7% (1) have a doctorate. The participants are geographically concentrated in Turkey's largest metropolitan areas, with 7 from Istanbul, 7 from Ankara, and 1 from Izmir. These demographic features highlight that the findings of this study primarily reflect the experiences of a young, highly educated, and urban group of vegans with significant experience in their lifestyle.

| Age           |           |             |
|---------------|-----------|-------------|
| Mean = 29.27  |           | Median = 27 |
| Min. = 22     |           | Max. = 43   |
| Vegan Year    |           |             |
| Mean = 5.033  |           | Median = 5  |
| Min. = 1      |           | Max. = 11   |
| Gender        |           |             |
| Gender        | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Male          | 7         | 46.67       |
| Female        | 7         | 46.67       |
| Non-binary    | 1         | 6.67        |
| Total         | 15        | 100.00      |
| Education     |           |             |
| Education     | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Undergraduate | 6         | 40.00       |
| Master        | 8         | 53.33       |
| Doctorate     | 1         | 6.67        |
| Total         | 15        | 100.00      |
| City          |           |             |
| City          | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Ankara        | 7         | 46.67       |
| İstanbul      | 7         | 46.67       |
| İzmir         | 1         | 6.67        |
| Total         | 15        | 100.00      |

**Table 1:** Some Statistics and Percents about Variables

The interviews were designed to explore participants' personal experiences with veganism, their perceptions of modern medicine and traditional healing practices, their views on the relationship between veganism and public health, and their responses to non-vegan arguments. The findings were subsequently categorized into five main themes:

- a) The Transition to Veganism and Motivations
- b) Health Experiences of Vegan Individuals and Interactions with Modern Medicine
- c) Approaches to Traditional Medical and Healing Practices
- d) Ethical Evaluations and Approaches Toward Modern Medicine
- e) Veganism and Public Health: Societal Benefits and Responses to Claims of Unhealthiness

| Nickname | Age | Gender     | Education     | City     | Vegan Year |
|----------|-----|------------|---------------|----------|------------|
| Doğa     | 34  | Male       | Master        | İstanbul | 4 years    |
| Toprak   | 24  | Female     | Master        | İstanbul | 5 years    |
| Deniz    | 37  | Non-binary | Undergraduate | İstanbul | 4 years    |
| Gökçe    | 41  | Female     | Master        | İstanbul | 11 years   |
| Çınar    | 35  | Male       | Doctorate     | Ankara   | 10 years   |
| Ada      | 43  | Male       | Undergraduate | Ankara   | 5 years    |
| Papatya  | 24  | Female     | Undergraduate | Ankara   | 4 years    |
| Bulut    | 27  | Male       | Master        | Ankara   | 4 years    |
| Nehir    | 29  | Male       | Master        | İzmir    | 6 years    |
| Yağmur   | 23  | Female     | Master        | Ankara   | 5 years    |
| Kardelen | 25  | Female     | Master        | İstanbul | 4.5 years  |
| Meltem   | 24  | Female     | Undergraduate | Ankara   | 1 year     |
| Yıldız   | 23  | Male       | Undergraduate | İstanbul | 6 years    |
| Ekin     | 28  | Female     | Master        | Ankara   | 5 years    |
| Fırtına  | 22  | Male       | Undergraduate | İstanbul | 1 year     |

Table 2: Participant Table

### 5.1. The Transition to Veganism and Motivations

Veganism is regarded as a philosophy of life and an ethical stance that extends beyond food consumption. Various social, psychological, and cultural factors shape individuals' transitions to veganism and play a motivating role in their decisions. The in-depth interviews conducted in this study revealed that participants adopted veganism through diverse motivations, experiences, and reflective processes. Among all participants, the prevailing and most dominant motivation was the ethical concerns which are grounded in principles such as recognizing nonhuman animals as sentient beings, rejecting their treatment as commodities, and opposing the violation of their rights to freedom. Most participants emphasized that exploiting nonhuman animals -whether for food, labor, cosmetics, or other purposes- represents a fundamental moral issue. For instance, one participant articulated the primacy of ethical motivations, stating, "Just because it's ethical" (Çınar, 10 years). Another participant similarly remarked, "Even if animals didn't suffer, we still have no right to violate

their right to life" (Papatya, 4 years), clearly expressing opposition to human dominance over other species.

In addition to ethical concerns, some participants emphasized that their decision to adopt veganism was reinforced by considerations related to health and scientific research. For instance, one participant said, "I took some courses on heart health, and that got me looking into the effects of animal consumption" (Doğa, 4 years), highlighting the influence of academic and medical knowledge in shaping personal decisions. Another participant explained, "I was worried I wouldn't stay healthy if I went vegan, that's what made me decide to do some research" (Deniz, 4 years), demonstrating how initial doubts about nutrition were eventually resolved through scientific evidence. Thus, while ethical motivation remains the primary factor for many participants, health and nutrition-related concerns often serve as supporting or accelerating catalysts in the transition to a vegan diet.

Environmental and ecological concerns emerged as another prominent motivational factor. Several participants emphasized the detrimental impact of the animal agriculture industry on the natural world, and they further highlighted the inequitable use of natural resources as influential in their decision-making process. Moreover, some participants noted that growing up in rural areas and their intimate connection to nature have heightened their awareness of the contradictions inherent in exploiting nonhuman animals. One participant expressed this sentiment clearly: "I was born in a village, and I spent my childhood around animals. City life takes that compassion away" (Ada, 5 years). This statement reflects the interplay between ecological awareness and ethical sensitivity.

Societal and cultural factors also play a significant role in the transition to veganism. Family pressure, long-standing eating habits, and reactions from one's immediate surroundings have the potential to delay or complicate participants' decisions. For instance, one participant stated, "While I was living with my family, there weren't any vegans around; cultural prejudices held me back" (Kardelen, 4.5 years), highlighting the importance of social support and role models in facilitating this process. On the other hand, factors such as spending time with vegan friends or receiving recommendations for relevant documentaries and books can facilitate this transition, as noted by a participant, who stated, "Spending time with vegan people was a catalyst for me when I couldn't change my eating habits yet" (Meltem, 1 year), reflecting the power of peer support and social networks on this process.

Personal transformation and identity construction emerge as another key dimension of this process, with participants describing veganism not merely as a dietary practice but as a comprehensive worldview and lifestyle. Many noted that while they initially interpreted concepts like animal rights through the lens of justice and morality -traditionally viewed as anthropocentric- they developed

a “beyond-species” moral sensitivity after adopting veganism. One participant reflected on this shift, stating, “When I watched Earthlings, I realized how human-centered my efforts to live ethically and justly had been. It was a radical confrontation” (Ekin, 5 years), emphasizing the nature of the identity transformation. Another participant shared, “That awareness struck me, and I realized what was being done to animals was wrong” (Nehir, 6 years), providing an example of how a moment of insight can trigger the construction of a vegan identity.

The findings reveal that the transition to veganism is a multidimensional process. While ethical concerns emerge as the primary driving force for most participants, factors such as health, environmental issues, and social support or barriers also play significant roles in shaping individual decisions. The narratives of participants suggest that veganism is not merely a dietary choice but also an identity and moral stance reconstructed on the foundation of animal rights. In this context, beyond its philosophical dimension rooted in the critique of speciesism, the struggle with social environments and cultural norms also shapes the transition process. Therefore, it can be concluded that veganism is not a one-dimensional choice but rather a comprehensive transformation that emerges at the intersection of personal, social, and ethical dimensions.

## 5.2. Health Experiences of Vegan Individuals and Interactions with Modern Medicine

The effects of a vegan diet and lifestyle on individual health, as well as how vegan individuals interact with modern medical services, are among the most notable topics in current research. In this sense, participants’ experiences can be evaluated within two main frameworks: (1) the effects of veganism on physical and psychological health and (2) the relationship between vegan individuals and modern medical services.

A large proportion of participants emphasized that a vegan diet had particularly positive effects on digestion and metabolism. Many reported that chronic digestive problems, such as constipation and bloating, either disappeared or significantly diminished. One participant (Deniz, 4 years) shared, “Before I went vegan, I had chronic constipation... Once I started eating a plant-based diet, those problems went way down”, highlighting the importance of fiber-rich plant foods in regulating bowel movements. Similarly, “I’ve got to go to the toilet more often, and it keeps my bowels comfortable.” (Firtına, 1 year) reflects a positive experience with digestive health. Participants also reported improvements in skin health, allergic reactions, and energy levels. For instance, Doğa (4 years) with the explanation of “My allergy symptoms are way better, and that oily eczema on my forehead is a thing of the past” suggests that certain components in animal-based foods or additives may act as triggers. Improvements in skin oiliness, acne, and eczema were frequently

mentioned in participants’ reports. Additionally, one participant (Kardelen, 4.5 years) noted, “I’m full of energy since I started eating vegan. At the very least, I am not collapsing onto the couch after meals anymore, since I no longer consume heavy animal proteins,” indicating a general feeling of lightness in the stomach and body. On the other hand, the majority of participants emphasized the importance of conscious nutrition and regular blood tests. This serves as a warning against the common assumption that veganism is inherently healthy under all circumstances. As one participant explained (Çınar, 10 years) “I had a B12 deficiency when I was younger, but once I started paying attention, I didn’t have such a problem again” underscoring the importance of supplements and regular health monitoring for sustainable well-being. Some participants also highlighted the potential risks of unbalanced plant-based diets. For example, “When I eat too little legumes or grains, I end up compensating with other carbs, which leads to an imbalanced diet” (Ada, 5 years), underlining the importance of proper planning for adequate protein, vitamin, and mineral intake. Another participant (Toprak, 5 years) warned, “Rapid weight loss can lead to unexpected consequences like gallstones” stressing the risks of excessive weight management. On a psychological level, most participants noted that the ethical motivations behind their vegan lifestyle provided a sense of mental ease and moral peace. One participant (Ekin, 5 years) stated, “Since I became vegan, I have experienced the psychological relief of making an ethical choice almost every day” suggesting that veganism may positively affect the emotional well-being of individuals concerned with animal rights.

Most vegan participants reported encountering bias and lack of knowledge when interacting with healthcare institutions. One participant (Toprak, 5 years) shared, “The doctors didn’t know much about veganism, which made things tough. I was always told to eat meat, and they thought my vitamin D levels were low.” suggesting that medical education in Turkey and many other countries has yet to incorporate comprehensive content on plant-based diets. Similarly, another participant (Deniz, 4 years) stated, “I’ve never met a healthcare professional who’s researched plant-based nutrition” reinforcing this observation. Additionally, “A doctor told me, ‘I eat X number of cows per year, I enjoy dealing with vegans’” (Kardelen, 4.5 years), illustrating how some physicians’ attitudes can create discomfort in doctor-patient relationships. However, there were also supportive and accommodating experiences. One participant (Bulut, 4 years) noted, “When I told my family doctor I was vegan, they responded with understanding and simply advised me to add a little more olive oil to my salads” demonstrating how knowledgeable and open-minded doctors can provide constructive advice. Similarly, “I asked my dermatologist to recommend a vegan sunscreen, and they happily did” (Firtına, 1 year), highlighting that medical services can be adapted to patient preferences. Most participants said they had better outcomes when they took an informed and assertive role in their interactions with doctors.

The findings of the study indicate that a vegan diet provided many participants with digestive ease, improved skin health, higher energy levels, and psychological well-being. However, as with any dietary approach, a lack of planning, knowledge, and awareness can lead to negative consequences. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of monitoring B12, iron, and other essential micronutrients and taking supplements when necessary. The study also highlights a lack of knowledge and biases among healthcare professionals regarding veganism, with some participants reporting negative interactions, including dismissive or condescending attitudes, while others described more positive experiences with understanding and capable healthcare professionals who offered plant-based dietary recommendations. These findings underscore the need for greater recognition of veganism in the medical field and the development of educational programs for healthcare professionals. Overall, the effects of veganism on health appear to be closely linked to individual differences, dietary planning, and awareness levels. The predominant opinion among the study participants was that a conscious and well-planned vegan lifestyle was physically and psychologically fulfilling. Additionally, the pervasive bias and lack of knowledge within modern healthcare systems require vegan patients to be more vigilant, express their needs with greater clarity, and, when necessary, seek alternative sources of consultation.

### 5.3. Approaches to Traditional Medical and Healing Practices

Participants' responses to questions about "traditional medicine" or "alternative healing" methods indicated a wide range of attitudes toward these practices. This diversity can be categorized into four main groups: (1) those who completely reject such methods, (2) those who conditionally or selectively accept them, (3) those who partially incorporate them into their lives, and (4) those who fully endorse these approaches.

A group of participants expressed an openness to trying or already incorporating herbal remedies and medicinal teas into their health practices. For instance, one participant (Gökçe, 11 years) stated, *"It's way better to use the healing power of plants, which is basically what the pharmaceutical industry is all about"* reflecting the belief that traditional methods serve as the foundation of modern medicine. Similarly, another participant (Yıldız, 6 years) emphasized a convergence between natural methods and evidence-based medicine, stating, *"I support the use of herbal remedies... If there's scientific evidence, they're worth trying"*. Additionally, the everyday use of complementary healing practices is evidenced by a participant who shared, *"I sometimes use herbal teas to ease the effects of colds in winter or when I have a headache"* (Ada, 5 years). This observation suggests a perception that traditional remedies, particularly those of plant-based

treatments, are seen as complementary to modern medicine. A further illustration of this perspective is provided by the statement of Firtına (1 year), *"I enjoy practicing yoga, and I believe it benefits me"* highlights the perceived physical and mental health benefits of traditional spiritual practices such as yoga and tai chi. The concept of a holistic approach is also evident in the remark of Kardelen (4.5 years), *"I find approaches that consider health more holistically and emphasize bodily integrity reasonably"* drawing attention to aspects that modern medicine may sometimes overlook. However, a significant portion of this group stressed the importance of scientific validation and safety measures. As one participant said (Yıldız, 6 years), *"Once again, research and being informed are crucial here"* emphasizing the need for either scientific validation or, at the very least, a criterion of harmlessness in evaluating these methods.

On the other hand, some participants expressed skepticism or negative views toward traditional healing methods. One participant (Çınar, 10 years), for instance, dismissed these practices, asserting, *"I think traditional healing methods are ridiculous and see them as a scam"*. Similarly, another participant remarked, *"I don't find these methods reliable... I believe they are generally bad for your health and are mostly marketed for profit"* (Nehir, 6 years), underscoring concerns regarding a lack of trust due to the absence of scientific validation. These participants also highlighted concerns about leech therapy, cupping therapy, and similar treatments, particularly about animal exploitation and scientific legitimacy. One participant noted (Papatya, 4 years), *"Methods like leech therapy remind me that animal exploitation is present in every field... It's very upsetting and unnecessary"* emphasizing a critique of traditional methods from an animal rights perspective.

Some participants described their stance on traditional healing methods as neutral due to a lack of experience or knowledge. For instance, statements such as *"I've never tried such a method before"* (Meltem, 1 year) and *"I wouldn't say I'm very experienced or knowledgeable in this area"* (Yağmur, 5 years) suggest that these individuals are unfamiliar with alternative medicine and, therefore, refrain from either endorsing or rejecting it. In contrast, one participant (Deniz, 4 years) articulated their reluctance to engage with practices that lacked complete transparency or credibility, stating, *"I prefer not to take risks with practices I don't trust"*. Some participants approached the topic from a broader economic, ethical, and systemic critique. For example, one participant (Toprak, 5 years) remarked, *"Too many drugs rely on animal experiments... The healthcare and livestock industries work together"* highlighting the contradiction of using nonhuman animals in both modern pharmaceuticals and traditional treatments. The same participant expressed hope for the advent of AI and technological advancements to provide alternative testing methods that would reduce animal exploitation. A third participant (Kardelen, 4.5 years) adopted a critical stance toward

both traditional and modern medicine, stating, “When I see that a treatment method is developed primarily for an average-aged male body... I believe we must always approach it critically”. This comment suggests that gender and species biases exist within modern medical practices, thereby calling for a more critical perspective on both traditional and contemporary healthcare approaches.

These findings indicate that vegan participants’ perceptions of health and ethical viewpoints extend beyond dietary practices. Issues such as animal rights, scientific evidence, anthropocentrism, and gender equality also shape their evaluations of traditional medicine and healing methods. Thus, the participant group includes both those who state, “You can try these methods, but you have to do your research first”, and those who firmly believe, “It’s total fraud”. Those in intermediate positions are less inclined to engage due to a lack of experience or skepticism. This diversity highlights that vegan individuals do not have a uniform approach to healing practices. Instead, their perspectives are influenced by factors such as ethical considerations and the search for scientific validation.

#### 5.4. Ethical Evaluations and Approaches Toward Modern Medicine

The study examined vegan participants’ perspectives on medications and medical procedures based on animal experiments in modern medicine. It also explored their experiences in requesting vegan alternatives within healthcare services and their approaches to mandatory treatments. Additionally, the study investigated their general critiques of the healthcare system. The analysis of participant responses revealed a wide range of attitudes toward modern medicine, yet ethical concerns and the perspective of animal liberation remained common underlying themes.

The majority of participants stated that animal experiments are ethically unacceptable. Several participants criticized modern medical practices for exploiting nonhuman animals from an anthropocentric perspective, asserting that such experiments are not only unnecessary but also scientifically unreliable. One participant (Deniz, 4 years) asserted, “I really believe that animal experiments should be banned. There are so many alternative scientific methods out there that are much more accurate and reliable” emphasizing that technological and scientific advancements have made animal experiments obsolete. Similarly, other participants raised concerns about the low reliability of animal experiments. One participant remarked (Doğa, 4 years) “The reliability rate of an animal experiment is very low” while another expressed (Yağmur, 5 years), “Many doctors already argue that physiological differences between us and nonhuman animals distort test results” highlighting scientific skepticism toward these practices.

Some participants emphasized the significance of necessity and practicality as pivotal considerations in dealing with medications derived from animal experiments. One participant stated (Doğa, 4 years), “These drugs should not be used unless it is a matter of life or death” acknowledging the challenge of completely avoiding animal-derived products in daily life and highlighting the ambiguities inherent in the notion of “necessity.” Others pointed to the capitalist nature of the pharmaceutical industry, asserting that systemic change would be gradual: “I have little hope for change anytime soon... progress in this area is really slow” (Gökçe, 11 years). While participants agreed that animal experiments are neither fair nor ethical, they also stressed the urgency of developing alternatives, including in vitro systems, computer simulations, organoid technologies, and human tissue-on-a-chip models. One participant expressed optimism about technological advancements, stating, “It is possible to use artificial intelligence to formulate drugs and do phase trials on plant-based test subjects” (Ada, 5 years), reflecting the belief that medical science could evolve through technology-driven solutions. Conversely, another participant asserted, “Even if we didn’t have any alternative testing methods, I still don’t think we should use animals for human health” (Kardelen, 4.5 years), arguing that ethical concerns go beyond scientific feasibility and that the inability to obtain consent from nonhuman animals makes the process fundamentally problematic.

A significant proportion of participants reported having limited or no experience in requesting vegan options in healthcare services. Some stated, “I don’t use healthcare services” (Çınar, 10 years) or simply “I haven’t” (Doğa, 4 years; Gökçe, 11 years; Bulut, 4 years), explaining that they had never made such requests either due to not experiencing serious health issues or having minimal interaction with the healthcare system. Some participants reported having inquired about the presence of animal-derived ingredients in certain products or medications, but they had not made formal institutional requests. However, there were instances of small-scale vegan product requests, such as “I once asked for a vegan sunscreen recommendation, and I didn’t receive a negative reaction” (Fırtına, 1 year). Additionally, one participant (Yağmur, 5 years) noted an increase in corporate transparency, stating, “We ask companies whether their products are vegan, and we demand answers. I feel like they’re getting more responsive to these requests”. Some participants (Deniz, 4 years) attempted to counteract healthcare professionals’ biases, emphasizing that “veganism isn’t just a lifestyle choice but a medically viable dietary model”. However, when it came to requesting vegan medications, many acknowledged the systemic barriers within regulatory frameworks and approval processes. As one participant noted (Ada, 5 years), “When there is another option, finding a medication that hasn’t been tested on animals is already really difficult” highlighting the structural limitations in accessing fully vegan pharmaceutical options.

All participants agreed that in cases of necessity and life-threatening risks, they would largely accept the use of medications derived from animal experiments. One participant (Doğa, 4 years) remarked, *"If it's a necessity, I can use it... From this perspective, we must realize that what's necessary and what's practical can change"* referencing the challenge of maintaining a fully "purified" vegan practice within existing societal structures. Many participants acknowledged that they would take medications in critical situations, even if it conflicted with their ethical stance, with one participant stating, *"My priority is to protect myself and make sure the vegan movement can keep going"* (Bulut, 4 years). However, some participants expressed a more radical ethical position, such as one who stated, *"If I had to choose between killing and dying, I choose to die"* (Çınar, 10 years). This perspective reflects a moral stance that prioritizes nonhuman animal life over one's own, though it should be noted that this viewpoint was held by a minority of the participants. The majority, however, adopted a pragmatic approach, as articulated by one participant: *"Being forced to accept a treatment that isn't vegan... it's a kind of contradiction, but we've got to accept it to some extent"* (Ada, 5 years). Furthermore, some participants indicated their inclination to seek out vegan alternatives if time permitted before resorting to non-vegan medications: *"Yeah, I'd definitely look into other options first. If it's not urgent, I would ask for a vegan option"* (Yağmur, 5 years).

Participants' criticisms of the modern healthcare system predominantly centered on the following points: lack of knowledge, biases regarding the necessity of animal products and testing, a deficiency in ethical awareness, and a capitalist profit-driven structure. One common complaint was that *"Doctors have incomplete or even incorrect information about veganism"* (Papatya, 4 years). As one participant (Deniz, 4 years) noted, they frequently find themselves having to dispel common misconceptions, stating, *"I often have to explain that B12 isn't produced by animals but by bacteria in the soil"* implying how poor nutritional knowledge among healthcare professionals leads to misinformation. Another participant (Toprak, 5 years) highlighted the systemic nature of animal exploitation, stating, *"The healthcare and livestock industries work hand in hand... Until AI technologies advance, we cannot overcome this"*. Participants believed that healthcare services have the capacity to develop alternatives to animal experimentation and animal-derived ingredients. However, they emphasized that this transition would require significant investment in scientific and technological research. One participant (Nehir, 6 years) asserted, *"Animal experimentation is increasingly recognized as irrational. There should be no medical system that relies on it"* reinforcing this demand. Nevertheless, some participants prioritized other areas of reform. One stated (Bulut, 4 years), *"Most vegans don't focus on the healthcare aspect because there are more urgent areas that require reform"* thereby arguing that mass exploitation in the food, cosmetics, and entertainment

industries should take precedence over the medical sector.

In conclusion, the participants' perspectives on modern medicine reveal a shared stance against the necessity and ethics of animal experiments, the contradiction of having to rely on medication in life-threatening situations, and the need to increase demand and awareness for vegan pharmaceuticals and medical services. Within this framework, vegan participants strongly criticize medical practices rooted in animal exploitation, while simultaneously navigating practical solutions within the existing healthcare system or experiencing a sense of helplessness when forced to use certain medications. Consequently, while participants challenge the instrumentalization of nonhuman animals in modern medicine, they continue to seek individual alternatives while believing that technological and societal transformation will ultimately provide the necessary solutions.

### 5.5. Veganism and Public Health: Societal Benefits and Responses to Claims of Unhealthiness

The present study sought to ascertain how vegan participants conceptualize the relationship between public health and veganism and how they respond to the common claim that "a vegan diet is unhealthy". The majority of participants established a strong connection between veganism and public health, emphasizing a broad framework that ranges from the role of plant-based nutrition in preventing chronic diseases to its potential solutions for environmental and climate crises. For instance, one participant said, *"I believe plant-based nutrition is good for public health because it reduces chronic disease rates and mitigates public health risks by lowering environmental and climate impacts"* (Doğa, 4 years), thereby underscoring the link between individual well-being, societal welfare, and sustainability. Similarly, another participant argued that *"one of the cornerstones in public health is climate justice"* (Fırtına, 1 year), asserting that the elimination of the animal industry is crucial not only for climate stability but also for ensuring food justice.

One participant (Çınar, 10 years) discussed the economic and societal dimensions of plant-based nutrition, stating, *"Consuming animal products is bad for the climate and your health. When you eat meat, you're hurting animals and contributing to global warming"*. The same participant extended the discussion beyond climate and physical health to examine the psychological and societal effects of animal product consumption. According to them, *"Since consuming animal products takes away the autonomy of animals, it makes it easier to violate bodily integrity for humans too. For instance, butchers are more likely to be violent. It's ridiculous to expect a community that eats animals every day to be violence-free"* (Çınar, 10 years). This argument suggests that the practice of animal

exploitation psychologically normalizes violence, lowering the threshold for violating human bodily integrity and reinforcing a culture of violence. It is argued that widespread acts of violence within society weaken both mental and physical health, reducing individuals' sensitivity to harm, both toward their bodies and others. Veganism has been demonstrated to be associated with public health benefits, including the prevention of chronic disease and the mitigation of the climate crisis. Additionally, it has been linked to societal violence, mental health, and cultural dynamics. A plant-based diet has been shown to promote psychological and ethical benefits, such as fostering an "anti-speciesist ethical stance" as defined by a participant (Deniz, 4 years) according to whom this stance exposes individuals to distressing experiences in societies where violence is normalized. They contend that veganism provides a critical distance from this cycle of violence, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of public health. This perspective aligns with approaches that conceptualize public health not merely as a physical matter but as a holistic framework encompassing psychological and ethical dimensions as well. The most common argument advanced by non-vegans, "A vegan diet is unhealthy", is countered by participants in various ways. One participant (Çımar, 10 years) presented a six-dimensional framework in response to this argument:

1. The notion of "being a role model": Personal experience and medical records are presented as empirical evidence, as in *"If a vegan diet is unhealthy, then why am I healthy? I haven't even been to the hospital for ten years"*.
2. The "principle of indifference": As long as there is no definitive evidence proving harm, one should have the right to adopt a neutral or non-harmful stance toward veganism.
3. The "irrelevance principle": It states that *"My veganism has nothing to do with trying to be healthy"*, emphasizing that veganism is fundamentally an ethical stance, independent of health considerations.
4. The "subjectivity critique": It highlights the idea that *"I'm not harming any animals, so I'm not interfering with anyone"*, framing nonviolence as a primary concern.
5. The "trial-and-error argument": It suggests that veganism is a low-risk, flexible dietary choice, as evidenced by the statement *"Give it a shot, and if your health takes a turn for the worse, you can always revert to a non-vegan diet"*.
6. The "burden of proof". The principle asserts that *"You are making the claim, then prove it"*, shifting the burden onto those who assert that veganism is unhealthy to provide evidence.

This set of rhetorical strategies was not only unique to this participant but also aligned with the responses of other participants who relied on personal experience, scientific research, and maintaining a consistent lifestyle.

For example, one participant (Gökçe, 11 years) adopted a reversal strategy, stating, *"I always say that my blood test results are excellent. The real question we should be asking is whether meat consumption is healthy."* Another participant (Kardelen, 4.5 years) used personal data to substantiate their position, asserting that despite not eating meat for eight years, their B12 and iron levels remained within optimal ranges. Another participant (Toprak, 5 years) also challenged the prevailing notion of vegan diets being "unhealthy" by presenting their own experience, highlighting their five-year vegan lifestyle that exhibited no adverse impact on their blood test results. Several participants (Ada, 5 years; Deniz, 4 years; Bulut, 4 years) challenged the narrow framing of the debate, contending that health should not be constrained to the mere presence or absence of animal-based foods. They pointed out that non-vegans frequently consume highly processed foods, packaged products, and sugary products, leading to unhealthy dietary patterns. Consequently, they argued, framing the debate as *"Is plant-based eating unhealthy, or is eating meat unhealthy?"* is too simple and misleading. In essence, the prevailing viewpoint among the participants was that veganism is fundamentally an ethical stance, with health-related arguments often serving as secondary or supportive points rather than primary motivations.

In conclusion, vegan participants conceptualize the relationship between public health and veganism from a macro perspective, encompassing a wide range of factors. Their approaches—ranging from ecological sustainability and chronic disease prevention to reducing societal violence, promoting psychological well-being, and achieving economic savings—demonstrate that public health cannot be confined to a narrow medical framework. Notably, arguments such as "the violation of bodily integrity" and "the normalization of a culture of violence", raised by some participants, reinforce the idea that veganism should not be reduced to a mere dietary choice. Concurrently, participants have developed multi-dimensional counterarguments against the claim that "a vegan diet is unhealthy." Some participants have relied on personal health records and laboratory results as empirical evidence, while others have referenced scientific research, expert medical opinions, or the principle of shifting the burden of proof. Additionally, their insistence that veganism is primarily motivated by a commitment to animal rights and anti-speciesism, rather than personal health benefits, reaffirms its ethical foundation. Thus, the potential contributions of veganism to public health—including lower rates of chronic disease, a sustainable ecosystem, a critical stance against violence and exploitation, financial savings, and psychological well-being—are evaluated not only in terms of physical health but also within a broader social and moral framework. The participants' experiences prove how these perspectives materialize in everyday life and reveal that the claim of "unhealthiness" is often rooted in misinformation or bias.

## 6. DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that veganism extends beyond a dietary pattern, functioning as a multifaceted lifestyle that intersects societal, ethical, and personal health dimensions. The findings provide an opportunity to further examine the discussions on “vegan identity” and “vegan health”, which have been explored from different perspectives in the literature (Tunçay & Bulut, 2016; Tekten Aksürmeli & Beşirli, 2019). In this section, the points of convergence and divergence between the findings and the existing literature are analyzed, possible explanations for the results are explored, and the study’s limitations are critically evaluated.

Most participants defined veganism not as a dietary choice but as an ethical/moral stance, an emphasis that aligns with theoretical perspectives from scholars such as Tom Regan and Gary Francione, who focus on the sentience and fundamental rights of nonhuman animals (Regan, 1983; Francione, 2000). Concurrently, extant literature (Tunçay & Bulut, 2016; Tekten Aksürmeli & Beşirli, 2019) underscores that veganism cannot be confined to a mere plant-based diet but rather constitutes a broader identity formation that actively rejects animal exploitation across multiple domains of daily life. The findings of this study further elucidate that vegan identity signifies a profound transformation, encompassing not only animal rights and environmental awareness but also health concerns and social interactions. However, other studies have indicated that the role of health motivations varies (Özer Altundağ & Payas, 2024; Şener & Kaplan, 2024; Akbulut & Yeşilkaya, 2021). Most of these studies primarily focus on the potential of plant-based diets to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, often relegating the ethical dimension to a secondary position. In contrast, this study found that while many participants initially adopted veganism due to ethical concerns, their motivations evolved to also include health and ecological considerations. This suggests that the binary opposition of “ethics vs. health” does not hold rigid boundaries in practice, as these motivations frequently intersect and reinforce one another in participants’ experiences. While identity-focused studies (Tekten Aksürmeli & Beşirli, 2019) acknowledge that vegan identity is not based on a single motivation, they do not explore the extent of this interwoven dynamic as comprehensively as reflected in this study’s participant narratives.

The findings indicate that the reliance of modern healthcare systems on animal experiments and the frequent use of animal-derived components engender ethical dilemmas for vegan participants. Objections to animal experiments have been increasing in the literature, with approaches such as feminist care ethics (Despret, 2004; Haraway, 2008; cited in Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024) proposing new models to challenge the false dichotomy between scientific progress and animal welfare. By introducing an empirical dimension to this discourse, this study highlights the profound internal conflict

experienced by participants, even in cases of “mandatory treatments” or “life-threatening situations”. While previous studies (Singer, 2018; Çekem & Kamözüt, 2024) have questioned the scientific necessity of animal experiments, there is a notable lack of qualitative research focusing specifically on vegan individuals’ reactions to modern medical experimentations. The participants’ ethical criticisms of animal experiments find resonance in the literature; as indicated in the study, technology-based new-generation testing methods such as *in vitro* systems, computer simulations, and artificial intelligence stand out as scientifically and ethically valid alternatives to animal experiments. Consequently, this study seeks to partially fill that gap and contribute to literature. At the same time, some participants acknowledged that they were compelled to compromise their ethical stance in critical medical interventions. While this phenomenon aligns with Regan and Francione’s rejection of the property status of nonhuman animals, it underscores the nearly unavoidable constraints imposed by the capitalist healthcare industry and legal regulations. Existing studies (Tunçay, 2018; Tekten Aksürmeli & Beşirli, 2019) have largely overlooked the internal conflicts that vegans face when confronted with such “necessities”. By focusing directly on participant experiences, this study aims to complement the existing literature, offering a perspective that captures the ethical tensions vegans navigate in real-world healthcare settings.

This study demonstrates that vegan participants hold diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on folk medicine and traditional/alternative healing practices. Previous research (Gönenç et al., 2024) has focused on the prevalence of non-vegan practices in historical medical traditions, emphasizing the widespread use of animal-based treatments. Similarly, this study acknowledges that traditional healing methods are not exclusively reliant on animal-derived ingredients but can also be practiced through plant-based remedies and “holistic” approaches. These findings challenge the assumption that traditional medicine is either entirely compatible or entirely incompatible with veganism, instead suggesting a more nuanced reality in practice. Given the limited empirical research on the subject of how vegans engage with or reject traditional medical practices, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a new perspective on how plant-based and non-animal-tested treatments can align with ethical concerns.

A substantial body of research (Şener & Kaplan, 2024; Özer Altundağ & Payas, 2024; Akbulut & Yeşilkaya, 2021) highlight the potential nutritional deficiencies (e.g., B12, iron, calcium) and health risks associated with poorly planned vegan diets. Similarly, participants in this study acknowledged such risks, yet emphasized that with “balanced planning” and “regular monitoring”, veganism generally led to positive health experiences. This finding aligns with existing literature, which frequently reiterates that well-structured plant-based diets can have protective effects (Akbulut & Yeşilkaya,

2021). Our participants actively countered non-vegan claims that “vegan nutrition is unhealthy” by relying on personal experiences, scientific literature, and medical advice. While previous research (e.g., Tunçay, 2018) has addressed this only partially, this study provides a more systematic analysis of how vegans defend their dietary choices using evidence-based approaches.

A notable limitation of the present study is its reliance on a predominantly urban sample of participants who are relatively well-educated and have access to online vegan networks. Consequently, the experiences of vegans from diverse socioeconomic, geographic and cultural backgrounds -particularly those residing in rural areas where social pressure may be stronger- were not sufficiently represented. Additionally, in-depth interviews with specific groups with unique dietary requirements, such as athletes, children, or pregnant individuals, were not conducted. Future research that will incorporate a wider range of demographic profiles and special nutritional requirements would contribute to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the relationship between veganism and health. Moreover, participants' perspectives on modern medicine and traditional healing practices were based on subjective experiences rather than quantitative assessments of health outcomes or treatment effectiveness, which is a limitation. Future studies could adopt a mixed-method research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to track practical health outcomes and laboratory data of vegan participants in medical settings. This would allow for more concrete evidence on factors such as quality of healthcare access, treatment success rates, and how potential nutritional deficiencies are managed, complementing the participants' self-reported experiences.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined the health and ethical dimensions of veganism from an ethnomedical perspective, exploring its complex interactions with modern medicine and traditional healing practices. The findings indicate that veganism cannot be reduced to a plant-based diet or a simple expression of love for nonhuman animals; rather, it represents a comprehensive lifestyle in which the rejection of nonhuman animal exploitation intersects with ethical, social, and personal health transformations. Vegan individuals' health perceptions and practices are particularly shaped by concerns regarding modern medicine's reliance on animal experiments and animal-derived ingredients, which often create significant ethical dilemmas, especially in cases of life-threatening conditions or urgent medical treatments. However, it is widely acknowledged that the current medical system lacks transparency -the profit-driven nature of the pharmaceutical industry frequently relegates animal and environmental rights to a secondary position. Consequently, vegan individuals find themselves in a predicament, compelled to choose between rejecting medication in critical situations and

unwillingly contributing to nonhuman animal exploitation. This predicament necessitates a practical compromise that aligns as closely as possible with their ethical principles.

Conversely, folk medicine and traditional healing practices are not entirely innocent either. Remedies containing nonhuman animal-derived ingredients, ranging from bear bile to hedgehog fat, have a long and highly contested history of use. However, the presence of plant-based prescriptions and holistic methods appears to offer an alternative pathway for vegan individuals. Nevertheless, this field is also fraught with uncertainties. To what extent are ethnobotanical applications evidence-based? Which rituals involve nonhuman animal-derived materials? Are plant-based treatments genuinely effective? These questions create a unique space for inquiry among vegans. While the allure of natural or “authentic” practices persists, so does the demand for scientific validation and the ethical concern over nonhuman animal exploitation. At this intersection, the rigid boundaries between traditional and modern medicine become even more blurred for vegans than for anyone else.

Both the findings and the relevant literature emphasize that well-planned plant-based diets provide overwhelmingly positive health experiences for most participants, challenging the cliché that “a vegan diet is unhealthy”. Reports of improved digestion, enhanced skin quality, increased energy levels, and a sense of psychological well-being are significant. However, a conscious approach is necessary when it comes to potential deficiencies, such as B12 or iron. Many participants address these concerns through regular blood tests and supplementation, while also noting that non-vegan individuals can experience similar deficiencies. This shift in focus from the consumption of nonhuman animal-derived foods to the broader issue of dietary planning is noteworthy. Ultimately, these insights demonstrate that veganism is neither an inherently effortless or “natural” health solution nor an inherently risky dietary choice. Its impact depends on knowledge, planning, and individual health needs. The study also uncovers frequent encounters with misinformation and bias among participants when interacting with modern healthcare services. Many participants reported experiences where doctors insisted that eating meat was essential or held preconceived notions that plant-based diets are inherently inadequate. Such encounters often compel vegan patients to justify their dietary choices and advocate for themselves. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive integration of plant-based nutrition and veganism into medical education curricula. Just as some doctors routinely advise patients to “consume more leafy greens,” they should also be equipped to address questions regarding the procurement of sufficient plant-based protein and the prevention of B12 deficiency with the same level of precision and care. Ultimately, medicine thrives not only on theory and experimentation but also on its ability to adapt to evolving societal needs and

ethical considerations. Continuous updates to medical knowledge and training are therefore essential to reflect shifting dietary patterns and growing awareness of plant-based nutrition, thereby ensuring optimal patient care and well-being.

In light of these ethical dilemmas and systemic challenges confronting veganism, a critical examination of the optimal course of action becomes imperative. For some, it becomes a way of life to seek out medications that are free from nonhuman animal experimentation, engage in critical inquiry with manufacturers, and even pressure companies for change. Others, despite their inability to fully actualize their ideal lifestyle, choose to make an effort to minimize nonhuman animal exploitation within their personal practices and actions. Ultimately, the intersection of animal rights advocacy, the pursuit of healthy nutrition, and environmental consciousness give rise to a broader critical interrogation that challenges the very foundations of modern medicine. In this regard, veganism's critical stance toward the established healthcare system is not only valuable but also transformative.

In conclusion, although veganism may appear to be an individual choice, it is a revolutionary movement that initiates a comprehensive critique of nonhuman animal exploitation, the environmental crisis, and healthcare policies. This study highlighted the complex and often conflicting relationship that vegan individuals have with both modern medicine and traditional healing practices, raising new ethical questions in the field of healthcare ethics. It should be remembered that the findings of this study should be interpreted within the framework of a qualitative research based on the subjective experiences and statements of the participants. The objective determination of the health effects of a vegan diet requires more comprehensive quantitative and mixed-methods studies that include the opinions of health professionals and are supported by biochemical data. This study aims to form a basis for future research to be conducted in this direction. To further advance the field, future research should aim to expand on these current sample groups to include vegans from diverse age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. This expansion will provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics. By doing so, we may be able to move beyond a purely human-centered definition of public health and towards radical transformations that encompass the well-being of all living beings.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1: Interview Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your level of education?
4. Where do you live?
5. How long have you been vegan?
6. When and why did you become a vegan?
7. Has being a vegan had any positive or negative effects on your health? Can you share your experiences?
8. What are your experiences with modern healthcare services? Have you run into any problems or had any good experiences because of being vegan?
9. What are your thoughts on medications or medical treatments that are tested on nonhuman animals?
10. What is your take on traditional healing practices? Have you ever used such methods?
11. How do you respond to the common argument that "vegan diets are unhealthy"?
12. Have you ever asked for cruelty-free alternatives from healthcare workers? If so, how did they react?
13. How does the ethical aspect of veganism influence your health-related decisions? For example, if you had to take a medication tested on nonhuman animals, how would you feel about that?
14. What are the common criticisms of the healthcare system from a vegan perspective? What criticisms do you personally express?
15. Do you see a connection between veganism and public health? For instance, what are your thoughts on the societal benefits of plant-based diets?