

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

VEGAN RHETORIC: ONLINE DISCUSSION PLATFORMS

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**Abstract**

This MRP addresses the rhetoric used in regard to veganism by analyzing comments made within forums on the social media platform Reddit. It focuses on analyzing the rhetoric used by individuals who follow a vegan diet, as well as the response rhetoric from those who are anti-vegan and/or do not follow a vegan diet. This MRP also addresses the stigma present towards vegans and veganism as a whole. In addition, this MRP discusses why social media is being used to investigate vegan rhetoric and what strategies both sides of the veganism debate use to advocate their viewpoint. The objective of this MRP is to examine the normalization and stigmatization of veganism online as well as the role that the rhetoric surrounding veganism plays for both vegans and non-vegans on social media.

The literature review addresses the overarching themes of vegan rhetoric, with a focus on the differing rhetoric used by vegans and non-vegans. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was used as a theoretical framework for addressing the research questions. The study explores the normalization and stigmatization of veganism online and examines the potential for rhetorical consistencies and patterns that can be found within the rhetoric surrounding veganism on an online forum.

The findings reveal that veganism is both stigmatized and normalized online. The analyses demonstrate that veganism is stigmatized more than it is normalized. Rhetorical consistencies and patterns were found to be commonly used by both parties to support their position in the veganism debate including strategies involving environmental, health, and ethical rhetoric. In future studies, it would be of interest to expand the data collection in order to find evolving keywords and patterns surrounding online vegan rhetoric.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Literature Review.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Research Methodology.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Environment.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Ethics.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Stigma.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Health.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Normalization/Support.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Opposition.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Culture.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Economics.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Rhetoric.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Analysis &amp; Discussion.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Research Question 1.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Research Questions 2a.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Research Question 2b.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Communication Accommodation Theory.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Limitations &amp; Future Research Directions.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>61</b>

## **Introduction & Rationale**

This MRP examines rhetoric that surrounds vegan and plant-based lifestyles on social media, specifically in online discussion platforms such as Reddit. This research analyzes the rhetoric used by individuals who follow a vegan diet, as well as the response rhetoric from those who are anti-vegan and/or do not follow a vegan diet. Vegans can be defined as “individuals who do not consume any animal flesh or animal products” (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). In comparison, vegetarians are individuals who do not consume animal flesh but may consume animal products such as dairy or eggs. The vegan diet is becoming more normalized and is increasingly trending in western cultures. According to Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu (2015), the number of individuals who follow a vegan diet has almost doubled since 2009, totaling six million people in the United States. Veganism is not a contemporary phenomenon and has existed for millennia (Griffin, 2017); however, Donald Watson, the founder of the Vegan Society first coined the term ‘vegan’ in 1944.

In this MRP, the research questions aim to identify what types of rhetoric vegan and non-vegan individuals on social media use when discussing the topic of veganism. According to Ludwig (2014), there has not been much academic research in this area regarding the study of rhetoric in online communication, specifically on social media. He argues that the presence of social media in everyday life is undeniable, and that it infiltrates into personal identity, attitudes, and behaviours (Ludwig, 2014, p. 28). Social media platforms differ from traditional media in their ability to reach larger audiences as well as acting as a means for facilitating two-way conversations. Kilgo et al. (2016) discuss how social media allows users to “manage their news consumption individually and tailor content to their interests” (p.1). In addition, social media, specifically online discussion platforms, differ from traditional media in that they are more

transparent, user generated, and encourage active involvement. Online discussion platforms do have the potential to influence attitudes and behaviors, including how individuals shape their thought processes. These platforms are of interest to study due to their “potential to become deliberative spaces” (Aragon et al., 2017, p. 420). As a result, online discussion platforms are able to facilitate users to participate in democratic communication, and essentially create a “online deliberative public sphere” (p. 421).

Individuals who follow a vegan diet are considered to be politicized eaters. Vegans may feel socially segmented from mainstream society because of their dietary choices. Chuck, Fernandez, and Hyers (2016) argue that minority food cultures are unified by their “countercultural orientation and their resistance through diet” (p. 426). As a marginalized social group, vegans are often positioned to be at “risk for rejection or alienation by their previous in-group” (p.426). Online discussion boards are able to facilitate discussion between groups and allow socially segmented groups (i.e., vegans) to voice their opinions and share information with others in online communities. Ludwig (2014) defines an online community as “the people who come together for a particular purpose, and who are guided by policies and supported by software” (p. 21). As a result of the affordances online discussion boards offer to users, socially segmented groups such as vegans benefit from the information and opinion exchange that social media platforms like Reddit offer. This MRP aims to explore the complexities and nuances of the rhetoric used on social media as a means of debate and discussion between groups. The rationale for investigating veganism through a social media lens in this MRP is to add to the existing body of literature regarding vegan rhetoric and to trace potential findings, patterns, and consistencies of rhetoric used on social media to inform what could be learned about social media as a means of communication. With these elements considered, this MRP aims to explore

why the vegan stigma exists and answer the question of what role the rhetoric surrounding veganism plays for both vegans and non-vegans on social media, specifically in online discussion platforms such as Reddit.

### **Research Questions**

*1) Is there evidence that veganism is normalized or stigmatized on social media platforms?*

*2a) Can rhetorical consistencies and patterns be identified in online discussions about veganism? If so, what are they?*

*2b) How are keywords used by advocates of veganism? How are keywords used by individuals who are not advocates of veganism?*

### **Literature Review**

There are a variety of reasons why individuals choose to follow a vegan diet. According to Radnitz et al. (2015), the main reasons why people choose to follow a vegan diet include “health, animal rights (ethics), environmental concerns, influence of others, and sensory disgust” (p.32). Out of these reasons, health and ethical considerations are known to be the most cited reasons for choosing to follow a vegan diet. It is important to note that it is highly uncommon for an individual to solely follow the vegan diet based on one reason, and that most vegans follow the diet due to a variety of considerations. Griffin (2017) states that the foundational definition of a vegan, “someone who tries to avoid animal products” (p. 1) is too simple. He argues that the definition fails to account for the multidimensional dynamics through which individuals practice veganism. In his writing, he states that “people who choose to adhere to veganism do so within a specific personal, social, political and cultural context” (p.1).

Griffin (2017) discusses veganism from a cultural perspective by referring to an article written by Harper (2010), who identifies a “lack of engagement with the centrality of issues of

race amongst mainstream middle-class white vegans”. She states that approaches to outreach of veganism have typically ignored the “differing socio-historically racialized epistemologies amongst the white middle class status quo and the collective of other racial groups’ (p. 9-10). In her research, she observes that the top-selling vegan books rarely ever discuss the varying epistemologies of African Americans, Chinese-Americans, or Native Americans. Instead, she argues that many vegan books are founded on epistemologies shared among the white middle class status quo. She observes that there is an underlying assumption among the “white middle class mainstream vegan media that racialization and the production of vegan spaces are disconnected” (p.5). She argues that space, whether vegan or not, is racialized and this is how individuals develop their “socio-spatial epistemologies” (p.5). In other words, she aims to explore how epistemologies of whiteness manifest within vegan rhetoric in the USA and argues that vegan activism practices have to be replaced by an anti-racist approach. Harper suggests that in order to implement anti-racist approaches, white vegan activists have to “engage in a critical reflexivity around racially privileged oriented ways of being and understand the world animal rights movements not only within white dominated or white-settler nations, but throughout the globe” (p.22-23).

Harper (2010) argues that vegan organizations such as Vegan Outreach are doing an effective job advocating and educating the public on ending non-human cruelty. However, she criticizes the organization for purchasing Silk chocolate milk and Soy Delicious chocolate ice cream, because both products use a cocoa source that is not certified human cruelty free. She also critiques Vegan Outreach’s promotional strategies, such as their informational pamphlet. The pamphlet displays images of solely white individuals engaging in animal rights activism and does not include images of racially diverse people in the movement. Harper (2010) argues that



the combination of Caucasian imagery coupled with vegan products that contain sugar and chocolate that are “unfairly harvested by the labor of non-white racialized people” (p. 17) represents a “contradictory ethos of who practices veganism and how” (p.17). She states that vegan advocacy organizations such as Vegan Outreach do not advocate the avoidance of vegan products that are not labelled as “fair trade, sweatshop-free, or free of current day human slavery practices” (p. 17-18). She uses this example to demonstrate her critique of those who do not view race as a significant factor in animal rights activism.

She poses an example by discussing vegan chocolate and how it is produced. In Mali, thousands of children have been declared as missing under the suspicion that they are in the Ivory Coast producing cocoa. She claims that many of these children are imprisoned on the cocoa farms and are abused if they attempt to escape. She argues that many vegans in the USA believe they are being ‘cruelty free’ by purchasing and consuming these advertised products, by consuming chocolate made without dairy. Harper (2012) argues that what these vegans fail to acknowledge is that they may be causing cruelty by purchasing non fair-trade products (e.g., cocoa). She argues that vegans’ denial and/or ignorance to the notion that race matters when discussing veganism has a significant impact on the validity of veganism. Her writings suggest that vegans should become more aware of their privilege and understand that some vegan individuals benefit from ‘institutionalized whiteness as the norm’ (p.24). She suggests that more individuals with a mindset of “race is a feeble matter in regard to veganism” (p.24) re-adjust their position of race and evaluate “how they may contribute to social injustice within vegan and animal rights activism” (p.24). Culture and race will be examined in the data collection of this MRP to see if evidence can be found to support or deny the notion of institutionalized whiteness and the mindset of race being a feeble matter in the veganism movement.

In addition to acknowledging Harper's (2010) work in regard to understanding veganism through a sociocultural and racialized lens, Greenebaum (2016) explores the idea of veganism as a privileged lifestyle. She studies the perspective of veganism as a privileged lifestyle from the vantage points of both vegans and non-vegans. She argues that "veganism itself is not a privilege, but rather the ability to make food choices is ultimately the privilege" (p. 355). She states that the term 'vegan privilege' reinforces and hides the "cultural invisibility of speciesism and carnism" (p. 355). Non-vegans with economic privilege criticize vegans in order to dismiss the vegan ethic without putting their own values, privilege, and participation in the animal food industry into question (Greenebaum, 2016). She argues that veganism does not require affluence and that the criticism she has of the term 'vegan privilege' is the underlying notion that a prerequisite for being vegan is to be privileged. She claims that veganism is not the only type of restrictive diet that can be expensive, as diets such as gluten free, kosher, Paleolithic, free range, etc. are costly and are also not widely available (p.359). Unlike these other restrictive diets, veganism tends to be targeted with anger and criticized for its privilege. RQ 1 aims to explore if evidence can be found through users' rhetoric to support or oppose the notion of vegan privilege and the economics behind the diet.

When discussing the topic of food and individual food choices, it is important to recognize that food and eating activities are an integral part of everyday life in all cultures (Chuck, Fernandes, & Hyers, 2016). In western society, Chuck et al. (2016) discuss how there are "massive and diverse food cultures, distinguished by abundance and diversity, with controversial roots in the early global food trade, colonial expansion, farm plantations, and the industrial revolution (p. 425). In addition to this, the researchers add that food has gradually become a political issue as food is connected to the "exploitation of producers, abuse of animals,

environmental destruction, serious healthcare issues, and unfair distribution that at its worst leads to ‘food deserts’, food scarcity, and mass starvation” (p.425). The researchers observe that it is becoming increasingly common for individuals in the USA to participate in activism through their dietary choices. In their study, they quote food activist Michael Pollan: “The wonderful thing about food is that you get three votes a day. Every one of them has the potential to change the world” (p.425). Politicized eaters participate in practices that do not represent the dominant food culture. As a result, they “participate in counter cultural political acts through one of the most pervasive and intimate expressions of their culture and community-their food” (p. 425). Chuck et al. (2016) argue that when individuals make the decision to leave the dominant dietary in-group to become part of a minority group, they are essentially “participating in a minority food culture”. As a result of being in a minority group, they become at risk of “rejection or alienation by their previous in-group” (p.426). Examples of this type of alienation include missed social activities, such as not being able to eat the same foods as others in social settings. In addition to alienation, the researchers suggest vegans are at risk of social rejection due to “misunderstandings and conflicting values” (p.426). In their discussion of minority eaters, the researchers discuss the relationship between ‘dogooder derogation’ and ‘anticipated moral reproach’ in regard to vegetarianism. Dogooder derogation can be defined as the act of “putting down people who are perceived as acting morally superior” (p.426) and anticipated moral reproach can be defined as the extent to which individuals expect to be judged. It was found that non-vegetarian individuals engaged in out-group derogation and associated vegetarians with “negative words and self-righteousness” (p.426). In addition, it was found that non-vegetarians assumed that vegetarians viewed individuals who eat meat as morally inferior.

Horta (2018) argues that society treats vegans more poorly than non-vegans and argues that vegans seldom do anything in terms of campaigning against this form of discrimination. He states that vegans see this form of treatment as a mere consequence of what they do not believe in, which Horta (2017) describes as *speciesist discrimination*. Speciesist discrimination is a form of discrimination against non-human animals (Horta, 2018, p.365). Horta (2018) focuses on several forms of discrimination towards vegans in his writing, including private and public discrimination. He states that vegans commonly find themselves “worse off for structural reasons” when there are little vegan food options available. Horta (2018) claims that this can happen in the private sphere such as a family gathering, or in the public sphere, in which there are few to no food options available. Horta (2017) brings up an example in which vegans are often “forced by the state to contribute to animal exploitation against their will” (p.362). He uses the example of vegans having to pay taxes in which they can indirectly or in some cases directly finance forms of animal exploitation (e.g., subsidizing animal agriculture and fishing industries).

Horta (2018) introduces the term *vegaphobia* in his writing and describes the term as a bias against vegans solely on the basis of being a vegan (p.361). He provides examples of vegaphobia by discussing occurrences when people make unwarranted remarks against veganism or eating meat in front of vegans solely to offend and harass them. Additionally, Horta (2018) states that vegans can face discrimination in terms of not being taken as seriously as their non-vegan counterparts in the form of epistemic discrimination. Vegans are mistakenly considered to be less reliable and less credible than non-vegans regarding nutritional topics due to their “apparent bias and claims that are typically assumed to be incorrect” (p. 361). This study will be beneficial in terms of addressing RQ 1 by providing evidence for or against the stigmatization of the vegan lifestyle.

Guerin (2014) states that the reasons why the vegan stigma exists are generally unclear. Guerin (2014) states that in the U.K. study, only 5.5% of vegan rhetoric was positive, 20.2% was neutral in tone, and 74.3% was categorized as negative (p.6). Guerin (2014) states that this phenomenon can be attributed to traditional media's tendency to highlight stories "which reflect expected opinions and values of the audience" (p.6). Guerin suggests that due to the negative representation vegans receive in mainstream media, vegans take on activism in the form of 'do it yourself' (DIY) activism, such as pamphlets, social media posts, recipes, etc. From this DIY method of activism, the study hypothesizes that these personal approaches "remove the vegan subject from the security of a passive viewer and puts them in a position of defending their choices and admitting a wrongdoing" (p.6). This literature will be important in this MRP as it provides evidence to support the notion that social media offers a means of two-way conversation and open debate between parties as opposed to traditional media that is parasocial in nature.

Cole and Morgan (2011) study the derogatory rhetoric of veganism and how the diet is demonstrated in the media, specifically in newspapers in the U.K. This will help build the foundation of evidence for the MRP in terms of the derogatory rhetoric surrounding veganism from a non-vegan perspective. The researchers argue that the focus on the vegan diet, specifically its dietary restrictions, can "perpetuate a veganism-as-deviance model that fosters academic misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the meaning of veganism for vegans" (p. 136). One of the main themes they uncovered in the newspapers was characterizing veganism as asceticism. They found that the most common phrases in relation to asceticism was 'strict vegan' and 'fervent vegan'. By framing veganism in an ascetic light, it removes the association between veganism and pleasurable eating experiences. The study demonstrates that ascetic

discourse is complex and can take different forms. Some may use asceticism rhetoric out of a “grudging respect for vegans succeeding in remaining strict” (p.142), while others use asceticism rhetoric in order to “reassure the omnivorous reader of the normality of their dietary ethics” (p.142). In this study, the researchers also conclude that if veganism were portrayed as an easy to maintain and pleasurable lifestyle, omnivorous lifestyles would be in a more precarious position and “populated with difficult debates about speciesism, violence and exploitation” (p.142). The study concludes that derogatory rhetoric serves to maintain a distance from veganism as a way to “acknowledge its existence without ever having to really think about the challenges it offers, and that asserting the difficulty of a vegan lifestyle fulfills the same function” (p.142).

Cole and Morgan (2011) outline the three interlocking effects of derogatory rhetoric in regard to veganism. The first effect is the marginalization of vegans through the “ubiquity of the imagined omnivorous reader and the lack of articles addressing the beliefs, experiences or opinions of vegans” (p.149). The second effect of vegan derogatory rhetoric is the concept of helping non-vegans avoid confronting the idea of the ethics of “exploiting, imprisoning, and killing nonhuman animals” (p.149). Lastly, the third effect is that derogatory rhetoric surrounding veganism facilitates the “continued normalization of human violence on an unimaginable scale” (p. 149). Cole and Morgan (2011) argue that instead of using veganism as a way to initiate conversation and debate about humans’ relationship with nonhuman animals, veganism is used as a reason not to care or to think about these issues. The majority of journalists are not vegan, and Cole and Morgan (2011) suggest that journalists have the tendency to “highlight reports from those who possess similar viewpoints and opinions and will largely

ignore those with which they disagree when making their own reports” (Cole and Morgan, 2011, p.149).

Sneijder and Molder (2009) identify the normalization of veganism and overall vegan identity. This research will supplement the MRP in terms of providing evidence to support RQ1 in relation to the normalization of veganism. In their research, they focused on the relationship between ideologically-based food choices and personal identity through online platforms (p.621). Specifically, the researchers studied the discursive psychology behind vegans’ food choices and their personal identity. They argue that vegans use discursive sentiments in order to appear ‘ordinary’, as a way to “resist the notion that being a vegan is complicated” (p.621). As a result of looking ordinary, the study argues that ordinariness helps to create and protect the vegan lifestyle and diet as an ideology. The study proposes that the consumption of food can be viewed as a social marker to “construct social identities and lifestyles” (p.622). Based on previous research on veganism, the researchers suggest that the ideological reasoning for food choices may be related to how a person expresses their identity. They also argue that vegetarianism is both a “practice and an identity for its proponents” (p.622). The main goal of this research was to study “how particular descriptions contribute to the construction of an ‘alternative’ identity, and how this identity is used to resist negative inferences about the vegan lifestyle” (p.622). Through various examples of vegans sharing their experiences and recipes online, the researchers concluded that being ordinary in language and tone is a critical and relevant method for vegans to refute the idea that veganism is complicated and unhealthy. Additionally, the study concludes that the term ‘ordinariness’ is a rhetorical alternative for ‘complicatedness’; and state that one who is “vegan but still an ordinary person” cannot be criticized (p.627). In this study, it was found that vegans do not deny their lifestyle. Instead, vegans focus on an alternative identity

as an ‘ordinary person’ to neutralize the negative implications of the vegan identity. The researchers suggest that health professionals can take their results and use them in health communication strategies by taking clients’ implicit concerns about veganism into account. This research will be beneficial to the MRP in terms of providing background to address RQ1 regarding the normalization of veganism through vegans displaying an identity that can be used to “resist negative inferences about the vegan lifestyle” (p.622).

Rosenfeld and Burrow (2017) trace the stigma against vegans and contend that those who follow a plant-based lifestyle often receive comments from omnivores that are micro aggressive and that “impair self-esteem and lead vegetarians to feel stigmatized” (p.84). Markowski and Roxburgh (2019) study the social stigma that is present against those who follow a vegan diet. They explore how the fear of being stigmatized may act as a barrier to those who want to avoid consuming meat (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). They argue that this topic is important because there is evidence to suggest that individuals who avoid consuming meat are typically stigmatized for “disrupting social conventions related to food” (p.1). They performed a data analysis using focus groups consisting of vegans, vegetarians, and omnivorous college students in which the discussion was centered around perceptions of vegans and veganism as a whole. The study explores two different strategies that non-vegans use to avoid stigmatization when eating vegan foods, with the two strategies being termed as social and behavioral distancing. In their study, non-vegans reported to socially distance themselves from vegans, both physically and verbally. They state that social and behavioral distancing by non-vegans towards vegans helps these individuals avoid a courtesy stigma, in addition to enforcing norms. The researchers argue that “by derogating and distancing socially from those who behaviorally deviate from norms, the norms themselves are reinforced as acceptable and legitimate. As a result, this



induces conformity to normative behaviors and strengthens identification with non-stigmatized groups” (p.3). The research demonstrates that the vegan stigma is indeed a barrier that inhibits individuals from transitioning to a plant-based diet. In addition, the researchers demonstrate that their results are significant because the results can be used to “improve the efficacy of public health initiatives focused on encouraging plant-based diet adoption and meat consumption reduction” (p.1). The study suggests that social stigma plays a role in deterring individuals to switch to a plant-based diet. Therefore, public health strategies can use these findings to lower the social stigma of veganism and promote less meat consumption in addition to emphasizing the health benefits of consuming less meat. These strategies will aid in providing additional context to answer RQ1 regarding the stigmatization of veganism and potential strategies vegans can use in their rhetoric to normalize veganism.

Greenebaum (2012) draws from Erving Goffman’s theory of impression management which states that impression management can be accomplished in conscious or unconscious ways in order to influence the perceptions of a person, object, or event in a positive manner (Greenebaum, 2012). This study may be beneficial to answer RQ2 regarding effective rhetorical strategies and keywords used by both sides of the veganism debate. Greenebaum (2012) studies the impression management strategies vegans use in order to maintain a strong identity. According to the study, it is argued that it is important for vegans and vegetarians to represent their diets in a positive manner in order for their audience to pay respect and listen to what they have to say. In relation to Goffman, Greenebaum (2012) states that vegans had to engage in both ‘front stage behavior’ by “carefully constructing strategies to manage their presentation of self” (p.312) and ‘back stage behaviour’ where they react “privately and among their peers to vent frustrations, interpret reactions, and strategize future face-to-face interactions” (p.312). The

study concludes that vegans often feel “silenced by stereotypes, misinformation, and conflict” (p.309), and that omnivores tend to use stereotypes as a psychological defence mechanism to cover feelings of guilt. The study contends that vegetarians and vegans participate in ‘face-saving’ strategies such as avoiding confrontation, waiting for an appropriate time, focusing on health benefits, and leading by example in order to maintain proper front stage behaviour.

One of the main face-saving strategies Greenebaum (2012) emphasizes is to avoid confrontation. “Since the vegetarians and vegans have a perception that they appear to others as judgmental, they must respond in a manner that will repudiate that assessment” (p.317). She states that vegetarians and vegans typically believe that the reactions of non-vegans are displays of their “carnivorous guilt” (p.317). As a result, Greenebaum (2012) argues that the use of a confrontational approach would be ineffective. “The ‘issues’ behind eating animals will get lost in translation, and the vegan or vegetarian will be highlighted as the problem instead” (p.317). In Greenebaum’s (2012) study, she found that confrontation towards non-vegans tended to do more harm than good. As a result, she recommends avoiding confrontation and not giving into the ‘fight’ (p.317). This notion will be studied within the data collection of the MRP to see if evidence can be found to support that direct confrontation does more harm than good in regard to advocating in support of veganism.

Greenebaum concludes her study by emphasizing the notion of maintaining a strong reputation. “As spokespersons for veganism and vegetarianism, these individuals cannot risk social foibles” (p.322). For many, food is a sensitive topic and Greenebaum (2012) argues that if there is even a risk of being threatened or insulted, individuals will immediately reject the message of veganism. She states that “food is a primal, personal experience as well as an active, social activity” (p.322). Consequently, the way in which vegans can effectively communicate to

non-vegans about their lifestyle should be in a respectful, educated manner. An important excerpt to take away from Greenebaum's message is the idea of vegans maintaining proper front stage and backstage behavior; in relation to Goffman's theory of impression management. "The backstage activities enable them to analyze, think, and decompress so that they can engage in positive front stage behavior" (p.322). From this literature it could be suggested that individuals may come to online message boards with questions out of curiosity about veganism. Online discussion forms may act as a method for advocates of veganism to educate others on their lifestyle and exchange information that can lead to meaningful discussion.

Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu (2016) explore two separate studies on why the vegan stigma exists and non-vegans typically unaccepting of the vegan lifestyle. In the first study, the researchers based their findings on the communal food hypothesis and attributed part of the explanation of the stigma to this hypothesis. The communal food hypothesis states that "breaking bread together expresses close comradery" (p.5). In other words, food brings people together. At every family get-together, the typical standard is an abundance of food on the table. To reject this abundance of food may be perceived as rejecting the offer of fellowship. In the study's discussion it is suggested that if there is a vegan present at the table with meat as an offering, non-vegans often feel a sense of guilt and defense. These feelings of guilt and defense typically occur regardless of whether the vegan makes a statement about meat being on the table or not.

In their second study, the researchers focused on vegan and anti-vegan rhetoric and studied the emotional response to veganism and the "roles of argument strength and depth of message processing in perception of stigma" (p.3). The second study demonstrates that negative emotions have a strong influence on the depth of information processing. Based on previous

studies, anger is theorized to enhance information processing, guilt is theorized to reduce the motivation to carefully process information, and discomfort is theorized to influence individuals to process information more systematically and consciously (p. 8-9). It was found in the second study that the emotions of anger and discomfort in relation to vegan topics were strong attributors between messages, the strength of the argument, and stigma response. This study will aid in answering RQ2 of the MRP because it will provide additional background in terms of the relationship between tone of rhetoric and information processing. This literature will also be useful to further understand how both vegans and non-vegans use certain rhetorical strategies in order to effectively deliver their message and to ensure complete information processing.

In addition to Bresnahan et al.'s (2016) work, Twine (2014) discusses the concept of contemporary vegans and how they challenge the "normative scripts of happiness and commensality in a dominant meat and dairy consuming culture" (p.623). Similar to Bresnahan et al' (2016) notion of the importance of food and the comradery that is shared between individuals, Twine (2014) argues that tables are "part of the materiality of family and community. They are where food is typically eaten and shared. This commensality, this practice is part of doing family" (p.625). The study was on Sarah Ahmed's figure of the killjoy in regard to feminism. Twine (2014) takes inspiration from Ahmed's work and uses the killjoy framework as a way to understand vegans and their position in a meat dominant culture. The study argues that killjoy discursive practices act to "destabilize an assumed shared sense of happiness" (p.625). In other words, Twine (2014) associates vegans with a killjoy mentality and states that vegans challenge the normative meat-eating culture by evoking emotions in others to destabilize the notion of comradery and happiness. The study argues that by vegans voicing their viewpoints, they may evoke "anxiety, discomfort, guilt, and risks exclusion for doing so. The order of happiness is

contested as reciprocity is disrupted. The killjoy in effect refuses membership of the normative affective community.” (p.625).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can be described as a “framework to identify and account for how people adjust language and other communicative behaviors in different social contexts” (Gasiorek, Giles, and Soliz, 2015, p.1). In terms of human nature, it is widely accepted that it is natural to “change our style of speaking as a response to the behavior of our conversational partners” (Gasiorek et al., 2015, p.1). CAT proposes that individuals use communication to manage our social relationships. Specifically, CAT proposes that “we affiliate and disaffiliate with others not only through what we say, but also how we say it” (Gasiorek et al., 2015, p.2). CAT states that individuals have the tendency to adjust their communicative behavior (verbal, written, or computer-mediated) as a result of their peers’ evaluations of them and in order to maintain both a “positive personal and social identity” (p.2).

This framework will be used in the MRP in order to provide a foundation for understanding how users communicate online and how they make adjustments to their arguments in order to “create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interactions” (Giles and Soliz, 2014, p.107). In other words, this theory will be useful to understand how both parties of the veganism debate effectively communicate with one another in order to deliver the message they want. The basic principles of CAT include the concepts of *convergence* and *divergence*. In CAT, convergence is defined as a “strategy whereby individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor’s behaviour” (p.108). Giles and Soliz (2014) argue that convergence is a communicative tool that is used in order to “seek approval, affiliation, and/or interpersonal similarity as a manner of reducing social distance” (p. 108). Divergence is defined as the use of accentuating speech between the self and the other. In

CAT, the motive behind using divergence is to “emphasize distinctiveness from one’s interlocutor, expressively highlighting contrasting group identities” (p. 108). Another core concept of CAT is *maintenance*. Maintenance is described as a strategy an individual can use where they persist in their original style of communicating in order to remain authentic or consistent, “regardless of the communicative behaviour of the interlocutor” (p.109).

CAT hypothesizes that individuals may modify their communicative strategies based on the personal idiosyncratic characteristics of their conversational partner (Giles and Soliz, 2014). Giles and Soliz (2014) use an example of friends debating over politics in order to explain CAT. If one friend understands that the other is highly sensitive to a particular political topic, they may avoid discussing the topic in conversation. As a result, the individual is making communicative adjustments in order to show respect for the other person. Alternatively, an individual can use divergent communicative strategies (nonaccommodative) in order to demonstrate their distinctiveness and potential pride in their social identity and political beliefs (p. 109).

The final core concept of CAT is *accommodation*. It is used as a general term in regard to the theory to represent various behaviors. Accommodation in CAT refers to “behaviours in which one or both of the individuals enact positive-oriented or conversationally appropriate behavior toward the other person” (p. 110). Underlying the concept of accommodation is that individuals “attune their communication to the needs and/or desires of their conversational partner” (p.110). Conversely, individuals may use non accommodative strategies such as behaviours where the individual fails to attune their communication to the needs of their conversational partner. This information will be beneficial to the MRP in regard to providing a theoretical framework in understanding the communicative tactics and strategies individuals use

online in order to accommodate their language to facilitate an effective and open discussion about veganism.

### **Research Methodology**

Critical discourse analysis, CAT, as well as a detailed content analysis through manual coding were used to address the research questions. A total of one hundred online discussion forum comments were analyzed and coded from the social media platform Reddit. Reddit is a social media platform that facilitates semi-anonymous discussions between users among differing communities. According to Kilgo et al. (2016), Reddit characterizes itself as “the front page of the Internet” (p.2). Reddit was chosen as the social media platform of choice for the MRP due to the divisive nature of the veganism debate and the affordance of anonymity and interactivity Reddit offers to its users to share their opinions. In order to use the social media service, users must create an account in which a pseudonym is given as a means to maintain partial anonymity (Ludwig, 2014). Kilgo et al. (2016) discuss the effects of anonymity on social media. The researchers state that anonymity can have various effects in online communication. As an example, they state that anonymity online can “lower social barriers by normalizing communication for participants in computer mediated discussion groups” (p.3). In anonymous online environments such as Reddit forums, the researchers suggest that users may feel more comfortable saying things that they otherwise would not feel comfortable saying in person. As a result of anonymity, it can be predicted that the opinions stated in regard to the veganism debate will be representative of the views of vegans and non-vegans.

In addition to the anonymity of Reddit, this social media platform was chosen for this MRP due to the ability of Reddit users to vote on shared content. Within each subreddit, all of the content is ranked and filtered using a “voting system in which registered users can give a post

either an ‘upvote’ for an interesting and positive contribution to the subreddit” (Ludwig, 2014, p.11). In contrast, users can ‘downvote’ a post that is “uninteresting or does not contribute to the subreddit” (p.11). For each post, a score is calculated by subtracting the total downvotes from the total upvotes. As a result, the highest ranked posts appear at the beginning of the subreddit thread (Ludwig, 2014). These features discussed above are distinctive of Reddit and make Reddit different from other popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Ludwig (2014) argues that “Facebook and Twitter emphasize personal information and relationships between users” (p. 13). Conversely, he argues that Reddit places a strong emphasis on its “shared, collective content” (p.13).

The website is divided into thousands of communities called subreddits. Subreddits are forums that are dedicated to a specific topic. Once a user registers for a Reddit account, they are able to subscribe to different subreddits. According to Ludwig (2014), subreddits can be defined as a “distinct community with its own purpose, standards, and readership” (p.10). The data from the top ten Reddit discussion forums between April 2018 and April 2019 regarding users’ thoughts on veganism will be used. More specifically, the top ten post within the subreddit ‘Ask Reddit’ (r/askreddit) that facilitate discussion regarding users’ perspectives of veganism will be chosen and analyzed. From each forum, the top ten comments will be analyzed in order to have a total of one hundred comments to analyze overall. In other words, this MRP will explore ten vegan-related forums that received the most engagement and were high in popularity during April 2018-April 2019. The discussion forums that discuss topics that directly addresses the veganism debate will be chosen in order to ensure the collection of data from both vegans and non-vegans. A code book that is made up of key themes was created from the collection and



analysis of comments, questions, and overarching themes of the discussion forums in order to conduct the research and to address the research questions.

Research was conducted deductively with the information that is collected from coding in order to draw connections and conclusions about the relevance of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to vegan rhetoric as well as the rhetorical strategies used by both sides of the vegan debate to generate meaningful discussion. A codebook made up of nine main codes was created and was used to guide the analysis of all ten forums. The main codes used to guide the analysis of all ten forums were environment, ethics, stigma, health, normalization/support, opposition, culture, economics, and rhetoric. From these main codes, secondary subcodes emerged in addition to tertiary subcodes to further organize and discern the data. Due to the fact that the research questions involve finding consistency, patterns, and keywords in vegan rhetoric, a quantitative section of the codebook will be included in order to count the frequency of codes mentioned in the forum comments. In the first subreddit forum analyzed for example, there is a subcode that is labelled 'Respect' under the main code currently named 'Support' (of the vegan lifestyle). Using this subcode, comments were then categorized if they fit into this sub code. Respectful comments such as "If you refuse to eat anything but non-animal products then it's your choice" were categorized into this subcode as they reflect support in the form of respect from the non-vegan community. It is important to note that some comments were coded under multiple codes and subcodes as they displayed multiple rhetorical perspectives. The figure below demonstrates an example of a comment that was coded into four main codes and numerous subcodes as the user was descriptive in their reasoning for following a non-vegan diet and used various types of rhetoric to make their argument against veganism.

**Table 1: Multiple Codes**

Example	Code	Subcode	Secondary Subcode
I actually really enjoy the meatless meats and my husband is vegetarian so we've <b>found a lot of plant based foods that I've actually enjoyed even more than meat.</b> (He makes this black bean rice burger that's so good you wouldn't even know it wasn't meat) But I also am not going to stop drinking milk eating eggs or honey. I think everything is good in moderation. Maybe we don't need to eat bacon everyday, or destroy an entire <b>ecosystem by over fishing</b> but I also don't think it'll work out in the long run for all humans to start eating only plants and all needing to take the same supplements. I'm sure companies would love to take advantage of that and cause a whole new world of problems. but <b>hey what do I know.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Environment</li> <li>● Normalization/Support</li> <li>● Opposition</li> <li>● Rhetoric</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Non-vegans causing global warming</li> <li>● Indifference</li> <li>● Recognition of good vegan foods</li> <li>● Ordinarity</li> <li>● Self-Reflection/Humility</li> <li>● Reasons to not be vegan</li> <li>● Stating being non-vegan</li> <li>● Personal anecdote</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fishing (Environment)</li> </ul>

These results can be related back to CAT in order to explore how individuals use rhetorical strategies such as respectful-toned language in the online discussion forum and how they accommodate their communicative strategies to the audience at hand to deliver their message successfully (vegan educating non-vegans and vice versa).

In the test analysis, one discussion forum was coded and connections that may lead to possible conclusions were found. The forum that was first analyzed was titled: "People who think it's wrong or bad to be a vegetarian or vegan, why?" According to Ludwig (2014), the user who creates a new subreddit takes responsibility as the moderator. The main role of the moderator is to "define the purpose of the subreddit and the kind of content that is appropriate and acceptable within it" (p.13). It is important to note that this discussion forum is labeled as 'serious replies only'; a filter that Reddit uses to keep a discussion serious and informed. By using this filter, the moderators of the forum are able to monitor any jocular answers or off-topic

comments. In ‘serious replies only’ posts, Reddit users are discouraged to post anything that is off-topic, as well as encouraged to downvote and/or report any comments violating the ‘serious replies only’ filter.

In the preliminary stages of this study, a test analysis was created after predicting codes and sub codes that could be used for the final MRP. Despite the analysis’ preliminary stage, it was predicted that main codes derived from themes such as ‘Health’, ‘Environment’, and ‘Stigma’ would continue to be observed as coding progressed. It was found that the preliminary results demonstrated that there are consistencies in terms of recurring themes within the forum replies. As an example, it was found that there was a total of 9 comments or mentions that were identified and coded under the main code of ‘Stigma’. The comments were then organized into sub codes such as micro aggressive comments, vegan superiority, and comments prefacing their comment by stating that they were not a vegan. Main codes such as ‘Stigma’ and ‘Support’ were used to collect data that guided answering RQ1 regarding the normalization and/or stigmatization of veganism online.

## **Findings**

### **Environment**

As stated in the literature review, environmental concerns are a significant determining factor in regard to an individual’s choice to be a vegan. Fox and Ward (2008) argue that a plant-based economy contributes to a healthier ecosystem by “reducing the impact on the environment and economies of pollution, intensive farming, and land degradation by grazing, affecting both developed and less-developed countries” (p.4). As such, one of the main codes used for the collection of data was the code ‘Environment’. Environmental rhetoric was mentioned 38 times throughout the forum comments, making it the least mentioned topic following health and ethical

concerns. It was found that the most discussed environmental-related topic in the forums coded was the negative impact of factory farming. Environmental rhetoric was found in comments as a way to demonstrate the users' reasonings for choosing to follow or not to follow a vegan diet. Vegan users argued that non-vegan diets contribute to factory farming, which in turn produces excess greenhouse gases such as methane gas from the raising of cattle. According to Baroni et al.'s (2006) study that evaluated the environmental impacts resulting from different dietary habits, they concluded that beef is in fact the "single food with the greatest impact on the environment" (p. 5). They argue that animals should not be considered as food production machines as they are "extremely polluting and very inefficient" (p. 6). The researchers highlight that when plants are transformed into animal proteins, most of the energy from these proteins are wasted and used by the animals through metabolic processes in addition to the production of non-edible tissue (bones, cartilage, etc.) (p.6). Other vegan users commented on the detrimental impact of overfishing, by stating: "Maybe we don't need to eat bacon every day, or *destroy an entire ecosystem by overfishing*". In addition to overfishing and greenhouse gases, two users argued that non-vegan diets support excess land usage which in turn negatively impacts the environment. One user wrote: "The only good argument I've heard for going vegan is that it would be easier to feed more people because *all of the pastures could become farm fields*." This comment is an example of a user being informed by research to state their opinion on the veganism debate.

In arguments against veganism, users were found to use environmental rhetoric as a means to argue that vegans may be negating their environmental efforts by following a plant-based diet. In a forum titled: "What annoys you the most about vegans?", a non-vegan user commented: "As a matter of fact, odds are that they're consuming products or carrying out habits

that possibly negate their efforts.” In other words, this user is arguing that in attempts to be more environmentally cautious, vegans may be negating their efforts by following a vegan lifestyle that may have the same if not more of a negative effect on the environment than following a non-vegan lifestyle. The findings provide evidence to support that both vegan and non-vegan users employ environmental rhetoric when discussing the veganism debate to support their arguments. These findings support the ideas discussed in the literature review by Harper (2012) in regard to human labour and race. As Harper (2012) argues, many vegan products exist that are not “fair trade, sweat-shop free, or free of current day human slavery practices” (p. 17-18). The above Reddit comment eludes to the notion of vegans negating their efforts of animal rights activism by consciously or unconsciously participating in efforts such as unethical human labour practices. The findings also provide evidence that race is not a feeble matter when it comes to veganism, and that individuals online recognize that the habits vegan individuals partake in can potentially negate their efforts of advocating for animal rights. These findings suggest that individuals on social media are informed of the hidden nuances that coincide with veganism such as practices of unethical human labour. These findings also suggest the potential hypocrisy that underlies what it means to be a vegan. From an online perspective, the internet affords its users with access to information regarding unethical vegan practices. As a result, the user mentioned above was able to voice their opinion of vegans participating in practices that negate their animal rights efforts.

## **Ethics**

Ethical concerns are one of the most cited reasons for individuals to be vegan. The main code ‘Ethics’ was used as a component of the codebook in order to collect information to answer the research questions, specifically RQ2 regarding rhetorical consistencies used by both vegans and non-vegans. Among ethics, health, and environmental concerns for choosing to be vegan, it

was found in the analyses that the majority of vegan commenters used ethical rhetoric to demonstrate their arguments in support of veganism. The findings support previous bodies of literature that state ethical concerns are the most common reasons why individuals choose to be vegan. The below figure demonstrates an example of a vegan's perspective of what should be understood about veganism using ethical rhetoric to support their argument.

**Table 2: Speciesism**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
What is something people should know about being vegetarians/vegans in general?	Ethics	Speciesism (Vegan)	“We value rights for humans because <i><b>we are sentient creatures</b></i> , meaning we have sense of self. We can experience the world. <i><b>We find it immoral to unnecessarily harm human beings, because it would negatively impact their sentient experience.</b></i> Killing someone is bad because we are robbing someone of their sentient experience. <i><b>Animals too, are sentient.</b></i> They avoid pain, and try to keep themselves alive. They form connections and have memories. As valuers of the protection of safe sentient experience, the right to live a life free of unnecessary pain and loss of sentence <i><b>should be extended to all sentient creatures, both human and nonhuman.</b></i> ”

Speciesism emerged as a secondary subcode to ethics and was found throughout multiple forums in the analysis. Cole and Morgan (2011) define speciesism as a form of prejudice against nonhuman animals and note that it is comparable to sexism and racism. As discussed in the literature review, the researchers regard speciesist discourse as being more controversial than discourse regarding following veganism for health reasons. This is due to the notion that by having beliefs that support animal rights and liberation, vegans are deliberately challenging mainstream food ethics by rejecting the ideology of speciesism (Greenebaum, 2016). The above figure demonstrates a vegan user's position towards speciesism and argues that animals should be treated with respect and dignity as they are sentient beings just like humans.

Another ethical argument that was found throughout the comments from non-vegans was the concept of vegan superiority. Vegan superiority was mentioned 21 times within the total

comments coded. Preceding vegan superiority, the subcode ‘Animal Rights’ had a total of seventeen total mentions. The figure below includes an example of a comment coded under the subcode ‘vegan superiority’ and another comment coded under the subcode ‘animal rights’.

**Table 3: Vegan Superiority & Animal Rights**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[J9]: Why is there such a stigma against vegans?	Ethics	Vegan Superiority	“It's because of the <i>self righteous vegans</i> who think not being a vegan means you support animal abuse. As an Atheist, I know what it's like to deal with unnecessary stigma, but I still eat meat.”
[E3]: Why aren't you vegan?	Ethics	Animal Rights	“i am, i cannot possibly imagine thinking a <i>snack to me is worth more than someone's literal being and life.</i> ”

## Stigma

Stigma was used as a main code in the data analysis as it directly pertains to research question one. One of the main subcodes that emerged was users explicitly stating what side of the veganism debate they were one. Out of 31 total comments explicitly supporting one side of the debate, it was found that 11 of these users were vegan and 20 were non vegan.

Another stigma subcode that emerged from the data collection from non-vegan users was the concept of vegan superiority. As stated above, a total of 21 comments mentioned the concept of vegan superiority. The subcode vegan superiority is an example of a subcode that was categorized both in the main codes of ‘ethics’ and ‘stigma’. In study one of Bresnahan et al. (2016)’s analyses of the communal food hypothesis and vegan stigma, the researchers state that anger occurs as a response to a personal offense. In relation to veganism, it is argued that non-vegans experience anger because they believe that “vegans are judgmental and believe they are morally superior to people who eat meat” (p.8). The below figure demonstrates comments made

by non-vegan users that argue they do not like vegans because vegans believe they are superior based on their dietary choices, further strengthening the stigma towards vegans.

**Table 4: Vegan Superiority: Non-Vegan Perspective**

Topic	Example
People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	"People who are rabid vegans don't realize it requires a <i>great deal of privilege</i> to be so selective about food. I have no issue with a person's dietary choices."
-	"It's not harmless for the environment, it's not tastier or more nutritious, not everyone can do it like rabid vegans claim, it's actually kind of expensive, it's disrespectful to pick and whine about things someone else cooked for you, and you're essentially still killing something so you can eat and that's almost unavoidable. <i>You are no better or worse than anyone else.</i> "
-	"But the ethical ones get crazy and make such a big deal about it. If you can be an ethical vegetarian and not tell everyone you see about it, then that's cool too. <i>It's just soooo many standards upon their soapboxes</i> "
-	It's more an issue about how <i>they try to make others look bad based on what they themselves eat</i> . Seriously no one gives a shit.
-	"I have heard of the factual basis of it being unhealthy unless you supplement the vast amount of deficiencies in those diets. But never a vegetarian or vegan being called a bad person. Unlike the reverse where militant vegetarians and <i>vegans demonize anyone who doesn't buy into the cult mentality.</i> "
-	"The real question is <i>why are vegans so mean to people that eat meat lmao</i> "

## Health

Alongside environmental and ethical concerns, one of the determining factors for individuals to transition to a vegan lifestyle is for health reasons. The findings show that both vegans and non-vegans use health-related rhetoric regarding their respective diets and provide reasoning as to why they follow their dietary lifestyle. Out of the three main reasons why individuals are vegan (environment, ethics, health), health was the second most mentioned topic as ethical concerns was the most mentioned and environmental concerns was the least mentioned. A common rhetorical pattern found throughout the ten forums studied was vegan



users stating the health benefits of a vegan diet. The second forum coded was titled: “If there was sufficient evidence that going vegan is better for your health, for the animals and for the environment, would you consider going vegan? Why/why not?”. A vegan user commented: “There is sufficient evidence that it is beneficial for animals (they won't be killed or tortured), *Your health (less risk of certain cancers, better digestion, better kidney function, etc.)* and it is better for the environment (less factory farming, less methane gas production from cows, less pollution and waste from slaughterhouses)”. Conversely, non-vegan users used health rhetoric to argue the benefits of following a non-vegan diet. In a forum discussing the best arguments for being vegan and the best arguments for being non-vegan, a user describes the health downsides of following a vegan diet. The comment reads: “I'm a meat eater and I haven't heard any good reasons to go vegan. But I have heard about a lot of vegans getting sick because they *don't have the proper nutrients for their body.*” The user is informed by research and uses health rhetoric in order to support their argument and add credibility to their position.

### **Normalization/Support**

In order to collect data to answer RQ1, a ‘Normalization/Support’ code was created. Any comments that pertained to the normalization or support of the vegan lifestyle was categorized into this section. One of the main sub codes that emerged from this section of the data collection was ‘Respect’. The majority of comments organized into this subcode were written by non-vegans that supported the vegan cause. As an example, a comment from the third forum coded read: “Not my lifestyle, but if that what they choose, *let them be.* Being vegan doesn't hurt anyone.” This comment was coded under the subcode of respect as it demonstrates a non-vegan being open to the concept that vegan individuals have the autonomy to choose their lifestyle and that they can live in harmony with non-vegans.

Another main theme that emerged from this section was the concept of ordinariness. Using this rhetorical framework, veganism is described as being simple to follow and an easy lifestyle for anyone to adopt. An interesting example of this type of rhetoric is comment [B8] that was written by a non-vegan. The user describes veganism as being easy to follow and normalizes the use of meat alternatives by stating that they enjoy a wide variety of plant-based foods. Although the user does not follow veganism, the comment is an example of how veganism continues to be normalized through demonstrating how ordinary and simple the vegan lifestyle can be. This user endorses veganism by using personal anecdotes such as making black bean rice burgers and describes meat alternatives as being more enjoyable than meat. The comment below demonstrates an example of a non-vegan endorsing veganism through rhetorical strategies that emanate the ordinariness of vegan foods.

**Table 5: Ordinariness**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[B8]:</b> If there was sufficient evidence that going vegan is better for your health, for the animals and for the environment, would you consider going vegan? Why/why not?	Normalization/Support	Ordinariness (Simplicity)	<i><b>“I actually really enjoy the meatless meats</b> and my husband is vegetarian so <b>we’ve found a lot of plant based foods that I’ve actually enjoyed even more than meat.</b> (He makes this black bean rice burger that’s <b>so good you wouldn’t even know it wasn’t meat</b>) But I also am not going to stop drinking milk eating eggs or honey. I think everything is good in moderation. Maybe we don’t need to eat bacon everyday, or destroy an entire ecosystem by over fishing but I also don’t think it’ll work out in the long run for all humans to start eating only plants and all needing to take the same supplements. I’m sure companies would love to take advantage of that and cause a whole new world of problems. but hey what do I know.”</i>

Based on the figure above, the user is using ordinariness as a rhetorical tool to promote veganism. This user mentions vitamin supplementation in addition to the simplicity of the vegan lifestyle. Multiple instances of ordinariness can be found within this comment, such as the user making the argument that vegan cooking is in some cases easier than cooking meat. The user

also uses personal stories to strengthen their argument for veganism by stating that their daily tasks are not any harder for the average individual. As discussed in the literature review, Snejder and Molder (2009) state that vegan individuals are able to draw on discursive devices such as suggesting that vegan meals are ordinary and easy to prepare. This logic argues that by showcasing veganism as ordinary, vegans resist the notion that veganism is complicated and consequently protect veganism as an ideology. In addition to this, Cole and Morgan (2011) argue that if vegans frame their lifestyle as being easy and attainable, “discourses of omnivory would be in a more precarious position on discursive terrain landscaped by vegans themselves, and populated with difficult debates about speciesism, violence, and exploitation” (p.142).

## **Opposition**

In addition to the main code ‘Stigma’, the code ‘Opposition’ was created in order to organize comments that were perceived to be directly in opposition of the vegan lifestyle. As an example, a comment left on the first forum coded read: “People who are rabid vegans *don’t realize* it requires a great deal of privilege to be so selective about food.” From this comment, the subcode ‘Epistemic discrimination’ emerged as a form of opposition to the vegan lifestyle. As stated previously, epistemic discrimination is a bias against individuals as epistemic agents. In other words, epistemic discrimination is the action of questioning an individual’s capacity to hold or acquire knowledge, beliefs, or proper understanding (Horta, 2018). The above comment is a demonstration of epistemic discrimination as the user discounts vegans’ ability to understand their privilege and insinuates that only privileged individuals are able to be vegan.

A theme that emerged from this code was the subcode of ‘misunderstanding’. In a forum discussing what non-vegans should understand about vegetarians and vegans, multiple vegan users shared their perspective. Four vegan users alluded to non-vegans being misinformed or

misunderstanding the motives for following a vegan diet. The figure below demonstrates the rhetoric used by vegans who believe that non-vegans have a misconstrued perspective on veganism as a whole. Edwards (2013) argues that as members of a minority group, vegans tend to be misunderstood by non-vegans and often stereotyped as “judgmental or difficult to deal with” (pg. 111). It is argued that when individuals feel excluded (vegans in this case), “it is quite often a result of misunderstanding than of deliberate ostracism” (pg. 114). These findings of misunderstanding reveal that vegans can feel alienated, whether or not the perceived ostracism is real. These results demonstrate that vegans acknowledge that they are misunderstood, which can lead to self-consciousness and fear of others’ judgement.

**Table 6: Opposition: Misunderstanding (Vegan Perspective)**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
What is something people should know about being vegetarians/vegans in general?	Opposition	Misunderstanding	<b>[I4]: “<i>We don’t feel superior as many think we do</i> and only the loud type people push their selves on others, we’re not all in your face types. Also it seriously hurts some of us to have a loved one “joke” about bacon or steak etc”.</b>
	-	-	<b>[I5]: “<i>Being vegan is not as hard as many people think</i>. Being vegan doesn’t automatically means that you are healthy. Veganism is not a diet. Is a lifestyle and under that lifestyle are many types of diets (raw vegan, Whole Foods Plant Based, Raw till 4, Engine 2, High Carb Low Fat, etc) We are just normal people who are against animal exploitation and cruelty. If you meet an annoying vegan, that person is just an annoying person who happens to be vegan. Just like if I meet an annoying carnist, that person is just an annoying person who is a carnist.”</b>
	-	-	<b>[I6]: “<i>Its not an instant sign of an eating disorder</i>, and you can eat vegan and be healthy. You can also eat just pure junk food and eat an unhealthy vegan diet - <i>vegan doesn't mean whole food plant based</i>.”</b>
	-	-	<b>[I8]: “<i>Living in accordance with your beliefs is a relief, not a burden</i>. I didn't realize how much psychological work it was to eat animals while caring about animals and being against animal abuse, until I'd stopped eating them.”</b>

## Culture

It was important to have a main code to organize comments that discussed veganism from a cultural perspective. Through the collection of one hundred forum comments, 15 comments mentioned culture. A subcode that was used under the main code culture was the communal food hypothesis. As stated in the literature review, the communal food hypothesis is a notion that states that breaking bread together “expresses close comradeship” (Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu, 2016, p.5). Comments in the reddit forums were found to implicitly touch on the communal food hypothesis. For example, a comment found in the first forum coded read: “*It’s disrespectful to pick and whine about things someone else cooked for you, and you’re essentially still killing something so you can eat and that’s almost unavoidable.*”. This is a comment from a non-vegan voicing their opinion that vegans are perceived to be disrespectful if they do not partake in communal food practices. The findings demonstrate that the communal food hypothesis is prevalent in online rhetoric and also demonstrates that vegans continue to be isolated and judged from non-vegans by not eating what others choose to eat. In addition to this, the findings demonstrate that vegans challenge the normative meat-eating culture. As discussed in the literature review by Twine (2014), vegans “challenge the normative scripts of happiness and commensality in a dominant meat and dairy consuming culture” (p.623). The forum comment mentioned above suggests that non-vegan users feel uncomfortable with vegans challenging their beliefs. This comment provides evidence towards the idea that non-vegans view vegans to hold a killjoy mentality. It can be suggested that online platforms such as Reddit facilitate the continuation of the vegan killjoy stigma as the platform offers semi-anonymity to its users. This evidence also poses the question of whether veganism will continue to be

stigmatized online due to the platform Reddit’s ability to keep its users semi-anonymous and free of the social consequences of stating one’s opinion to another in a face-to-face environment.

One interesting comment that used cultural rhetoric to defend the practices of non-vegans used Native American culture. This comment was not in the top ten comments of this forum; however, it was included as an extra in this study because it demonstrates an example of cultural rhetoric used by non-vegans from a historical perspective. From a colonial perspective, Wrenn (2017) highlights that a criticism of veganism is its apparent “failure to embrace multiculturalism to the point of aggravating inequality for many demographics and complicating alliance building” (p.90). In addition, Wrenn (2017) argues that animal rights movements have long been associated with “whiteness” (p.150), and as a result have been noted as a major deterrent to demographics of color. The example below provides evidence of how racialized groups such as Native Americans use animals as a means of survival and provides evidence to defend and justify non-vegan cultural practices.

**Table 7: Cultural Practices**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[F11]:</b> [Serious] Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	Culture	Food Practices (Native-American Culture)	“I always hear it’s not right to kill an animal for food. Yet, <i>we’ve been killing and farming animals for generations</i> just for food and other products that are key to our survival. <i>For example, Native Americans use the bladder of a buffalo for a water bag and they use parts of the stomach for medicine.</i> This goes along with eating the meat.”

In regard to Harper (2010)’s work on the issue of race amongst middle-class white vegans, no comments in the data collection were found to explicitly provide evidence for “institutionalized whiteness as the norm” (p. 24). However, the notion of vegan privilege and middle-class lifestyles were found to be insinuated by non-vegan users in their comments. The

below figure provides evidence for the use of vegan privilege rhetoric and middle-class rhetoric but does not provide evidence to support that race (whiteness as the norm) plays a role in vegan activism.

**Table 8: Middle-Class Vegan Privilege Rhetoric**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[G7]: People who are not vegans, what annoys you the most about vegans?	Ethics	Vegan Superiority	"I'm vegan but <i>I absolutely hate the self entitlement attached to most vegans</i> , I'll usually never mention that I am because of that stigma."
[J9]: Why is there such a stigma against vegans?	-		"It's because of <i>the self righteous vegans who think not being a vegan means you support animal abuse</i> . As an Atheist, I know what it's like to deal with unnecessary stigma, but I still eat meat."
[A9]: People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?			"People who are rabid <i>vegans don't realize it requires a great deal of privilege</i> to be so selective about food. I have no issue with a person's dietary choices."

## Economics

Economics was used as a main code in the data collection as one of the main arguments against veganism is how costly it is to follow the diet. A common pattern found throughout the non-vegan users' comments was that being vegan is unattainable and cost-inefficient. An example of this type of assumption can be found in the comments of the sixth forum. The question of the forum was titled: "Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?". A user answered: "For veganism- Animal cruelty for eating meat- *Vegan diet is expensive*". In contrast to the viewpoint that veganism is expensive, there was a common pattern found that consisted of arguments that veganism is in-fact cost efficient and potentially less costly than a non-vegan diet. A vegan user shared their experience in the ninth forum coded titled: "What should people know about vegetarians/vegans in general?" They wrote: "*I'm relatively poor, but switching to this*

*lifestyle has saved me money for sure.* Getting all of your vitamins is simple when buying enriched food, or you can just take a multivitamin if it's of great concern." In addition to this comment, another user in a separate forum stated that the reason why they do not eat meat is that it is expensive. The user wrote: "*Meat is expensive*, I've never liked meat that much anyway, it forces me to always be conscious of what I'm putting in my body, it reduces my environmental impact, and the not having animals be killed for the sake of my indulgence is a pretty sweet bonus." The findings echo the literature that argues that veganism is not inherently expensive. Conversely, the findings do highlight the assumption that veganism is an expensive lifestyle. Both sides of the veganism debate were found to use economic rhetoric to support their side of the argument and facilitate discussion.

### **Rhetoric**

Rhetoric was used as a main code in order to collect data on the rhetorical strategies employed by both sides of the veganism debate to facilitate efficient communication between parties. Various rhetorical strategies were found to be common between both vegans and non-vegans, with different subcodes emerging throughout each forum. A main theme that was found throughout the forums coded was asceticism. Cole and Morgan (2008) suggest that vegans tend to be viewed as strict and that they hold restrictive dietary beliefs. They state that non-vegans will imply asceticism towards vegans by prefixing 'vegan(s)' with adjectives that suggest vegans deny themselves of pleasure. For example, in comment A9, a user writes: "People who are *rabid vegans* don't realize it requires a great deal of privilege to be so selective about food.". By stating that vegans are 'rabid', the user is suggesting that all vegans are extreme in their dietary beliefs. Cole and Morgan (2008) suggest that this type of rhetoric is used by non-vegans to avoid associations between veganism and enjoyable eating experiences "despite research



findings on the broader variety of plant-based foods enjoyed in vegetarian and vegan diets” (p. 141). The figure below highlights the findings found in the data collection and provides evidence for the use of ascetic rhetoric by non-vegans. Asceticism will be discussed further with additional examples in RQ1.

**Table 9: Rhetorical Strategy: Asceticism**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[C1]:</b> People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	Rhetoric	Asceticism (Strict)	“They're doing what they think is right and <i>if they can stick to it</i> and be healthy all the luck to em.”
<b>[F4]:</b> Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	-	-	“I'm not sure if this counts, since the definition of being vegan is, "a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose," but I personally think that people who are recovering or are anorexic have a very legitimate reason to eat meat, since their life and health is often at risk. Also, people with multiple, severe allergies to common vegan foods, such as wheat, nuts, etc., which would <i>severely limit their food choices on top of their limitations already</i> , I understand.”

Another common theme found throughout the data collection was the use of personal anecdotes and stories from both non-vegans and vegan users. As discussed in the literature review, Greenebaum (2012) highlights strategies vegans can use to successfully advocate their cause. One strategy Greenebaum (2012) suggests is to take small steps to advocate for veganism so non-vegans are not scared away. “This includes introducing new foods to omnivores, which are often perceived as being tasteless, boring, and gross” (p. 319). She also suggests that vegans should use their story to promote the health benefits of following a vegan diet. In the findings, there was evidence of vegans using personal anecdotes as a rhetorical strategy such as sharing their health stories to promote veganism. The below figure demonstrates an example found

within the data collection by a vegan user that uses personal anecdotes as a method for promoting their lifestyle.

**Table 10: Personal Anecdote**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[F5]: Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	Rhetoric	Personal Anecdote	<i>“4 year vegan here, and I LOVE it! My only regret is I wish I'd done it sooner My range of foods has actually drastically increased, as now I cook with all the different types of plants instead of three basic animals. My cooking has become so much more advanced, flavorful, creative, even on basic things. I can make at least twenty different rices, with flavors I would have never imagined before Veganism. My health improved, drastically. I went in 100% for the animals, but incidentally, the symptoms of my Psoriatic Arthritis completely disappeared.</i> I don't even take medication anymore. Turns out dairy is incredibly inflammatory, who knew Everytime I eat, I feel happy and peaceful, knowing I'm nourishing my body while not harming another. It's helped immensely with my depression and anxiety I talk about veganism, a lot. Not because I think I'm better than anyone, or trying to push an agenda, but because it truly is a wonderful way to live, for the animals, for the planet, and for myself”

## Analysis & Discussion

**Research Question 1:** Is there evidence that veganism is normalized or stigmatized on social media platforms?

The findings indicate that there is indeed evidence that veganism is both normalized and stigmatized on social media platforms. However, it is important to note that the extent to which veganism is both normalized and stigmatized on social media platform differs. In total, 108 mentions surrounding stigmatization towards veganism were found and 61 total mentions of the normalization and support of veganism were found. These findings suggest that veganism continues to be stigmatized more often than being normalized in online conversations.

One of the most common approaches both vegans and non-vegans used in the forum comments to initiate conversation was to state which side of the veganism debate they were on. As mentioned in the findings, 20 non-vegan users and 11 vegan users explicitly state their dietary lifestyle at the beginning of their respective comment. The findings suggest that more non-vegan users may explicitly state their stance on the veganism debate in order to avoid stigmatization

and judgement. Conversely, the findings suggest that vegans may not explicitly state their dietary choices due to fear of judgement and to facilitate effective debate by avoiding using the term vegan; a term known to be divisive and controversial.

Another commonality found throughout the forums coded was the use of asceticism rhetoric by non-vegan users. Asceticism was assigned as a subcode under the main codes of ‘Stigma’ and ‘Rhetoric’. In total, there were 22 total mentions of veganism being described as an ascetic lifestyle. The figure below illustrates how individuals from three separate forums use ascetic rhetoric in order to help explain why they choose to not follow a vegan diet. Povey, Wellens, and Conner (2001) conclude in their study that if diets are understood on a continuum of restrictiveness, with carnism on one end and veganism on the other, “attitudes and intentions could be described as becoming less positive as the participant moves from their own position on the continuum towards the other” (p.22). The researchers state that both meat eaters and vegans both have positive attitudes towards vegetarianism, as vegetarianism “represents a compromise between the two diets, drawing on aspects of both carnism and veganism” (p.22). In relation to Povey et al.’s (2001) study, comment A7 provides an example of a non-vegan stating that they are not against vegetarianism; however, they believe veganism is too restrictive.

**Table 11: Asceticism**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[A7]: People who think it’s wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	Stigma	Asceticism (Strict)	"Vegetarian isn't bad, but <i>Vegan has such restrictions that it really</i> . It's just kind of one of those things where everyone can't do it."
[C6]: What do you think of vegans?	-	-	“That they're probably decent cooks. <i>It takes work committing to that lifestyle</i> and if they like good tasting food, they're probably experimenting a lot in the kitchen since <i>they're already so limited on what they can have.</i> ”
[E2]: Why aren’t you vegan?	-	-	“This seems a like a pretty annoying troll question but I’ll answer instead of just saying mmm meat is good. I am vegetarian, I don’t have a desire to be vegan. I don’t eat a lot of dairy and eggs but I do eat some. I like

			cheese, ice cream etc. also I went vegetarian for some very specific health reasons going vegan wouldn't further help those health issues. <b><i>Also going full vegan seems like a huge hassle</i></b> especially eating out so it's just not in the cards for me. Lastly, just let people eat what they want"
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Despite the research indicating a strong continuation of vegan stigma online, the findings also demonstrate that the support and normalization of veganism is occurring. The findings highlight common normalization strategies used by vegans in their forum responses involve the concept of ordinariness. As stated by Snejder and Molder (2009), displaying ordinariness is an “important and relevant activity for rebutting the notion that veganism is a complicated and unhealthy lifestyle” (p.627). In relation to ordinariness, the researchers highlight the importance of the rhetorical device *minimization*. The figure below demonstrates how a vegan user explained their position on veganism using minimization to strengthen their argument.

**Table 12: Minimization Through Ordinariness**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[I2]:</b> What is something people should know about being vegetarians/vegans in general?	Normalization/Support	Ordinariness (Simplicity)	“If you know how to cook (even a little) and have a general sense of nutrition, going vegan is <b><i>incredibly easy</i></b> . I’m relatively poor, but switching to this lifestyle has saved me money for sure. <b><i>Getting all of your vitamins is simple when buying enriched food, or you can just take a multivitamin if it’s of great concern. I don’t feel like my daily tasks are any harder.</i></b> A lot of things are already vegan, and <b><i>finding out is as simple as reading a few words on a package.</i></b> Cooking vegan food really takes <b><i>no more time- I’d say it takes even less in some instances,</i></b> since you don’t have to cook things as thoroughly in fear of disease.”

In Snejder and Molder’s (2009) study, the researchers found that vegan individuals promote supplementation as a minimal or routine procedure. The findings in this MRP study also demonstrate that vegans frame supplementation as a routine practice, with the user stating in the above figure that “you can just take a multivitamin if it’s of great concern.” By vegans normalizing the practice of taking pills to maintain their health, they are downplaying the

“unusual character of this procedure and at the same time downplaying the reasons that may underlie the procedure, such as veganism being an unhealthy lifestyle” (p. 627).

A common theme found in the normalization code was the concept of ordinariness. 7 mentions of ordinariness were found throughout the forum comments. Both vegans and non-vegans were found to use normalization rhetoric by arguing that veganism does not have to be complicated and that it can even be a more simplistic and attainable diet than consuming meat. The figure below demonstrates ordinariness rhetoric by arguing that since they stopped consuming meat, they found that cooking was easier as they were not worried about cooking the food through to avoid health risks. As discussed in the literature review, ordinariness rhetoric is an effective strategy to advocate for veganism and “protect it as an overall ideology” (Sneijder and Molder, 2009, p. 621).

**Table 13: Ordinariness as Effective Strategy for Vegans**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[D10]:</b> Vegans and vegetarians, what is the reason why you don't eat meat?	Normalization/Support	Ordinariness (Simplicity)	“Meat is difficult to prepare. You are basically handling a biohazard until it is cooked. <i><b>I found it was a lot easier to cook every night</b></i> when I wasn't worrying about handling meat.”

**Research Question 2a:** Can rhetorical consistencies and patterns be identified in online discussions about veganism? If so, what are they?

Rhetorical consistencies and patterns can be identified in online discussions in regard to veganism. Aside from the normalization and stigmatization rhetoric described in detail above, users drew upon other types of rhetoric to discuss veganism. A large portion of individuals used health rhetoric to participate in discussion. Fetissenko (2011) argues that out of all arguments for animal rights, “the human health argument is more likely than any other to be perceived as relevant by the movement’s target audience” (164). They state that health effects of diets are

neither immediate nor certain. Immediacy and certainty are two conditions that have to be present in order for consequences to be highly effective (p. 164). As health effects on diet are gradual over time, many individuals continue to consume unhealthy foods even if they are informed of the unhealthy consequences. However, Fetissenko (2011) argues that because of the “less-than-perfect” (p.164) effectiveness of the health argument, realistic expectations of success can be made as one cannot outright reject the argument. He argues that those who advocate for animal rights such as vegans, need to be “well versed in the latest research on human nutrition in order to make the moral argument as authoritative and convincing as possible” (p.167). In addition to this, Fetissenko argues that as long as the general public continues to believe that the consumption of animal products is beneficial for human health and that giving up animal products is solely an act of altruism, “the appeal of the moral argument will remain limited” (p.167). In other words, the ethical argument will not be effective as long as the public believes the consumption of animal products is in their best health interests. From this logic, it can be argued that the debate of veganism will continue to be ineffective for vegans until new ethical arguments are created for veganism. It can also be suggested that because of the perpetuity of the debate, there may not be changes in the discourses surrounding veganism online over time. Based on this literature, perhaps vegans can employ more health rhetoric in their discussions on veganism in order to educate non-vegans on the negative health effects of the consumption of animal products.

An interesting finding that was not expected before data collection was the connection between veganism and eating disorders. 3 of the comments coded from three separate forums discussed eating disorders and presented an association of eating disorders with veganism. A recurring theme that emerged from the data was disordered eating in non-vegan and vegan diets.

Heiss, Coffino, and Hormes (2017) conducted a study in which they study the eating behaviors of both vegans and non-vegans. They were driven to conduct this study due to the inconclusive findings of the previous studies that compared the eating behaviors between vegans and omnivores. They state that the inclusive findings of previous studies may have been due to the fact that they were “unable to obtain sufficiently large samples of vegan participants to make meaningful comparisons” (p. 129). Their study suggests that ultimately vegans are not significantly different from non-vegans in terms of their eating attitudes and behaviors. There was a slight difference in terms of vegans demonstrating healthier attitudes and behaviors towards food, however the researchers found that non-vegans and vegans share similar behaviors. The figure below illustrates the three comments made by both vegan and non-vegan users regarding eating disorders.

**Table 14: Health Rhetoric: Eating Disorders**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[D6]:</b> Vegans and vegetarians, what is the reason why you don't eat meat?	Health	Eating Disorder	<i>“I went through an anorexia phase</i> during high school and developed an irrational fear of getting fat as I gained weight back. At the time, <i>I associated "fat" with meat</i> so I decided to make a lifestyle change of cutting it out. It's been 7 years since I've been pescetarian and never really have a craving for it anymore.”
<b>[F4]:</b> [Serious] Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	-	-	“I'm not sure if this counts, since the definition of being vegan is, "a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose," but <i>I personally think that people who are recovering or are anorexic have a very legitimate reason to eat meat, since their life and health is often at risk.</i> Also, people with multiple, severe allergies to common vegan foods, such as wheat, nuts, etc., which would severely limit their food choices on top of their limitations already, I understand.”
<b>[I6]:</b> What is something people should know about being vegan/vegans in general?	-	-	<i>“Its not an instant sign of an eating disorder,</i> and you can eat vegan and be healthy. You can also eat just pure junk food and eat an unhealthy vegan diet - vegan doesn't mean whole food plant based.”

Heiss et al., (2017) suggest that a common nutrition myth is that the avoidance of eating meat and eating disorders are connected. It was found in the data collection that a vegan user admitted to restricting meat from their diet due to disordered eating. Comment D6 provides evidence to support the correlation between veganism and disordered eating. This finding directly opposes the research done by Heiss et al. (2017) that suggest that veganism and eating disorders are correlated. In comment D6, the user associated meat with fat and as a result spiraled into having an eating disorder, specifically anorexia.

Heiss et al. (2017) suggest that the myth stems from the notion that avoiding and/or restricting certain foods from a diet perpetuates disordered eating habits. Generally speaking, vegans do tend to replace animal-based foods with lower calorie, plant-based foods such as fruits and vegetables. The researchers argue that in previous studies done on the relationship between veganism and disordered eating, questions have been unfairly scored and as a result misrepresented vegans' eating habits. For example, questions from previous studies have been structured as: "Do you watch exactly what you eat?" "Do you deliberately eat foods that are slimming?" Vegans tended to score higher on these questions due to the nature of the vegan diet and as a result has led researchers to conclude that there is a higher prevalence of disordered eating in vegans. In contrast to the findings of Heiss et al. (2017), this study has found evidence of vegans admitting to restrictive and disordered eating habits. Therefore, it can be argued that the avoidance of meat is not a myth but perhaps a driving force that leads to disordered eating habits of vegans. Further research could be done in regard to the relationship between meat avoidant tendencies and disordered eating.

Comments F4 and I6 discuss the misinformation regarding veganism and eating disorders. Barthels et al. (2019) study the relationship between orthorexia eating behavior and



veganism. They describe orthorexic eating behavior as a “fixation on only eating foods perceived as healthy” (p.1). The researchers state that previous studies revealed that orthorexic eating habits are more evident in vegan individuals. However, the basic motives for following a vegan diet were not studied in previous studies. As with other similar findings previously stated in the literature review, this study also concluded that animal rights were the most important motive for choosing to follow a vegan diet (Barthels et al., p.3). The study found that choosing to follow veganism for health motivations is significantly linked to orthorexic eating behaviors. In this study, the researchers argue that the most common reasons for following a vegan diet (animal rights, politics, and environment) are “not associated with orthorexic eating behavior” (Barthels et al, p.4). Therefore, the underlying motives for following a vegan diet are indicative of the onset of orthorexia (health related motives) as opposed to the overall vegan diet itself for causing orthorexia. Comment I6 alludes to the preconceived notion that vegans only eat healthy foods and have disordered eating habits such as orthorexia. This unfounded assumption may contribute to the stigmatization of vegans due to the idea that in order to be vegan, one can only eat healthy, plant-based whole foods and strive to always make healthful choices.

Another rhetorical consistency that was found between the vegan and non-vegan commenters was the notion of vegan superiority and privilege. In the data collected, there were 21 total mentions regarding vegan superiority and privilege. As discussed previously in the findings section, there is a tendency for non-vegans to view vegans as assuming an air of superiority being more privileged. The findings suggest that non-vegans may use vegan superiority rhetoric as a method to distance themselves from the vegan identity and justify their own identity. An example of this notion can be found in the comment J2 displayed in the figure below.

**Table 15: Vegan Superiority: Challenging Unspoken Norms**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[J2]:</b> Why is there such a stigma against vegans?	Ethical	Morality	“It's basically the same stigma against people who don't drink. There are socially accepted norms, behaviours that go unquestioned because, you know, they're just what people do. So when you're at a party, and you offer someone a beer, or a hotdog, and they say "no, thank you, I don't drink" or "no, thank you, I'm vegan", their very actions and beliefs confront you to that unspoken norm. Their very presence there forces you to question, consciously or not, all those unchallenged beliefs you have. And it's fine. You can go through that entire line of questioning and still come out thinking that it's okay for you to drink beer and eat meat, and maybe you change your mind on some things. But people will resent you for creating that shadow of doubt within themselves”

In addition to the health rhetoric demonstrated by users in the online forums, environmental rhetoric played a significant role in the discussions between parties. Fetissenko (2011) argues that the environmental argument for veganism is likely to have a narrower appeal to the broader audience. Despite the narrow appeal of the environmental argument, he argues that there are several advantages of taking this approach as opposed to an ethical argumentative approach. In contrast to ethical arguments for veganism that are abstract such as questioning whether animals possess rights or not, the environmental effects of animal agriculture are derived from scientific fact. As a result, Fetissenko (2011) argues that due to the strong evidence of the negative environmental effects of the animal industry, “it is impossible to dispute that raising animals for food is an incredibly resource-intensive enterprise that also creates significantly greater amounts of air and water pollution and makes a larger contribution to global warming than plant agriculture” (p.167). Similar arguments were found to be used by multiple vegans in the Reddit comments. The figure below demonstrates the use of environmental rhetoric used by vegans to argue that animal agriculture is one of the greatest contributors of greenhouse gases.

**Table 16: Vegan Perspective on Animal Agriculture & Greenhouse Gases**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
<b>[B2]:</b> If there was sufficient evidence that going vegan is better for your health, for the animals and for the environment, would you consider going vegan? Why/why not?	Environment	Benefits of Veganism (Factory Farming)	“There is sufficient evidence that it is beneficial for animals (they won't be killed or tortured), Your health (less risk of certain cancers, better digestion, better kidney function, etc.) and it is better for the <i>environment (less factory farming, less methane gas production from cows, less pollution and waste from slaughter houses)</i> ”
<b>[I10]:</b> What is something people should know about being vegetarians/vegans in general?	-	Pollution	“Environmentalists that realize that <i>livestock is responsible for unnecessary land-use</i> (which land could remain forest otherwise), <i>methane and ammonia pollution (greenhouse gasses)</i> , <i>pollution of the groundwater and open water with nitrogen and phosphate causing eutrophication/algae bloom</i> . Additionally one could argue that solving world hunger is an environmental issue, but it could also be a separate humanitarian reason to become vegan.”
<b>[J8]:</b> Why is there such a stigma against vegans?	-	Non-Vegans Causing Global Warming	“ <i>Eating meat is ingrained in our culture</i> and telling people basically that it's wrong will probably upset them in some way because it's so standard and looked past. Once you point out what's wrong people think you're saying they are doing these things and they'll get defensive about it. It's upsetting to learn something you don't even think about is doing damage to your body, <i>the planet</i> , and all the animals involved.”

As demonstrated above, these vegan users are using scientific fact to argue against animal agriculture. For example, in comment I10 brings up three scientifically proven environmental effects of animal agriculture. The comment states that animal agriculture contributes to unnecessary land use, methane and ammonia pollution, as well as the pollution of groundwater and open water. These users were effective in using environmental rhetoric to defend their position on veganism due to the fact that these environmental effects of the consumption of meat are highly difficult to dispute.

In contrast to comments from vegan users stating the environmental facts against animal agriculture, non-vegan users used environmental rhetoric to argue against veganism. The figure

below displays instances of non-vegan users using environmental rhetoric to argue that veganism negatively affects the environment. These findings suggest that there are valid arguments for and against veganism from an environmental perspective. It was found that both parties used scientifically backed logic in order to make arguments that were credible.

**Table 17: Non-Vegan Perspectives of Veganism: Environment**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[A7]: People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	Environment	Vegan Causing Global Warming (Land usage)	"It's inefficient. <i>There's enough food resources on Earth to feed 10-11 Billion people, but not 10 billion Vegan people who want to 'eat local' and organic and stuff.</i> "
[F7]: Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	-	Lab grown meats (Benefits)	"A few of my vegan acquaintances have said they would have no problem with eating <i>lab grown meat</i> as it is cruelty and killing free. It is also vertical farming friendly and <i>extremely energy efficient to produce</i> since you are only supporting tissue growth rather than an entire animal. It's very hard to argue against it."
[G4]: People who are not vegans, what annoys you the most about vegans?	-	Negative environmental impacts of veganism	"As a matter of fact, odds are that <i>they're consuming products or carrying out habits that possibly negate their efforts</i> . It's like that quote from a song I've heard: " <i>you're always killing something just by living on the Earth</i> "

Despite the large body of environmental evidence in support of veganism, non-vegan users were able to use environmental rhetoric as a means to facilitate discussion in support of non-vegan diets. The above figure demonstrates the use of environmental rhetoric by non-vegans in the form of environmental arguments against veganism. Land usage, lab grown meats, and greenhouse gas emissions are three separate environmental issues non-vegans discussed in relation to the veganism debate. As mentioned previously, environmental arguments are difficult to dispute if they are credited with scientific evidence. As a result, it can be suggested from these findings that both vegans and non-vegans use legitimate environmental rhetoric as a strategy to facilitate effective discussion regarding the support or opposition of veganism.

**Research Question 2b:** How are keywords used by advocates of veganism? How are keywords used by individuals who are not advocates of veganism?

Due to the small sample size and limited scope of this study, there were no findings of keywords that emerged frequently from either side of the veganism debate. Before the research was conducted, it was expected that keywords such as ‘plant-based’ or ‘whole foods’ would appear often from vegan users. This was expected as the term ‘vegan’ is known to be controversial and divisive, therefore, it was predicted that terms such as plant-based and whole-foods would be used as an alternative. Tuso et al. (2013) state that the term *plant-based* is often used interchangeably with the terms *vegetarian* and *vegan*. However, the researchers argue that the term plant-based is broadly defined whereas the term vegan is narrowly defined and it “does not require consumption of foods or restriction of fat and sugar” (p. 62). This may be a reason as to why users did not use the term *plant-based* and instead used the term *vegan* to be more specific. Meat eaters are able to eat plant-based foods and may even follow a plant-based diet; therefore, this term cannot be interchangeable with the term vegan. Tuso et al. (2013) argue that unlike veganism, plant-based diets are not an “all or nothing program, but a way of life that is tailored to each individual.” (p.64).

Another possible reason why terms such as plant-based and whole foods were not used was due to the length of these terms. Vegan is shorter to type than the terms plant-based and whole-foods. In online spaces, it is common for users to use short words and/or short forms of words as online discussion spaces are often casual and do not often require proper grammar and spelling. Clark and Araki (2011) suggest that because of the fast expansion of online user-generated content in the 2000s, less standardized language has become quite prevalent in online

spaces. Users on social media have come to use their own writing style and lexicon that is usually informal and unstructured. As discussed previously in RQ2a, main consistencies and patterns were found within the main codes. In future studies, more forums could be included in the data collection to see if any keywords would emerge with a larger dataset within the codes.

### Communication Accommodation Theory

As stated in the literature review, a core component of CAT is *convergence*. In sum, convergence is a strategy where “individuals adapt their communicative behaviours in such a way to become more similar to their interlocutor’s behavior” (Gasiorek & Soliz, 2014, p.108). The findings of this MRP reveal that users employed convergence strategies to argue their side of the veganism debate. The two figures below showcase both vegan and non-vegan users using convergence strategies in the form of rhetoric that demonstrates relatability. As stated in the findings section, a common theme found throughout the forum comments was the rhetorical strategy of using personal anecdotes. Personal anecdotes are beneficial in conversation as they provide a sense of relatability and interconnectedness between users. The figure below demonstrates convergence rhetoric in the form of personal anecdotes in order to facilitate meaningful conversation between the two parties (vegans and non-vegans).

**Table 18: Vegan Users: Convergence**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[F5]: Vegans, what's the best argument you've heard for eating meat? Meat eaters, what's the best argument you've heard for going vegan?	Rhetoric	Personal Anecdote	"Just try it for 30 days" <i>So I did and being vegan felt amazing</i> , then I had ribs on date night and felt BETTER. Turns out removing refined sugar, wheat and dairy makes me feel good.
[I2]: What is something people should know about being	-	-	<i>"I've only been vegan for a year and a half, was entirely omnivorous and have always had a passion for cooking. I was even contemplating starting a barbecue restaurant at some point near the end of omnivorous days."</i>

vegetarians/vegans in general?			
[D10]: Vegans and vegetarians, what is the reason why you don't eat meat?	-	-	“Meat is difficult to prepare. You are basically handling a biohazard until it is cooked. <i>I found it was a lot easier to cook every night when I wasn't worrying about handling meat.</i> ”

**Table 19: Non-Vegan Users: Convergence**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[C9]:Question: What do you think of vegans?	Rhetoric	Personal Anecdote	“I respect their choices. <i>I actually tried vegan food for about 2 weeks to support my MIL</i> , she was put on a vegan diet for health reasons. Honestly, there's plenty of delicious vegan food out there so it's not that bad of a proposition.”
[D4]: Vegans and vegetarians, what is the reason why you don't eat meat?	-	-	“I am not a vegan or vegetarian but <i>I have lived with a vegan and two vegetarians.</i> ”
[D3]: -	-	-	“The <i>first time I stopped eating meat was to try and impress some hippy girl. Dumb, I know and it lasted like a year.</i> The second time(I stopped eating it like 8 years ago) was due to a paper I wrote in college on factory farming. I had already stopped eating meat but the paper sealed it.”

In contrast to convergence, the findings show that users were also found to employ the CAT strategy of *divergence*. As previously mentioned, divergence involves “emphasizing distinctiveness from one’s interlocutor” (Gasiorek & Soliz, 2014, p. 108) and highlighting contrasting group identities. The findings demonstrate that both vegan and non-vegan users employ divergent strategies to identify themselves within their own respective group. One of the most common divergence strategies found to be used by non-vegans and vegans was to state which side of the veganism debate they were on. This can be considered a divergent rhetorical strategy as explicitly stating their side of the veganism debate is a means of emphasizing distinctiveness.

**Table 20: Vegan Users: Divergence**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[C2]: What do you think of vegans?	Stigma	Stating their side of the debate (Vegan)	" <i>As a vegan</i> , I'm really happy that most of these responses have been positive! I just wanna say that I definitely never try to push my diet on others, that's just annoying. However, I'm always happy to discuss/answer questions, so if anyone has any, feel free to ask :)"
[G7]: People who are not vegans, what annoys you the most about vegans?	-	-	" <i>I'm vegan</i> but I absolutely hate the self entitlement attached to most vegans, I'll usually never mention that I am because of that stigma."
[E3]: Why aren't you vegan?	-	-	"i am, i cannot possibly imagine thinking a snack to me is worth more than someone's literal being and life."

**Table 21: Non-Vegan Users: Divergence**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[A2]: People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	Stigma	Stating their side of the debate (Non-vegan)	"Well <i>I'm not a vegan nor a vegetarian</i> , but I'd suppose my answer to that question would be another question: why do meat eaters not care about the negative impact the meat industry has on the environment?"
[E2]: Why aren't you vegan?	-	-	"This seems a like a pretty annoying troll question but I'll answer instead of just saying mmm meat is good. <i>I am vegetarian, I don't have a desire to be vegan</i> . I don't eat a lot of dairy and eggs but I do eat some. I like cheese, ice cream etc. also I went vegetarian for some very specific health reasons going vegan wouldn't further help those health issues. Also going full vegan seems like a huge hassle especially eating out so it's just not in the cards for me. Lastly, just let people eat what they want."
[J4]: Why is there such a stigma against vegans?	-	-	"Everyone says vegans are the obnoxious ones but all I absolutely EVER see is people complaining about them. I've literally never had a vegan be annoying about it and I know TONS. Factually, there's a societal circle jerk against them and everyone loves to feel validated by making fun of them and having the majority join in. Edit: <i>I'm not a vegan</i> and I know there are annoying vegans out there but there are obviously more annoying meat eaters offended that someone would point out their perceived flaws 🤔"

The last component of CAT in addition to convergence and divergence is *accommodation*. As stated in the literature review, accommodation refers to “behaviors in which



one or both of the individuals enact positive-oriented or conversationally appropriate behaviour” (Gasiorek & Soliz, 2014, p.110). Accommodation strategies were found to be used from both sides of the veganism debate, most notably with the use of rhetoric that demonstrated respect of personal choices. In order to facilitate meaningful conversation, it can be suggested from the findings that users employ respective rhetoric. By remaining respectful, it was found that users were able to openly share their opinion without degrading the dietary choices of others.

**Table 22: Normalization: Respect**

Topic	Code	Subcode	Example
[A5]: People who think it's wrong or bad to be vegetarian or vegan, why?	Normalization/Support	Respect (Non Vegan)	"If you refuse to eat anything but non-animal products then <i>it's your choice</i> just don't hate on people who eat meat cause some of us love meat"
[C1]: What do you think of vegans?	-	-	"They're doing what they think is right and if they can stick to it and be healthy <i>all the luck to em.</i> "
-	-	Respect (Vegan)	"As a vegan, I'm really happy that most of these responses have been positive! I just wanna say that <i>I definitely never try to push my diet on others, that's just annoying.</i> However, I'm always happy to discuss/answer questions, so if anyone has any, feel free to ask :)"
[I2]: What is something people should know about being vegan/vegans in general?		-	" <i>I completely understand where non-vegans are coming from.</i> I used to be that until not too long ago, you know? I'm excited to talk about veganism, <i>because I want what's best for my friends,</i> the planet, and the animals, human & non human alike"

## Limitations & Future Research Directions

Due to the short nature of this MRP, the pool of data collected is limited and as a result it cannot not fully representative of the vegan and non-vegan communities. Despite the limited pool, this study provides an insight of the type of rhetoric used in online communities regarding the veganism debate. It is also important to recognize that Reddit is only one social media platform out of many. In future studies, additional platforms such as Twitter or Facebook could be used for data collection. In addition to these limitations, users on Reddit volunteer to initiate

debate and discussion. The users who comment in these types of debates are already inclined to initiate conversation. By nature of Reddit being participation based and user generated, the data collected does not represent vegan and non-vegan individuals who do not choose to participate actively in the forums.

In the future it would be beneficial to study a larger sample of data in order to draw more connections and to find more recurring keywords and consistencies of the rhetoric surrounding veganism. More forums could be coded in order to gain further insight of a broader base of users' perspectives of veganism and how it is discussed online. It would be of interest to collect data over time in order to see the progression and changes of veganism rhetoric online. As found in this study, non-vegans introduced the phenomenon of lab-grown meat to the discourse and suggested that opinions of animal rights would change once this trend gains traction. A study looking at online rhetoric surrounding veganism over time could measure the frequency of environmental, ethical, and health mentions in relation to relevant scientific food breakthroughs such as lab-grown meat. The pattern of the normalization and stigmatization of veganism could also be followed and measured over time to see if progress is being made towards the normalization of veganism in online spaces.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that veganism is found to be both stigmatized and normalized online. It was found that veganism was stigmatized more than it was supported and normalized in the forums analyzed. Rhetorical consistencies and patterns were found between both parties of the veganism debate. Notable consistencies found between parties were users explicitly stating if they were vegan or non-vegan, with more non-vegans explicitly stating their position than vegans. These findings suggest that non-vegans feel more comfortable disclosing

their position than vegans, as vegans are often feel more openly judged and ostracized for their dietary choices. In terms of the stigmatization of veganism online, ascetic rhetoric was often used by non-vegans to support their arguments. Non-vegan users mentioned that veganism has tight restrictions, is not a practical lifestyle, and can be considered a burden or hassle.

Normalization was found within the forum comments as users employed rhetoric that demonstrated ordinariness in regard to veganism. Previous research argues that ordinariness is a critical strategy of vegan activism as it rebuts the notion that veganism is a complicated and an unattainable lifestyle. Users on both sides of the veganism debate were found to use rhetoric in their arguments to normalize veganism.

Consistencies such as the use of ethical, health, and environmental rhetorical arguments between parties were most commonly found in the comments as a means for users to facilitate effective debate and discussion. Within these main rhetorical consistencies, more specific patterns were found such as eating disorder rhetoric and rhetoric highlighting the concept of vegan privilege. The findings support previous literature in regard to vegan privilege and provide evidence of non-vegans using vegan superiority rhetoric as a mechanism to distance themselves from vegans and justify their own identity. In regard to environmental rhetoric, it was found that users made arguments that were informed by scientific research. It can be suggested that users may have used environmental arguments supported by scientific fact since these are difficult to dispute if backed with evidence, however tenuous.

In terms of the application of CAT, the study found that users employed the three main components of CAT (convergence, divergence, and accommodation) in order to connect with other users in the forum to facilitate meaningful debate. The use of personal anecdotes was a rhetorical strategy both vegans and non-vegans used to create discussion and form personal

connections between users. Conversely, users were also found to use divergent rhetorical strategies such as stating their side of the veganism debate in order to emphasize their distinctiveness. It was also found that users employed the third pillar of CAT, accommodation, in the discussion forums. Accommodation was found within the normalization code in the form of comments that demonstrated respect and support towards the opposing party.

Keywords regarding veganism were not found to emerge in comments made by non-vegan and vegan users in this study. The lack of keywords may be attributed to the small data sample, the narrow definition of vegan, as well as non-formal conversation styles and the short-form nature of online rhetoric. Keywords can potentially be addressed in future studies with the use of a larger data set and a broader range of vegan-related topics. It would also be of interest to study a variety of social media platforms in order to gain a deeper insight of the online rhetoric surrounding veganism. In addition to these future directions, it would be of interest to expand the size of the study and analyze more forums in order to find potential keywords and consistencies within the rhetoric used.

This study demonstrates that social media, specifically online discussion platforms like Reddit, offer users the ability to share their opinions freely in order to participate in meaningful debate. Online discussion platforms act as a place for individuals to go who are curious about a topic, who want to share their personal stories, and those who want to connect with other like-minded individuals. The rhetoric surrounding veganism online is diverse and evolving as individuals are becoming more environmentally and ethically conscious. A longitudinal study would be beneficial to explore how rhetoric surrounding veganism changes over time and if patterns of normalization and stigmatization change in online spaces as time goes on.

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