

**THE CONSTRUCTION AND AUTHENTICATION  
OF VEGAN IDENTITIES ON THE SUBREDDIT  
R/VEGAN**

Master's Thesis  
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Veganismi on noussut yhä paremmin valtavirran tietoisuuteen viime vuosina, kun eläinten tuotanto-oloihin ja lihapainotteisten ruokavalioiden ympäristövaikutuksiin on alettu kiinnittää enemmän huomiota. Veganismista keskustellaan yhä enemmän myös sosiaalisessa mediassa. Esimerkiksi Facebookissa ja Redditissa on lukuisia veganismin teemoihin keskittyviä yhteisöjä, joiden jäsenten välinen vuorovaikutus tarjoaa kiinnostavia kohteita identiteettien ja autenttisuuden tutkimiseen.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten aliredditissa r/Vegan rakennetaan ja autentikoidaan vegaani-identiteettejä kielellisin ja interaktiivisin keinoin. Analyysissa hyödynnetään etnografian, temaattisen analyysin ja diskurssianalyysin työkaluja.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että aliredditin keskustelijat identifioivat usein sekä itseään että aliredditin muita osallistujia. Itseensä kohdistuvat identifiointi koskee useimmiten vegaanien kategoriaa, kun taas muita identifioidaan useammin muihin kategorioihin kuuluviksi. Identiteettien muodostamista tukevat keskusteluissa muodostettavat määritelmät veganismista sekä niissä neuvotellut veganismin normit. Tutkimustulosten perusteella määritelmistä ja normeista ei ole yhtenäistä linjaa, vaikkakin eläinten oikeuksiin keskittyminen vaikuttaa suosituimmalta näkemykseltä verrattuna esimerkiksi ympäristöaatteisiin ja terveyssyihin. Vegaani-identiteettejä vahvistetaan myös luomalla vastakkainasettelua vegaanien ja erilaisten ulkoryhmien välille kuvaamalla ulkoryhmiä kielteisesti ja vegaanien sisäryhmää myönteisesti.</p> <p>Oman ja muiden vegaani-identiteetin autentikoimista tapahtuu myös aliredditissa sekä vahvistamisen että kyseenalaistamisen muodossa. Tulosten mukaan oman veganismin autenttisuutta pyritään yleensä vahvistamaan, kun taas muiden autenttisuuden arviointi on useammin kyseenalaistavaa. Autenttointi on vahvasti kytköksissä keskusteltuihin normeihin, ja muiden vegaani-identiteetin autenttisuutta kritisoidaan usein nimenomaan normatiivisten määreiden avulla. Veganismin määritelmän ja normien tapaan myös näkemys vegaanien autenttisuudesta on moniääninen yhteisössä: on mahdotonta eritellä yksittäistä, kaikenkattavaa autenttisen vegaanin määritelmää.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The present study will discuss identity and authentication processes in the subreddit r/Vegan. The aim of the study is to investigate how vegan identities are constructed and authenticated through linguistic and interactive means in the community. The practices will be observed through the lens of online ethnography, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis.

The role of different online spaces is increasingly significant in the lives of people around the world. As Townsend and Wallace (2016) state, social media platforms are often used as significant locations for networking, socialising, and reflecting on all facets of everyday life. Moreover, internet spaces provide an opportunity to connect with people everywhere irrespective of the actual, geographical locations of the participants. While access to the internet still partly depends on socio-economic status, it is estimated that nearly five billion people have internet access (Internet World Stats 2020), and in many countries the internet is used daily by the majority of the population. For instance, in 2019, 90 percent of all Finns used the internet, while the percentage among people aged 16-44 was estimated to be 100 percent (Statistics Finland 2020).

As social media have somewhat cemented their place in the everyday lives of a significant portion of the world's population, studies on people's identities online might offer new insights into their behaviour and their ways of acting on the internet. As Leppänen et al. (2017: 2) remark, social media act as significant sites for everyday life, as ways of 'being in the world', communicating with others, sharing and arranging information, and constructing culture together. What once was a variety of distinct online worlds, each with their esoteric linguistic features, has now become a site of social action that is instrumental to society as a whole, and thus to our theorising of language, society and media (Androutsopoulos 2015: 75). More specifically, with respect to the present study it could be argued that, as it focuses on a community that revolves around a strongly ideological topic, it has the potential to provide insight into how such topics might serve in identity construction and how they could affect people's interactions.

Veganism as a diet, lifestyle and phenomenon has become more and more topical in recent years. Whereas earlier it was largely considered to be a view of the few, it has gradually become more familiar and well-known to the general public. With the rising interest in veganism, research on vegan identities has become an even more fascinating object of study than it has been before. While vegan identities have been researched before in the environment of online forums (Sneijder and te Molder 2004, 2005, 2006) and interviews (Greenebaum 2012b; Chuck, Fernandes and Hyers 2016; Buttny and Kinefuchi 2020), such identity construction on more modern social media sites is still largely uncharted. By combining the study of vegan identity construction and authentication with the environment of a vegan-themed subreddit, I hope to provide insight into these processes in a more contemporary setting.

In the second chapter, I will introduce some relevant previous research and present the main concepts of the present study. In the third chapter, I will introduce the aims and research questions of my study, the process of data selection and collection, the ethical considerations of data collection, and the methods of analysis. The fourth chapter consists of the analysis of the data. The fifth chapter presents the discussion concerning the findings of the present study, including its relevance to previous research, its implications and applications, and its limitations. Finally, the sixth chapter is comprised of the conclusion which discusses the larger indications and connections of the present study with respect to previous research conducted in the field.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following section, the most relevant previous research and key terms are presented. First, I present Reddit as a platform, some previous research on Reddit, and the subreddit r/Vegan that acts as the object of my study. In the next sub-section, I introduce some previous research on veganism and discuss its relevance in regards with the present study. In the following sub-sections, I define the terms of identity, identification and dis-identification, normativity, and authenticity.

### 2.1 Reddit as a platform

Reddit is a social media platform that was founded in 2005. While the current number of users is unknown, in 2019 Reddit was estimated to have had more than 430 million monthly active users (Reddit 2019). As a platform, Reddit consists of different kinds of user-generated and user-moderated communities. The communities, which are called subreddits, are mostly based on a common interest, such as a TV show, sports, or a lifestyle. Reddit highlights communality by branding itself as “home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection” (Reddit 2020a). While most of the subreddits can be seen and read by anyone who chooses to do so, some subreddits may have requirements concerning age, and others require a Reddit account to be seen. Registered users can subscribe to the subreddits, so that new and popular posts from the chosen communities show up on their account’s front page. Popular posts from different subreddits can also be visible on the front page of Reddit to the general viewer.

In the case of an unregistered viewer, content on Reddit’s front page is divided into six tabs: Hot, New, Rising, Controversial, Top, and Gilded. Content that is getting popular very quickly gets listed under Hot. Most recently added posts are classified under New. Posts that garner upvotes but not at the same rate as the ones in the category Hot get listed under Rising. The Controversial tab includes posts that have a large variety of upvotes and downvotes, indicating polarising views amongst the voters. The posts that have received the most upvotes appear in the Top category. Finally, the Gilded section shows the posts that have been awarded Reddit Gold.

Reddit Gold is an award which is usually given to show appreciation for an exceptional contribution to Reddit. The Gold Award is rather prestigious, as its purchase requires 500 Reddit Coins and gives the recipient a week of Reddit Premium membership and 100 Coins (Reddit Help 2020a). In addition to the content-related tabs, there is a tab for the Reddit wiki which provides information about the site and its community norms. For a registered user, the categorisation is mostly the same, but there are a couple of differences. Firstly, the front page of a registered user only shows posts from subreddits to which the user subscribes. Secondly, the front page then includes a Best tab which works mostly similarly to the Hot tab but emphasises personalisation more in its algorithm. The tabs provide Reddit users with different options on what kind of content they want to see.

Considering the opportunities for multimodality that current social media environments often offer, Reddit is remarkably strongly text based. The title post of a Reddit thread might include visual and/or auditory elements, but there is no possibility to include images, videos, gifs or other such elements to the comments apart from providing a link that leads to the content. The textual nature of the site is in fact one of the reasons why Reddit is suitable for my study: I have decided to focus primarily on the discourses in the textual interaction between participants without much emphasis on the multimodal aspects of internet communication, except for instances where images or other multimodal elements provide essential context for the discussions. To me, it seems that a more thorough combination of the two would have required a more extensive type of research than the scope of the present study allows.

As a platform, Reddit also provides its users with the opportunity to evaluate the content of others by giving them 'upvotes' or 'downvotes' which can be seen by all users. The total of upvotes and downvotes a comment has received forms the score that the post or the comment has. Reddit users can choose to not see comments below a certain score by choosing to do so in their account settings. Thus, the users of the site themselves can affect which parts of the content are automatically visible and which are not. A plethora of downvotes also sometimes causes the creator of the post or the

comment to delete it of their own accord. Overall, the ability to vote on the comments offers Reddit users a significant power in curating the content of the site.

Another feature showcasing the power that Reddit users have over the content and customs of the site is the fact that Reddit users act as the moderators of the subreddits. Thus, there are no Reddit officials who curate the content of the subreddits, as moderator rights are granted and removed amongst regular users. As Meikle (2016: 85) notes, Reddit unites the affordances of user-generated or curated content with community voting on the interest or relevance of such material. In summary, Reddit offers its users the opportunity to create, share, evaluate and moderate content, thus being a user-centred site in multiple senses.

Overall, Reddit is more of a collection of different communities rather than a uniform website with a unified culture. The extremely vast variety of subreddits provides nearly everyone with the opportunity to find a suitable community for oneself. Moreover, the different topics around which the subreddits are created also make it possible for different cultures and group dynamics to form inside the subreddits. As Anderson (2015: 9) remarks, a unique community with a specific sub-culture exists within each subreddit, offering Reddit users a sense of belonging. She further mentions that the sense of community and the feeling of validity the subreddits can offer to their participants when their posts or comments gain upvotes or replies are a significant appeal to Reddit users. Such rewarding concepts can also be seen as an important part of the communality of the subreddits. Overall, subreddits present an excellent opportunity to observe interactions in a community setting.

As Reddit has grown in popularity as a social media site, it has also attracted more research. As could be expected, Reddit has been investigated in the field of computer science, with topics such as the creation of a recommendation engine based on the user tweets (Nguyen et al 2016) and backbone networks in mapping user interests (Olson and Neal 2015). The site has also been a fairly popular object of study in the field of social sciences, where, for example, Reddit as a curated news source (Ovadia 2015) and participant recruitment (Shatz 2017) have been examined. Somewhat more surprisingly, Reddit has also been the topic in several studies concerning medicine and



health. These have focused on for example cognitive performance during reddit sessions (Singer et al. 2015), weight loss with the help of a subreddit (Pappa et al. 2017), e-cigarette use (Li et al. 2016), and the connection between online voting habits and human cognition (Priestley and Mesoudi 2015).

While Reddit has inarguably been widely studied in different fields in recent years, at the same time there has been little research on it within linguistics, let alone sociolinguistics. Notable exceptions have been a couple of recent studies, on post language and user engagement in online communities (Noguti 2016) and linguistic signals of online groups (McEwan 2016). Noguti (2016) combined the study of language with a commercial view, as she concentrates on what kinds of linguistic features affect user engagement, i.e. post score and number of comments, in Reddit post titles and emphasises how advertisers could use such information to tailor advertisements on social media. Her findings indicate that a number of language features in post titles relate to post scores and number of comments, but these relations vary based on the category and other variables. McEwan (2016), on the other hand, studied how particular words signalling stability, cohesiveness, and sociability affect the viability in subreddits. Her results revealed that highly active boards were more likely to use terms referencing the past indicating stability, while moderately active boards were more likely to contain linguistic markers of cohesiveness and stability and highly interactive boards more probably had language markers indicating stability, cohesiveness, and sociability.

It is notable that the studies by both Noguti (2016) and McEwan are quantitative in nature. Noguti (2016) used a programme written in Python to collect data, and McEwan (2016) utilised language processing software to quantify the message features that formed the data of the study. Therefore, it seems that there is a shortage of language-centred studies on Reddit that are qualitative in nature. With this in mind, the present study aims to contribute to the linguistic research on Reddit with a qualitative study that focuses on the interaction among the members of a subreddit instead of categorising a previously thought-out set of features. Thus, I hope that my thesis can contribute in its part to bridging this gap in research.

### 2.1.1 Subreddit r/Vegan

This study focuses on the subreddit r/Vegan which is a community centred on veganism. In the description of the subreddit, there is a quote: “A philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.” (The Vegan Society 2020). While, based on the subreddit’s name and description, it seems that the community is mainly directed to vegans, according to my observations people aiming to be vegans in the future and those who are generally interested in veganism are also welcome in the subreddit. All aspects of veganism are included in the discussions of the subreddit, as opposed to, for example, r/veganfoodporn and r/veganrecipes, both of which focus on vegan food while excluding discussion on other aspects of veganism. The discussion topics of the subreddit mostly consist of ethical issues, vegan food and recipes, veganism as a lifestyle, peer support, and vegan-related pictures and memes. As of November 2020, the subreddit has over half a million subscribers (r/Vegan 2020). In contrast with the most popular subreddit of the site, r/AskReddit, with its over 30,383,000 subscribers, the subreddit is not particularly large in terms of subscribers. However, it is the largest and most active vegan-themed subreddit on the site with several active discussion topics evolving daily.

In order to understand the practices and processes of identity construction and authentication on r/Vegan, one must consider the characteristics of the online space in itself. I argue that the subreddit could be regarded as an online community. Herring (2004: 355) defines six sets of criteria for online communities as follows:

1. Active, self-sustaining *participation* and *core participants* who can be identified based on the frequency of posting
2. Shared *history* which can be evaluated through the availability and use of archives, *purpose*, *culture* which is indexed through the use of group-specific

abbreviations, jargon and language practices and *norms and values* which can be seen through an examination of netiquette, FAQ, i.e. frequently asked questions, and verbal reactions to abuses of appropriate conduct

3. *Solidarity* which can be evaluated through the use of verbal humour, *support* which can manifest, for instance, as acts of positive politeness, and *reciprocity* which often takes the form of turn initiation and response
4. *Criticism and conflict* which can be examined through speech acts that violate positive politeness and *means of conflict resolution* which can be regarded as an interactive sequence of acts
5. *Self-awareness* of the group as an entity that differs from other groups which can be expressed in its' members' references to the group as a group and in "us versus them" language
6. *Emergence of roles and hierarchy* which can be presented in participation patterns and different kinds of speech acts, as well as *governance and rituals* which usually need to be observed over a period of time in order to be understood by the observer

Based on my initial observations, r/Vegan entails almost all of the criteria, possibly excluding the sixth criterion. The subreddit has participants who have shared history, common culture, and shared norms and values. Members of the subreddit also seem to engage in acts of solidarity, support, and reciprocity, while sometimes having instances of criticism and conflict which are resolved through means of conflict resolution. Members of r/Vegan also often express their membership of the subreddit, or at least veganism in general, while distancing themselves from other groups by using "us versus them" language. I have yet to see pattern of emergence of roles and hierarchy as well as governance and rituals to occur in the subreddit. However, as Herring (2004: 355) notes, understanding of these aspects usually requires a lengthy period of observation to be understood by the observer.

Online activities are an increasingly important part of the everyday lives of many people. As Leppänen (2012: 233) notes, the globalized nature of the internet entails the possibility of connecting individuals and groups who can be culturally, geographically

and linguistically distant from each other. Moreover, Coupland (2003: 426) remarks that quick, remotely facilitated networks complement and complicate face-to-face networks, as electronically mediated social interaction provides new ways of achieving intimacy, relationships, and sociality. This unique way of connecting people that the Internet provides could be seen as one of the reasons why online communities are highly interesting objects of study for today's researchers.

Moreover, McEwan (2016) notes that in online communities, the subject and content of communication has a greater effect on the defined boundaries of the group than shared physical space. Scholars have also argued that as a society we are less likely to join location-based groups (Putnam 2000). Whereas subcultures have traditionally been considered dependent on physical space and geography (Cohen 1955), the internet provides an opportunity to overcome such geographical limitations and a means for people to pursue meaningful social relationships online (Williams and Copes 2005). Such connectivity therefore enables numerous subcultural groups to propagate and members to constitute a wide assortment of non-mainstream identities and communicative practices (Kahn and Kellner 2003). Vegans could be regarded as one such subcultural group who share a non-mainstream identity. In the case of this study, the subreddit r/Vegan provides vegans and people interested in veganism a common space in which they can communicate together. Moreover, within such online subcultural communities, members may form social bonds and discover how their peers perform their subcultural selves, thus encouraging culturally bounded networks of people who share the meaning of particular ideas and practices through interaction (Williams and Copes 2005). The subreddit r/Vegan provides vegans with the opportunity to connect with other similarly minded people without any geographical limitations. As not all vegans might know other vegans in their offline life, such an online space as r/Vegan might become a highly meaningful way of connecting with individuals who share the ideology and identity.

It can also be argued that online communities are very strongly connected with language. As McEwan (2016) states, communication is a driver of the construction, preservation, and continuity of an online community. Moreover, she notes that the

asynchronicity and anonymity of online communities means that online communities, more so than location-based communities, places, and networks, rely on the communication between members. This notion provides another strong argument for adopting a linguistic perspective when studying online communities.

As a vegan-centred subreddit, r/Vegan also combines the themes of veganism with Reddit as an online environment in an interesting way. While online identity work of vegans has been researched to some extent (see e.g. Sneijder & te Molder 2004, 2005, 2006; Chuck et al. 2016), such research has focused on discussions in vegan-themed forums and discussion boards. Considering that Reddit is a highly popular social media site, it is likely that the subreddit r/Vegan offers different kinds of instances of vegan identity construction than the web forums. Furthermore, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14) note, in modern settings, which multiply communications with personally unknown others, occasions for identification are particularly abundant. Thus, the subreddit, located in a popular modern online setting, might be a more fertile breeding ground for identity processes than online forums which have seen their golden age earlier.

## **2.2 Previous research on veganism**

While veganism has become more familiar to the public over recent years, there is still a level of uncertainty concerning its definition. One of the most widely used definitions is that “[v]eganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.” (The Vegan Society 2020). According to this definition, the movement is not limited to merely diet but includes all forms of animal exploitation. However, there seems to be some unclarity regarding this statement, as terms such as “health vegan” and “vegan diet” can be seen in, for example, the data set of the present study.

As terms describing different plant-based diets have emerged, developed, and changed their meaning, it might be difficult to distinguish between them. While

“vegetarian” used to refer to a person who eats only plant-based food, with “vegan” adding the avoidance of other forms of animal exploitation to the mix, meanings have shifted slightly in recent times. Nowadays, “vegetarian” mostly refers to a “lacto-ovo-vegetarian” diet which includes dairy products and eggs in addition to plant-based ones. The Vegetarian Society defines a vegetarian as someone who lives on a diet of grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruits with, or without, the use of dairy products and eggs. (The Vegetarian Society 2020) While the definition states that a vegetarian could use or abstain from using dairy and egg products, the Vegetarian Society (2020) defines lacto-ovo-vegetarian as the most common type of vegetarian diet. “Vegan” can be understood as a diet which excludes all animal-based food products without including non-food items, or as a lifestyle that entails both food and non-food items. While the meanings and definitions shift, develop, and merge in everyday use, some still hold a very strict definition of veganism and regard it as definitively being more than merely a dietary choice. As Sneijder and te Molder (2006: 627) note, the ideal of eating a ‘healthy but relaxed’ diet does not seem to tie in with a lifestyle such as veganism that is bound to be linked with strict norms and rules.

Veganism has been researched from different perspectives, the main difference being whether only the dietary aspect of veganism are included in the analysis, or whether the ethical aspect of the lifestyle is also taken into consideration. Sneijder and te Molder (2004, 2005, 2006) have studied vegans’ discussions on health and accountability, responsibility and blame, and the normalisation of ideological food choice in a Dutch online discussion forum, with the focus of the discussions being diet. Dyett et al. (2013) have studied vegan lifestyle behaviours, focusing on nutrition and aiming to discover whether vegans who are vegan due to health-related beliefs also choose to commit to other health-related actions. While these studies are more concentrated on the dietary aspect of veganism, some researchers have taken the ethical side of veganism into account as well. Greenebaum (2012b) has specifically restricted the respondents in her study to ethical vegans, observing how ethical vegans construct their vegan identities and both construct and preserve their authenticity. Moreover, Chuck et al. (2016) discuss politicised eaters, including vegans, and how they become a part of a dietary outgroup by choosing a marginal diet to follow.

While veganism is most often considered to entail abstaining from all animal products instead of being merely a dietary decision, the term is defined in various ways by different researchers. Greenebaum (2012b: 129) uses the widely accepted definition of The Vegan Society, thus indicating that veganism is regarded as more than a diet in her research. Indeed, her study focuses on so-called ethical vegans who have adopted the vegan lifestyle due to ethical reasons, most importantly animal welfare. Alternatively, Sneijder and te Molder (2006: 622) define veganism as “a particular dietary style that entails eating only plant-based foods and abstaining from all animal products”. Therefore, it is implied that they focus on the dietary side of veganism while disregarding its ethical aspects. Moreover, Dyett et al. (2013: 120) choose to define vegans as individuals who use no meat, fish, or poultry, and who use dairy or egg products less than once a month. Thus, abstaining from all animal products is not even required for their definition of a vegan.

### **2.3 Defining identity**

As was stated in the previous subsection, veganism is an overarching ideology and way of life for many. Thus, it can also have a strong impact on the identity of persons who apply to the ideology. Identity is such a popular and rich object of study in various fields that it warrants a clear definition of how it is understood in the present study. As this study is rooted in the sociolinguistic study of social interaction, I use the definition of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) as the basis of establishing the concept. They have proposed a framework for analysing identity based on the following principles:

- “(1) identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon;
- (2) identities encompass macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles, and local, ethnographically emergent cultural positions;
- (3) identities may be linguistically indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems;

(4) identities are relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of the relationship between self and other, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice and authority/delegitimacy; and

(5) identity may be in part intentional, in part habitual and less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of larger ideological processes and structures." (Bucholtz and Hall 2005)

In the present study, the focus is in most part on the ways that identity is constructed, maintained, and modified in interaction between people. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 588), identity is best described as the emergent product of linguistic and other semiotic practices and thus an essentially social and cultural phenomenon. In the same vein, Greenebaum (2012b: 131) notes that if identities are socially situated, they must be regarded as an activity or action, instead of a static trait or characteristic. Identity could be described as always in progress with the subjects always on the course of becoming, as they actively construe and negotiate social meaning (Campbell 2006: 277). All of these notions thus highlight the social aspect of identity and describe why the social context and interaction surrounding the identity practices in focus need to be considered.

Moreover, Bucholtz (2003: 408) suggests that it should be taken into account that identity formation is closely connected to its context: identities arise from temporary and variable interactional situations, in negotiation and often contestation with other social actors and in relation to broader and often inflexible structures of power. Thus, both the specific context of the interaction and the larger social structures should be acknowledged when discussing identity. Furthermore, as Jones (2011: 724) notes, by taking particular care to consider the sociocultural context in which speakers use language, it is possible to explain how personae constructed on a local level have broader indexical meanings connected to different categories. She further remarks that such approaches allow an understanding of identity as something that is not predefined or innate, but rather as a changing and complex phenomenon. What this view means in the present study is that the influence of the subreddit in focus, the



context of the vegan ideology, and the position of vegans in society should all be recognised when evaluating the construction and performance of authentic vegan identities.

At the level of expression and execution, the focus of my thesis is on how identity is constructed and performed through language. To me, language seems to be one of the primary building blocks in identity construction and expression. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 588), identity is something that is composed through social action and particularly language as social action. Indeed, as Edwards (2009: 20) states, with language being instrumental to the human condition, it seems logical that any study of identity should include some consideration of it. Moreover, Joseph (2004: 13) notes that language and identity are “ultimately inseparable”. In summary, I consider it an essential preliminary step to adopt a sociolinguistic perspective for the analysis of identity through language.

Another important aspect in the context of my thesis is that I am observing and analysing identity construction online. Thus, it should be taken into account that the identity construction processes happen in a virtual space with the modalities that the space in question provides. Internet environments could, in fact, be seen as highly relevant sites for identity construction. As Hall (1996: 4) remarks, identities are constructed not outside, but within discourse, and thus we must understand them as created in particular historical and institutional sites within particular discursive patterns and practices, by certain enunciative strategies. Therefore, the internet should not be regarded as merely a tool, but rather as an ‘electronic geography’ (Poster 1997: 216), a space which intersects with other territories (online and offline spaces), which allows for the constitution and reconstitution of identity (Campbell 2006: 274).

On the other hand, there has also been some critique towards identity as a concept. Perhaps most notably, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) challenge “identity” by regarding the term as “richly ambiguous” and suggesting that other terms should rather be used to describe the processes usually connected with identity. Coupland (2003: 426) aligns with Brubaker and Cooper by noting that stance and role in social identification are often more appropriate concepts than identity, as the question of which persona is

appropriate for which communicative event might be a more relevant concern than the fulfilling of an identity. For this thesis, I have combined aspects of theories and definitions regarding identity with some of the key terms that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) present as replacements for the term of identity.

Identity is a relevant notion in this study on digital veganism, as “vegan” seems to work as an identity marker for many. Greenebaum (2012b: 132) remarks that a vegan identity needs to be seen as something more than a philosophy or a way of being, and rather as something that is constructed by what one does. She concludes that the ethical vegans in her study partly construct their identity by devaluing so-called health vegans and by using accommodation strategies to justify their own aberrations from the vegan lifestyle, thus strengthening their own identity as authentic vegans. In this case, ethical views seem to be at the core of vegan identity work and serve as reasons for the vegans to hold veganism in such high regard concerning their identity. On the other hand, while the focus of Sneijder and te Molder (2004, 2005, 2006) is on the dietary side of veganism in online forum discussions, they, too, point out how identity work is still present in the interactions. Likewise, as Lindeman and Stark (1999, 2000) remark, ideological reasons for food choice may be connected to the expression of one’s personal identity. Moreover, Hirose and Pih (2011: 1483) note that what kind of food one eats and how – organic, healthy, local, processed, vegan, or ethnic – is an important cultural and political matter with vital consequences for one’s cultural lifestyle and identity. All of these studies thus indicate that different branches of veganism seem to be linked to a range of identity practices.

### *2.3.1 Identification and dis-identification*

When speaking of identity, the process of identification is central. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14) describe identification as acts in which one needs to characterise oneself and others, to locate oneself in regards with known others, to place oneself and others in a narrative, and to position oneself and others in a category in different contexts. In other words, identification is realised by both self and others and can be directed at both self and others. Therefore, it is at the core of constructing one’s own identity as well as those of others. Identification can be regarded as an inherent part of

social life, and in modern settings, which multiply connections with others not personally known, occasions for identification are especially ample (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14). Thus, it could be said that online communities offer various opportunities for identification.

Identification entails alignment with a description or category, expressing that someone belongs to something. However, it is important to note that identification is not limited to merely seeking alliance and affinity, but it can also involve various acts of dis-identification, according to which social actors can disengage, dis-align or distance themselves from certain identification-related stances or opportunities (Leppänen et. al. 2017: 15). Dis-identification might, in its part, act as an enhancer of identification, as people might express their belonging to a certain category more strongly when distancing themselves from another, opposing, category. Indeed, discursive practices of categorical dis-identifications from the other are rather explicitly also about the identification of the selves in question, about 'us' discursively making evaluations of 'them' (Leppänen et al. 2017: 22).

The processes of identification and dis-identification are often abundant in groups and communities where membership is deemed important by the participants. Identification, in the classificatory sense, refers to identifying oneself or others as someone who fits a particular description or belongs to a certain category (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17). The distinction of "us" and "them" divides people into groups and produce feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Such processes may facilitate concepts of shared belonging and offer members a sense of shared identity (Jenkins 2014). Thus, the identification and dis-identification processes can continually construct and modify meanings of belonging in a community, simultaneously making a distinction between the members and people who do not fit into the shared identity. As Bilgri (2018: 2716) remarks, the boundaries of the community are formed by the subculture's context and cultural repertoires, traditions and narratives that members have access to, including categorisation systems to distinguish insiders and outsiders, and common vocabularies and symbols (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In other words, identification and dis-identification can be

used to define ingroups and outgroups by highlighting the differences between the groups.

Identification and dis-identification processes and thus defining in-groups and outgroups can be seen as a relevant phenomenon in veganism. According to Leppänen et al. (2017: 31), in studies that focus on both identifications of the self and (dis)identifications with others, diversity is often regarded as a juxtaposition between 'us' and 'them', in-group and out-group, where the out-group is seen as in some respect significantly (and suspiciously) different or divergent from the self-identified position represented by the authorial stance. Previous research on veganism shows that vegans might use identification and dis-identification practices to mark vegans as the in-group, while distancing themselves from an outgroup, such as 'health vegans' (Greenebaum 2012b), or vegetarians (Sneijder and te Molder 2005: 691). Moreover, the perception that an out-group signifies a threat to in-group interests or continuity establishes a circumstance in which identification and interdependence with the in-group is directly linked with fear and antagonism toward the threatening out-group and vice versa (Brewer 1999: 435-436). Thus, such practices might be highlighted among vegans, as they represent a rather marginalised community.

## **2.4 Normativity**

Another feature of online interactions that is relevant to the present study is normativity, and its importance can be seen on multiple levels of the current study. Firstly, veganism itself can be considered a normative discourse, as it contains several norms to which vegans are expected to adhere. Secondly, internet spaces and communities normally impose norms on their users. In the present study, both Reddit as a website and r/Vegan as a subreddit contain sets of explicit and implicit norms which the members are supposed to follow. Lastly, the specific interactional instances in online spaces can lead to new norms being established, for example in the case that the discussed topic requires exceptional sensitivity or other kinds of adjustments to the interactional practices. The different types of normativity that are relevant to the present study are discussed more extensively in this subsection.

Broadly perceived, social norms can be regarded as rules that direct behaviour, the "customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions and all other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of the contact of individuals" (Sherif 1936: 3). Social normativity can also be described as a polycentric phenomenon, meaning that people might align with, or feel accountable towards, different social and linguistic norms which are related to various norm centres (Blommaert 2010). Blommaert (2010: 39) defines 'centre' as the broader social and cultural body of authority into which we convey our immediate practices in relation with our immediate addressees, containing the complexes of norms and apparent appropriateness criteria to which we adhere. The relevant centres of normativity can vary from one situation to another, and thus internet users align with different norm centres in different internet environments. In other words, online status symbols, norms and expectations are always reliant on the specific scene or community (Baym 2010; Marwick 2013). They are assessed and negotiated daily and inclined to change over time (García-Rapp 2017: 123). Therefore, it is essential to take into account the environment in which the interactions are realised and the different levels of normativity the environment poses.

Internet spaces specifically are characterised by several layers of normativity, including self-, peer- and state-imposed norms. The potential orientation towards different norms is an instrumental element in interaction on social media because the conversations take place in a semi-public space where different people with different normative alignments constantly engage with each other and encounter each other's writings and normative orientations (Stæhr 2015: 76). Moreover, the imposed norms can be both explicit, such as rules posed by the internet site in question, and implicit, in which case they appear and are negotiated in online interaction (Varis and Wang 2011: 71-72). It is highly usual that the written rules of an online community only constitute a small part of its norms, as many of the norms are implicit and thus continually negotiated in interaction.

As many other social media platforms, Reddit has some rules that apply to all of the site's users. However, the way in which these norms are expressed is slightly different

from other popular social media sites. Reddit itself has only provided its users with the outline of Reddit Content Policy which includes information about unwelcome content, prohibited behaviour, Not Safe for Work content, enforcement of rules, and moderation within communities (Reddit 2020b). It is also stated that the subreddits may have additional rules which are enforced by the subreddits' own moderators. However, there is also a set of guidelines called the 'reddiquette' which is described as "an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves" (Reddit Help 2020b). While the reddiquette is written by the users of Reddit instead of Reddit officials, Reddit strongly encourages its users to follow it.

Due to the way in which the reddiquette is constantly updated and modified by redditors, it could be seen as negotiation of implicit norms. However, many seem to consider reddiquette as part of the explicit norms of Reddit. Anderson (2015: 9) notes that the relevance of reddiquette is upheld by the redditors themselves, as those who breach the reddiquette will be called out and corrected by their peers. Consequently, Reddit constitutes a highly interesting space concerning normativity, for the line between explicit and implicit norms is not clear-cut. Moreover, the normativity inside the site is constantly evolving and the norms can differ significantly from one subreddit to another due to the possibility of subreddits forming their own rules.

Normativity also plays an instrumental role in the identity construction and performance of the subreddit's participants. As Varis and Wang (2011: 72) note, the constraints in online environments have determining influence on the way internet users can deploy and build identity repertoires, engage with others and construct communities. Thus, as the identity performances observed in the thesis occur inside the given online space and community, the norms of both the space and the community are likely to affect the ways in which participants construct their identities in the subreddit.

It is also generally believed that to be regarded as a vegan, one must adhere to a certain set of norms. In general, people have different normative predilections, and an individual might draw from different centres for different social purposes (Stæhr 2015: 75). For instance, one will most probably adhere to different normative centres when

expressing the role of a close friend in a group chat than one does when performing the identity of a vegan in a public online space. However, it is nearly impossible to define a set of norms for veganism upon which everyone agrees. As Greenebaum (2012b: 129) states, not every vegan holds the same norms and values. Nonetheless, especially in recent years the definition of veganism has become more focused on diet. In consequence, many believe that veganism equals a diet that is exempt of all animal-based products but does not necessarily encompass the issues of clothing and other animal-based materials. It is to be expected that the different ideas of the norms of veganism might also appear in the interactions on r/Vegan, or at the very least affect the normativity in the community.

## 2.5 Authenticity

In identity work in general, as well as in forming a vegan identity, another key issue is that of authenticity. As previously mentioned, there are several notions of what veganism entails, and thus it seems to be important for some to define what is, in fact, 'real veganism'.

Authenticity can be defined as a claim that is made by or for someone, a thing, or a performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others (Peterson 2005: 1086). Moreover, Bucholtz (2003: 398) notes that authenticity underwrites nearly every aspect of sociolinguistics, including the identification of socially relevant linguistic phenomena, the definition of the social groups that are studied, the methods that are used to collect data, and the theories that are utilised in the analysis.

Authenticity is somewhat highlighted in the construction of vegan identities, as veganism is considered to be in strong connection with certain definitions and norms. As Blommaert and Varis (2011: 12) remark, in different positions of our social and cultural lives, we organise features in such a way that they enable others to identify us as 'authentic', 'real' members of social groups. People take part in explicit identity work especially when their authenticity is questioned either by others or in the form of self-critique (Peterson 2005). Moreover, as Vannini (2006: 237) states, the basic

principle of authenticity is that when individuals feel that they are in congruence with their values, goals, emotions, and meanings, they experience a positive emotion, authenticity. She further notes that in contrast, people experience inauthenticity as an unpleasant emotion when they experience incongruence with their values, goals, emotions, and self-meanings.

The different potential motivations for veganism also raise the question of authenticity, with a notable example being the perceived distinction between “ethical vegans” and “health vegans”. According to Greenebaum (2012b: 136-137), the ethical vegans in her study felt they could claim more authenticity than the health vegans due to their ethical motivation and lifelong pledge. As Goffman (1959: 29) notes, performers often maintain the impression that they have ideal motives for acquiring the role in which they are performing. Thus, it might be that many vegans feel that precisely *their* motivation for being vegan is the ideal and authentic one.

Such a phenomenon can be seen in other studies on authenticity as well. García-Rapp (2017: 127) discusses authenticity in a YouTube beauty community, focusing on the popular beauty guru Bubzbeauty. She notes that after metrics such as views and subscriptions have confirmed that an aspiring guru has skills, the community will eventually assess the possession of other significant qualities. According to her, a key issue is the revealed and enacted ‘real’ reasons for them to participate and upload, which can be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ reasons according to the community. For example, participating to help and inspire others is regarded as an acceptable motivation to make videos, while looking to become rich or famous are examples of unacceptable reasons (García-Rapp 2017: 127). The logic is similar with the evaluations that ethical vegans form of others’ motivations to become vegan in Greenebaum’s (2012b) study. She reports that the ethical vegans she interviewed considered the best interest of animals, animal rights, and aiming to save animals from the animal agriculture industry as acceptable reasons to become vegan, whereas dietary and health reasons as well as self-interest were deemed as unacceptable motivations for veganism. Such evaluations illuminate that even within a broader identity category, such as “vegan”,



individuals might have differing ideas of who should actually be accepted as a member of the community.

When examining authenticity, it is important to acknowledge how it is constructed. As Bucholtz (2003: 410) notes, authenticity does not exist without the authenticating processes that produce it. The process through which authenticity is claimed and negotiated is called authentication. Bucholtz (2003: 408) defines authentication as a concept that considers identity to be the result of constantly negotiated social practices and produces authenticity as its outcome. She further notes that authentication is achieved through the claim of one's own or another's identity as genuine or reliable. In addition, Coupland (2010: 105) describes authentication as a discursive process through which people can make assertions about their own or others' positions as authentic or inauthentic members of social groups. Authenticity is, thus, realised through these intricate processes of authentication that are discursive in nature and relate to the specific practices and norms of the surrounding community or group.

Another factor that influences the construction and performance of authenticity is the environment in which it is realised. As Androutsopoulos (2015: 74) notes, in the new public spaces established in social media, the expression of authenticity is a core value in the production of discourse for a personal public. Moreover, he states that displays of authenticity in social media are rendered visible to a networked public whose follow-up discourses can contain exceptional linguistic reflexivity and normativity.

### **3 AIMS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this section, I will discuss the methodological framework of the present study. Firstly, I will present the aims and research questions of the study. Secondly, I will introduce the collected data in detail. Moreover, I will explain the process of data collection and the reasons for data selection. Thirdly, the ethical issues concerning the data collection will be discussed. Lastly, I will present the methods and tools of analysis of the present study, including online ethnography, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis.

#### **3.1 Aims and research questions**

The purpose of my study is to examine the ways in which vegan identities are constructed and authenticated through linguistic and interactional means on the subreddit r/Vegan. The subreddit provides a rich platform for textual interaction, as participants are able to communicate with each other regardless of geographical boundaries and without membership restrictions. Moreover, the community offers a space for specifically discussing veganism-related issues, which might be a highly important outlet for some people to express their vegan identities. As veganism often elicits debate on its definition and the 'right' ways of being vegan, the subreddit r/Vegan also seems to provide a suitable environment for discussion on 'authentic' veganism. Overall, the combination of an active online platform and the theme of veganism creates a fruitful environment for identity and authentication processes.

In order to discover how identity and authentication processes are realised through language and interaction on r/Vegan, I aim to answer the following research questions in my study:

1. In which ways are vegan identities constructed through linguistic and interactional means on the subreddit r/Vegan?
2. How are these vegan identities authenticated in the subreddit?

Due to the nature of thematic analysis as a method, the research questions were evaluated and reformed during the phase of data analysis. As inductive thematic

analysis requires that the themes are strongly related to the data themselves instead of being tailored to a pre-existing coding framework (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83), the research questions were meticulously considered at each step of analysis. Thus, it was ensured that the research questions would reflect the themes found in the data instead of the theoretical background of the initial research questions guiding the formation of the themes.

I believe that answering these two research questions will demonstrate the ways in which linguistic means are used in identity construction and how these identities are authenticated in interaction. These processes will be realised through discourse within the community, and therefore the discourses present in the observed community will be carefully analysed. Moreover, the recurring themes regarding identity construction and authentication will be presented in order to portray the ways in which such processes are realised in the community.

I chose to focus on the identity construction and authentication of vegans as the topic is particularly interesting due to the discord within the vegan community regarding the definition of veganism. The choice to study these processes through linguistic means stems from the affordances of Reddit as a platform that provides a fertile environment for textual interaction between participants. Similarly to Lloyd and Finn (2017: 161), in the present study, language is understood as an essential aspect of the constructions of knowledge and of the systems of meaning through which we come to know and make sense of our world, our experiences and ourselves. I believe that the combination of veganism-related identity and authentication processes can reveal some highly interesting, and possibly novel, insights into how identities and authenticity are constructed and negotiated in online spaces.

### **3.2 Data selection and collection**

The main motivation for choosing the subreddit r/Vegan as the object of study is my own affiliation with veganism and my interest in the ideology. Moreover, as veganism in itself is often a strong identifier, it provides an interesting sphere of study

concerning identity construction. Many participants of the subreddit presumably share the identity of “a vegan”, and the ways in which such shared identity may affect the interactions between the participant is interesting to consider. What is more, the active discussion of the subreddit provides material for examining identity construction in interaction, which is one of the main objects of research in my study. I feel that another vegan-themed subreddit with a less active user base would not have been as suitable for the study as r/Vegan. Due to its activity, I feel that the community is worth examining despite its fairly modest size compared with the most subscribed subreddits.

Due to the topic of the present study and the limitations of its scope, I decided to leave out certain types of content that are regularly posted in the subreddit but that do not relate to the aims and research questions of the study. Firstly, I only included posts that had generated at least ten comments at the moment of collection. As I focused on the construction of authentic identities in interaction in the present study, posts that have only garnered a few singular comments do not provide relevant material for analysis. Secondly, I did not include any posts that consisted of merely a picture of food, a vegan product or a recipe in the data. While the sharing of recipes and information about new products are certainly a part of the vegan experience, they rarely elicited conversation apart from singular comment expressing thankfulness for sharing or similar sentiments. Lastly, I did not include any content that could easily be recognised as spam or advertising.

I decided to collect the data from the subreddit r/Vegan from posts that are under the tab Hot, as it showcased the posts that were rapidly gaining popularity at the moment of data collection. I felt that the Hot tab provided the most general overview of the subreddit’s content, as it did not merely feature the top-voted posts but rather the ones that were actively discussed. Moreover, as my focus of observation was on identity construction and authentication processes that happen in interaction, the observation of actively discussed topics seemed like a fitting choice. I only observed the posts that had been sorted by Hot during the data collection period in order to avoid discrepancies in the data selection.

A Google Chrome extension called SingleFile was used to collect the data. For the data excerpts, I took screenshots of the data that was collected with SingleFile in order to present the relevant units of data in a suitable form. With SingleFile, I was able to save entire websites at a given moment, so that all the content on the page was collected. Such a tool made the data collection much easier and much more practical than, for example, using screenshots, as one could only fit a small part of the whole page into one screenshot.

The data collection was conducted during eleven days between 29 November and 12 December 2019. The data collection was realised through a period of several days so that patterns of interaction and other relevant processes within the community could be recognised.

### **3.3 Ethical considerations of data collection**

When the data for a study is collected online, the ethical aspects of the process must be carefully considered. Townsend and Wallace (2016: 3) remark that while social media platforms provide researchers with the opportunity to collect data that would otherwise be challenging to obtain, this opportunity also entails the responsibility to ensure that the ways in which the data is gathered and reused adhere to the highest possible ethical standards. Moreover, as Kytölä (2013: 69) notes, computer-mediated communication is an especially challenging area in regards with research ethics, since it involves online spaces that are neither distinctly open or public, nor clearly closed or private. Therefore, researchers of such data must carefully plan and consider their conduct of study. Markham and Buchanan (2012: 12) particularly emphasise the importance of recognising and solving ethical issues as they surface in the different stages of the research. I aim to achieve this by thoroughly considering potential ethical issues at every step of the research process, from defining the topic to presenting the data and protecting the identities of the participants in the data in the best way possible.

The accessibility of the data is considered to be at the centre of ethical issues in research. The use of readily accessible data is largely seen as acceptable, as the content is then regarded as public. However, boyd and Crawford (2012: 672) note that it can be considered problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical merely because the data is accessible. They further remark that the process of assessing the research ethics cannot be disregarded just because the data is seemingly public. Furthermore, as Zimmer (2010: 324) states, concerns over consent, privacy, and anonymity do not simply disappear because subjects participate in online social networks, but rather become even more meaningful. While the content might be readily available, some of it might be very personal or intimate to its creators.

Views on whether online postings are public or private are defined to some extent by the online environment itself, and by an assessment of whether there is a sensible expectation of privacy on behalf of the social media user (British Psychological Society 2013). For instance, a private Facebook group in which membership requires acceptance from a moderator could be considered private, while openly accessible discussion on Twitter in which people discuss topics using a hashtag could be seen as public. For me, one of the reasons for choosing the subreddit r/Vegan as the object of research was its availability. The subreddit does not require a Reddit account, subscription or a certain age to be accessed, and can thus be seen and read by any internet user who desires to do so. As the publicity of a social media space is seen as closely tied to whether the social media user can reasonably expect to be observed by strangers (British Psychological Society 2013), I feel that the subreddit r/Vegan is a suitable choice as an object of research. However, questions of whether the data is public or not also relate to the extent to which we are ethically required to seek informed consent from social media users. Because of these considerations and constraints, data collection in online settings definitely entails its own challenges.

Another instrumental issue to consider are the terms and conditions of the online environment in which the data is collected. There might be significant differences in the accepted uses of the content of different online spaces and communities. Reddit forbids users from “modifying, preparing derivative works of, disassembling,

decompiling, or reverse engineering any part of the Services or Content” (Reddit 2020c). It is further mentioned in the User Agreement that users may not access, search, or collect data from the Services by any means (automated or otherwise) except as permitted in the Terms or in a separate agreement with Reddit. These prohibitions apply to more technical data and not the actual content of the site, as the User Agreement makes a clear distinction between the terms ‘content’ and ‘data’. The use of the content for research purposes is not prohibited in any part of the User Agreement.

As Townsend and Wallace (2016: 6) remark, anonymity is also a central consideration in research ethics. In order to avoid the possibility of recognition with the data, I plan to create pseudonyms to protect the privacy of all the participants in the data of this thesis, despite the fact that Reddit users use pseudonyms by default. The pseudonymisation also protects the participants from the risk of harm that researchers potentially place on their research subjects. The risk of harm is most likely where a social media user’s privacy and anonymity have been breached and is also greater when dealing with more sensitive data which, when revealed to new audiences, might expose a social media user to the risk of embarrassment, reputational damage, or prosecution (Townsend and Wallace 2016). The risks of privacy seem fairly small on r/Vegan, as Reddit users are not allowed to include personal information in their usernames or comments. Townsend and Wallace (2016: 11) also define sensitive data as including postings concerning criminal activity, financial problems, mental health issues, extramarital sexual activity, controversial political opinions, and activism. As the subject matter of the r/Vegan revolves around veganism in everyday life, it seems unlikely that such sensitive data would be an issue.

I opted to create pseudonyms for the communicators shown in the data, concealing their actual Reddit usernames, in order to ensure pseudonymisation as best I could. The decision was in part based on the consideration that these online identities could be as valuable to their users as their offline identities (Bilgri 2018: 2717). I strongly subscribe to the idea that individuals might consider the identities they have formed

online as a highly meaningful part of their selves. Therefore, revealing such identities in the research would seem unethical to me.

Another issue that should be addressed is my position as the researcher of this study. In studies that incorporate ethnographic elements, the main role of the researcher in developing theory within qualitative frameworks of research, and the ensuing richness of the developed data connections and possible interpretations, can sometimes be regarded as a downside due to the possible loss or lack of objectivity or validity (García-Rapp 2017: 122). As I am a vegan myself and was somewhat familiar with the subreddit that serves as the object of the current study, I recognise that I might possess ideas and attitudes that subconsciously affect my ability to stay objective in my analysis of the data. However, I have attempted to stay as objective as possible, leaving my personal feelings and ideologies aside to the extent that I consciously could. Furthermore, I realise that other researchers might have interpreted the same data in other ways, highlighting different themes and coming to other conclusions.

### **3.4 Methods of analysis**

In this section, the analytical methods and tools of analysis will be presented. In order to answer the research questions and to demonstrate how vegan identities and their authenticity are constructed through written interaction, the collected data will be analysed with qualitative methods.

The framework for the observation and collection of data lies in online ethnography which will be discussed in the first sub-section of this chapter. Secondly, to highlight the different ways to construct, perform and negotiate authentic identities, relevant themes within the data are identified according to the principles of thematic analysis. Thirdly, in order to capture the different ways in which identities and authenticity are formed and negotiated, discourse analysis is presented.

#### *3.4.1 Online ethnography*

Ethnographers seek to capture and comprehend the meanings and dynamics in particular cultural settings by observing and participating in the environments they



aim to describe (Rampton et al. 2004: 2). Moreover, ethnography provides insight into the relationships between participants, the sociocultural experience of those involved in a discussion, the interactive aim of the moment, and the indexical meaning for the group of the linguistic features being used (Jones 2011: 725). Thus, ethnography can be a highly useful tool in the analysis of identity construction in online communities.

Ethnographic tools can be used in the present study in order to understand the phenomena of identity construction and authenticity better. As Jones (2011: 725) remarks, research that hopes to understand the meanings behind linguistic features, interactive moves and stance taking must have a clear comprehension of the local context in which it happens. She further explains that through ethnographic engagement with a specific group, by means of close participant observation, the interactive context in which identities are mutually built may be explained. In the present study, I actively observed the community in focus for approximately six months before the data collection in order to gain an understanding of its conventions and patterns of communication. Moreover, I made notes on the observations and the collected data throughout the research process. Indeed, by integrating these features of ethnography into my study, I have been able to analyse the collected data with more insight and precision.

#### *3.4.2 Thematic analysis*

Having gained an understanding of the community of r/Vegan and its practices through ethnographic observation, I will use thematic analysis to illustrate how participants in r/Vegan construct vegan identities and evaluate their authenticity. With thematic analysis, I will be able to detect recurring patterns in the data and compile them into relevant themes. Thus, this method enables the qualitative analysis of the most relevant issues in the rather large data set.

As per Braun and Clarke (2006: 78), thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. They further note that as a method, it minimally organises and describes the data set in abundant detail. However, thematic analysis often goes further than this, interpreting numerous facets of the research topic (Boyatzis 1998). While the expression of ideas and views is central

to thematic analysis, the method should not be simplified into an analysis of singular items of discussion. As Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012: 9) note, thematic analyses do not merely focus on counting explicit words or phrases, but rather concentrate on recognising and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, or, in other word, themes. Thus, the recurring and relevant thoughts concerning the topic at hand can be recognised and discussed in detail.

Thematic analysis is usually used in the analysis of qualitative data, though it may be complemented by quantitative elements. The quantitative elements might be useful in illustrating the prevalence of themes in the data. However, it should be noted that the definition of themes is not always as straightforward as one might think. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) note, the significance of a theme does not essentially depend on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something relevant in relation to the overall research question. Thus, themes are not limited to the views that are mentioned most often in the data but also encompass thematically relevant issues that are scarcer in occurrence.

Themes within data can be identified in one of two primary ways in thematic analysis: in an inductive or 'bottom up' way, or in a theoretical or deductive or 'top down' way (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83). An inductive approach means the identified themes are strongly in connection with the data themselves (Patton, 1990). Thus, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 83) state, inductive analysis is a procedure of coding the data without attempting to fit it into an already existing coding framework, or the analytic presumptions of the researcher. They further note that in this sense, the inductive form of thematic analysis is data-driven. In contrast, a theoretical thematic analysis is usually driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area and is therefore more overtly analyst-driven (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). The theoretical form of thematic analysis tends to not provide as rich a description of the data overall, but rather a more detailed analysis of some facet of the data. As my aim is to discover how the participants of r/Vegan construct and perform authentic vegan identities in different ways, the inductive form of thematic analysis seems more suitable for the purposes of the present study than the theoretical form of analysis. With the inductive

analysis, I will be able to consider the views that the participants express in the data set instead of limiting the focus on certain perspectives on the basis of previous research and established theoretical frameworks.

Another aspect of thematic analysis is the level at which themes are to be identified: at a semantic level or at a latent level (Boyatzis 1998). With a semantic approach, the themes are recognised within the explicit meanings of the data, and the analyst is not searching for anything apart from what a participant has said or what has been written (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). Thus, no interpretations of broader views or ideologies should be made on the basis of the explicit material. In contrast, the latent approach of thematic analysis surpasses the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or observe the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies that are theorised as forming or enlightening the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). As the purpose of the present study is strongly related to vegan ideologies that possibly create concepts of authenticity, the latent level of thematic analysis seems to be a suitable choice for the analysis of the current data. Focusing merely on the semantic level of the data would most likely not capture the extent of the ideas that are relevant to the research question of the present study.

In the present study, the criteria I use to identify themes are the following: connection with the focus of the study, recurrence in the discussion within the subreddit, and focus on one key topic. With this framework, I first formulate initial codes for the data excerpts. Codes identify an element of the data that seems interesting to the analyst, and refer to “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998: 63). Next, I begin to form the potential themes. At this point, some preliminary codes may be formed into main themes, while others might form sub-themes, and others may be discarded altogether (Braun and Clarke 2006: 90). This phase results in candidate themes. At this point, the significance of individual themes regarding the data set must be considered, as well as whether the candidate themes ‘accurately’ reflect the meanings apparent in the data set as a whole (Braun and Clarke 2006: 91). The values of each theme and the connections between the themes must then

be evaluated and considered. Next, the themes that will be presented for the analysis must be defined and further refined and the data within them should be analysed in detail (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92). At this stage, it is also important to recognise whether the themes contain any sub-themes. Sub-themes are fundamentally 'themes-within-a-theme' which can be helpful for creating structure to an especially sizeable and complex theme, and for displaying the hierarchy of meaning within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92). The themes should also be given names which encapsulate their importance in regards with the data. The themes and sub-themes of the present study are introduced by name in the beginning of Section 4, Analysis.

While thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative studies, it has been critiqued due to issues of reliability. As Guest et al. (2012: 9) remark, reliability is of greater concern with thematic analysis than with word-based analyses as the definition of the data items (i.e. codes) as well as applying the codes to chunks of text requires more interpretation than word-based forms of analysis. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the process of forming the themes is illustrated precisely and in a transparent way. In other words, it is essential to note that researchers cannot liberate themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and thus data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). While the aim is to observe the data objectively, it is always possible that the preconceptions of the researcher affect the interpretations in some ways. An account of themes 'emerging' or 'being discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis which denies the active role the researcher essentially plays in identifying patterns or themes, selecting which of them are relevant, and reporting them to the readers (Taylor and Ussher 2001). Moreover, if it is not apparent how people go about analysing their data, or what presumptions affect their analysis, it is difficult to evaluate their research, and to compare or synthesise it with other studies on the topic, and it can impede other researchers carrying out related projects in the future (Attride-Stirling 2001). Therefore, I will attempt to illuminate the ways in which the themes of the present study have been formed as clearly and transparently as possible.

Thematic analysis has also been argued not to be a method at all, but rather a tool that can be used within certain methods. For example, Boyatzis (1998) characterizes thematic analysis as a tool that can be used across different methods instead of considering it to be a specific method. Similarly, Ryan and Bernard (2000) define thematic coding as a process that is realised within major analytic traditions, rather than a particular approach. However, Braun and Clarke (2006: 78) argue that thematic analysis should indeed be recognised as a method in its own right, as through its theoretical freedom, it delivers a flexible and valuable research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. Thus, I feel that thematic analysis provides an opportunity to highlight and analyse relevant aspects of the data in a manageable manner. When there is a rather high volume of data, the themes can be used to accurately represent the entirety of the data set while only presenting relevant examples of each thematic component.

Similarly to a model presented by Lloyd and Finn (2017: 161), once themes are established, a more discursive analysis can be initiated. Lloyd and Finn (2017) further clarify that the purpose here is to pay attention to the ways in which key themes are oriented to, constructed, and managed by the participants through discursive practices. With this combination and dialogue of thematic analysis and discourse analysis, both the larger ideological themes related to identity and authenticity as well as the discursive dimension present in the data can be uncovered. Discourse analysis will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection.

### *3.4.3 Discourse analysis*

After gaining a general sense of the object of study and identifying the relevant themes within it, the next step is to analyse the data in more detail on the textual level. As Reddit is a highly text-centric website, my data is mainly text-based. The focus of my study is the use of linguistic and interactional features in the construction of authentic vegan identities. Regarding the focus of my study, discourse analysis seems like a suitable choice for the analysis of the data. The term discourse analysis comprises a variety of language-oriented approaches that are concerned with the analysis of talk, text and other signifying practices (Parker 1992; Willig 2013). Within this framework,

'discourse' as a systematic way of talking about something is seen not as a transparent medium that reflects some underlying assumed reality, but as something that creates social, psychological and material realities in context-specific ways (Foucault 1990, 1976; Parker 1992).

Discourse analysis as a collection of methodologies examines how the use of language is affected by the relationships between the participants and the influence the use of language has upon social identities and relations (Paltridge 2012: 2). Thus, it is highly suitable tool for the analysis of identity processes in online communication. The suitability also applies to the processes of authentication, as they are similarly negotiated in online discussions as identities. As Karrebæk, Stæhr and Varis (2015: 22) remark, rather than an essential quality, authentication is a progression and a discursive construction attained through the employment of semiotic resources. Thus, it seems practical to adopt a perspective of discourse analysis when observing authentication processes. Discourse analysis can also be seen as relevant when observing identity construction. As Gee (2014: 2) states, language provides us with the opportunity to undertake different socially significant identities. Thus, discourse provides insight into the connection between language use and identity performances.

It is also important that methods used in the present study are connected to the communal aspects of the study, considering that the identity construction takes place in the community of r/Vegan. Discourse analysis fits the requirement, as its features enable the examination of the communication of the community members. As a discussion forum emphasises social interaction, a discursive approach enables us to observe how accounts are formed and how they function in this particular social context (Gough 2016: 159). Paltridge (2012: 17) remarks that speakers often have a variety of social identities and discourse community memberships as well as a collection of languages or language varieties they use to interact in within certain communities. Moreover, as Jones (2011: 737) states, research utilising a sociocultural linguistics approach provides a comprehension of the relationship between broad, ideological notions of identity and their applications in real, local-level contexts, while the use of discourse analysis can provide a clear understanding of practices and

stances within a group setting. She also notes that by recognizing that these may differ from moment to moment, while viewing interactions as part of a much broader context, we may learn more about the varied ways in which individuals within communities of practice construct meaningful identities. Thus, discourse analysis can be used to pinpoint particular uses of such language varieties within the community in focus.

In the present study, I attempt to uncover processes of identification and authentication through discourse analysis. I will attempt to illustrate how these processes are realised through different linguistic means. Moreover, I aim to illuminate how such processes are accomplished in interaction with other participants in the subreddit. As discourse analysis considers the social aspects of communication, I feel that its tools can help in such discoveries.

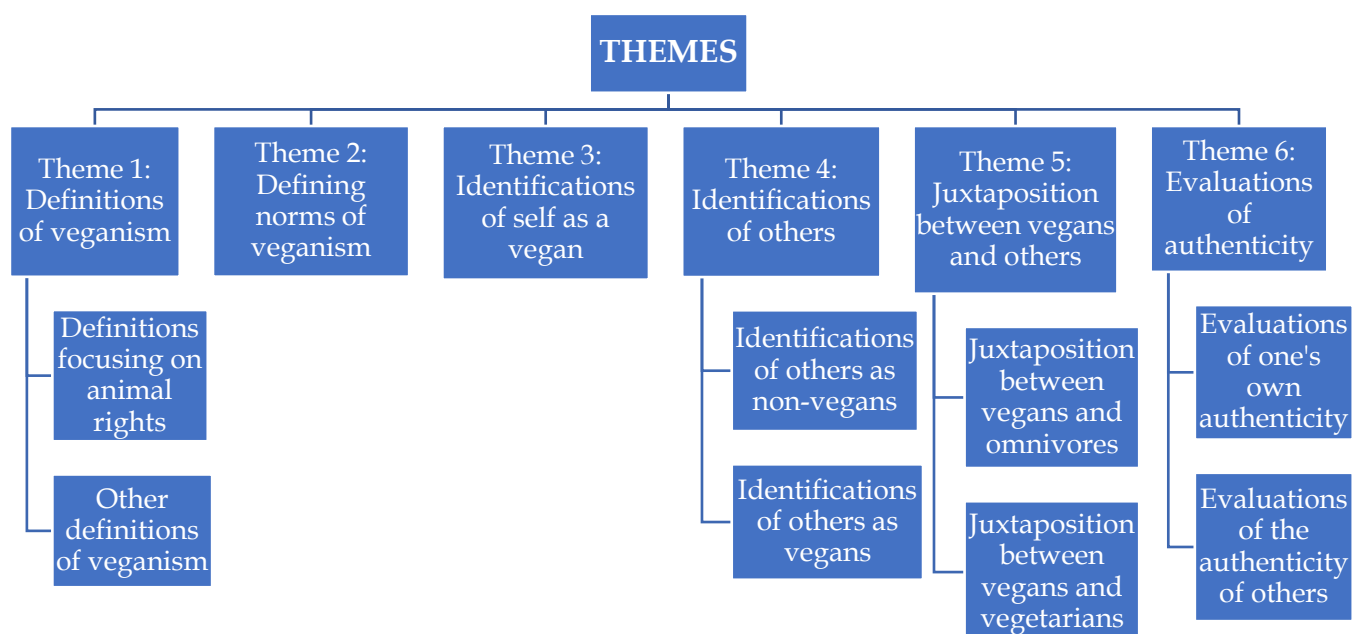
When conducting the discourse analysis, I will firstly look for relevant instances of the formed themes in the data set by identifying posts that discuss topics that relate to the themes. Secondly, I will acquaint myself more closely with the whole discussion on the post, including comments and replies. Thirdly, I will look for relevant discursive practices inside these units of data, such as insider language, word choices, use of pronouns, and relevant uses of netspeak (e.g. emojis, acronyms, and typographical features). Finally, I aim to illustrate throughout the analysis how these discursive practices relate to each other and the broader themes and aims of the present study.

## 4 ANALYSIS

This section comprises of the analysis of the collected data. Firstly, the themes and sub-themes into which the data has been categorised will be introduced. Then, the analysis of all themes, and their possible sub-themes, will be presented in their respective sub-sections. Data examples will be presented in each sub-section to further illustrate what kinds of linguistic means and interactional practices are included within each theme.

The data has been categorised into six different main themes: (1) *Definitions of veganism*, (2) *Defining norms of veganism*, (3) *Identifications of self as a vegan*, (4) *Identifications of others*, (5) *Juxtaposition between vegans and others*, and (6) *Evaluations of authenticity*. Theme 1, *Definitions of veganism*, has been divided into the sub-themes *Definitions focusing on animal rights* and *Other definitions of veganism*. Theme 2, *Identifications of others*, also contains two sub-themes: *Identifications of others as non-vegans* and *Identifications of others as vegans*. Theme 5, *Juxtaposition between vegans and others*, entails the sub-themes *Juxtaposition between vegans and omnivores* and *Juxtaposition between vegans and vegetarians*. Theme 6, *Evaluations of authenticity*, is also split into two sub-themes: *Evaluations of one's own authenticity* and *Evaluations of the authenticity of others*. Themes 2 and 3, *Defining norms of veganism* and *Identifications of self as a vegan*, do not contain any sub-themes. All the themes and sub-themes are presented in a table below.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of the data





In the present study, sub-themes are utilised within themes that are large and contain features that relate to the same main idea but are realised in markedly different ways. In other words, the sub-themes act as further qualifications of the main themes when it is needed. If such distinctions do not seem necessary within a main theme, no sub-themes have been constructed.

The themes, and their potential sub-themes, will be presented in the following sub-sections. The first two sub-sections focus on the themes *Definitions of veganism* and *Defining norms of veganism* respectively, constructing the image of how veganism is characterised by the participants of r/Vegan. These themes present the groundwork on which identification and authentication processes are constructed on the subreddit. The two following themes, *Identifications of self as a vegan* and *Identifications of others*, then examine how self and others are identified on the subreddit in relation to veganism. The next theme, *Juxtaposition between vegans and others*, illustrates how participants of r/Vegan highlight and reinforce vegan identity by indicating marked distinctions between the in-group of vegans and the chosen out-groups. The final theme, *Evaluations of authenticity*, depicts how claims to vegan identities are authenticated, or how their authenticity is undermined, within the subreddit.

It must be noted that there might be slight overlap among the themes, as the posts and comments in the data rarely fit into a singular, clear-cut category. However, this is largely unavoidable due to the close connection of the discussed topics.

#### **4.1 Definitions of veganism**

When it comes to veganism, an interesting and highly relevant topic is the actual definition of what veganism is. As has been mentioned earlier, not all those who label themselves “vegan” agree on the definition. The need to define veganism seems to be strongly present on r/Vegan as well. Definitions of veganism are frequently mentioned and discussed by participants on the subreddit.

Though these categories may seem so closely linked that they could be one, they deal with slightly different topics. While the definitions of veganism focus more on

describing overarching meanings of veganism, and thus defining *what* veganism entails, the norms are more concerned with *how* veganism should be realised. Thus, I feel that there is a need to discuss the themes as separate entities.

The definitions of veganism that are mentioned on the subreddit vary somewhat. However, based on my observations, some definitions seem to be more prevalent than others. Overall, definitions that centre on animal rights and animal welfare seem to be more generally accepted in the subreddit than other kinds of definitions, as will be illustrated in the following examples. Animal-centred definitions are also much more usual than definitions that are based on, for example, only diet or environmental matters. The definitions have been further divided into sub-themes that comprise of *Definitions focusing on animal rights* and *Other definitions of veganism*. The sub-themes will be discussed in detail in their respective sub-sections.

#### 4.1.1. *Definitions focusing on animal rights*

The majority of definitions of veganism that are discussed in the subreddit are focused on animal rights and animal welfare. They strongly centre on the ethical aspects of veganism and define veganism as a philosophy and way of life rather than merely a diet. An interesting way of expressing such a description is to quote the definition provided by The Vegan Society (2020), "Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose." Overall, definitions that focus on animal rights are strongly outnumber other definitions that concentrate on environmental issues, health reasons, or deem veganism as a mere diet. Example 1 presents an instance where the definition of The Vegan Society is used as an argument for the idea that veganism should be focused on animals instead of the environment.

#### **Example 1.**

↑ Comm. Blue vegan 14 points 1 day ago

↓ "Veganism 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."

Sorry but since when are we gatekeeping people out of veganism because of their environmental footprint? And how exactly does that fit in with the idea that veganism is, at it's basic level, the avoidance of animal products?

I'm calling troll on this one.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [give award](#) [reply](#)

The specific definition of The Vegan Society is mentioned frequently in the data. Moreover, there are some instances where the definition seems to be the basis of the definition, but it is not quoted word for word. Thus, it seems that the kind of definition where veganism is described as an ethical philosophy is fairly popular and frequently used in the subreddit.

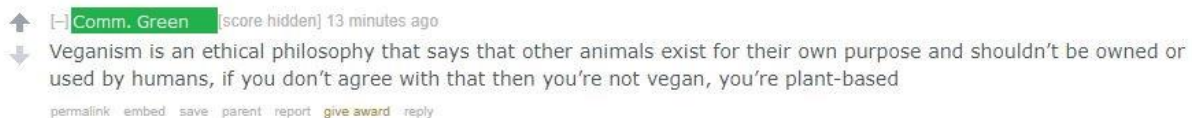
In Example 1, the definition is quoted word for word in a reply to a commenter who states that flying is incompatible with the ideas of veganism due to its environmental impact. Commenter Blue seems to use the definition of the Vegan Society to combat this statement by bringing animals to the focus. They seem to deem people's environmental footprint irrelevant due to it not being a central issue in defining veganism. Moreover, the commenter describes veganism, at a more basic level, as "avoidance of animal products". In both the quoted, more extensive, definition and the more simplified description, animals are at the forefront. Thus, the conclusion of Commenter Blue seems to be that animal rights are at the core of defining veganism, while environmental issues are not relevant. In Example 2, in turn, a similar view is expressed, but in this case, it is also connected with the idea that veganism is not about purity and should only be practiced as far as is possible.

### Example 2.



In Example 2, there are elements that seem to refer to the definition of The Vegan Society, but their definition is not quoted. However, the core idea of excluding the exploitation of animals is presented in this definition as well. It is also interesting to note that this definition includes the idea of veganism only pertaining to doing this "as much as possible as far as it is practicable". While the definitions that focus on animal rights can be seen as more complicated than those that simply focus on diet, they emphasise that the ideology only extends to what is practically possible. A stricter interpretation of the definition is presented in Example 3:

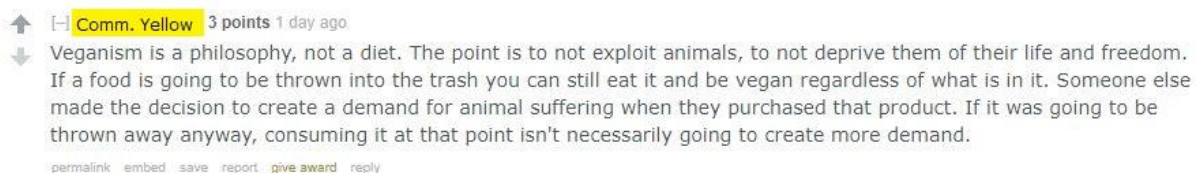
### Example 3.



In Example 3, Commenter Green responds to another comment where the Original Poster (OP) is accused of gatekeeping due to stating that anyone who supports the use of police dogs is not actually vegan. Therefore, it seems that the definition acts as a reminder of what veganism is about, which refers to the animals. While the definition is not quoted from The Vegan Society, the core idea seems to be largely the same in regard to the importance of animal rights. However, the practical aspect of the definition is not mentioned in this example. Nonetheless, the thematic emphasis is again on the animals and their wellbeing.

Example 4 illustrates how another focal point which is often mentioned in different definition of veganism is the fact that it is *not* merely a diet, but rather a philosophy, an ideology or a way of living. The distinction seems to be important to many participants of the subreddit, as it is frequently mentioned and discussed. There are also specific instances of resistance towards defining veganism as “a diet” in the data.

#### Example 4.



Here, Commenter Yellow also defines the “point” of veganism as “to not exploit animals, to not deprive them of their life and freedom”. Again, the focus is on the animals and the avoidance of their exploitation. The commenter also mentions an interesting idea of someone eating animal-based products and still being vegan if the food would have otherwise been thrown out. As eating the product would not raise demand of animal-based products, it is not exploiting animals, and thus vegan. While the view might seem peculiar, it makes sense from a purely practical perspective where the goal is to avoid food waste which is commonly seen as a significant global problem. Overall, the focus of this definition is again on the animals and their wellbeing.

The combination of defining veganism as a philosophy and focusing the definition on animal rights goes hand in hand with the definition of The Vegan Society, and similar instances can be seen in other examples in the data as well; Example 5 is an illustration of this:

### Example 5.

↑ **Comm. Black** 0 points 1 day ago

↓ I see where you're coming from but the reason we now have 'vegan' menus in restaurants, 'vegan' options', 'vegan' fast food chains, 'vegan' supermarkets ranges is because of this massive movement of plant based eating - there is power in numbers. Honestly I don't care if I have to tell someone I don't eat eggs or fish or make sure my secret santa person knows I don't wear leather or wool or whatever else. Veganism isn't about me and how difficult or easy it is for me to eat or shop out. It's about the suffering of animals. Honestly I don't care how we get there or what we call it, if we can get to the point where eating first then wearing and using animals is no longer mainstream then no longer exists, happy fucking days!!! 🙌

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(My emphasis)

In some cases, such as in Example 5, the idea of veganism not being about “us” is highlighted. There seems to be a perceived contradiction between seeing veganism as being about the people who practice it as opposed to it being purely about the animals.

Here, Commenter Black states that veganism “isn’t about me and how difficult or easy it is for me to eat or shop out”. They go on to remark that “it’s about the suffering of animals”. Thus, the definition is focused purely on animal rights and disregards personal views of the difficulty and inconvenience of veganism. In Example 6, the importance of animal rights as a motivation for veganism is emphasised by comparisons with environmental reasons.

### Example 6.

↑ **Comm. Violet** 22 points 7 hours ago

↓ veganism is different than plastic-free or sustainable. it's about minimizing animal cruelty. if you try your best and accidentally slip up because you got a non-vegan order and you didnt realise then that's fine and still perfect imo. but ppl shouldn't use this as an excuse to eat eggs or fish once a month.

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↑ **Comm. Brown** 11 points 5 hours ago

↓ Does the word “vegan” not have any meaning anymore? Veganism strictly means not consuming any animal products (to the extent that is possible), environmental benefits are strictly secondary.

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As illustrated by Example 6, in some instances, definitions that focus on environmental factors seem to be directly opposed to the ones that put their focus on animal rights. The reason for this distinction seems to be that people regard the environmental aspect as separate from and irrelevant to the definition of veganism. While veganism can reduce one's environmental footprint greatly and is often mentioned in discussions about the current situation of the environment, the most widely accepted definition of veganism (The Vegan Society) does not mention environmental issues. Thus, the inclusion of environmental matters in the definition of veganism can be seen as blurring the definition and being, ultimately, unnecessary due to the strong emphasis on animal rights among vegans.

In Example 6, Commenters Violet and Brown both distinguish the definition of veganism from environmental considerations. Commenter Violet defines veganism as "minimizing animal cruelty", while Commenter Brown sees it as "not consuming any animal products (to the extent that is possible)". Both definitions focus on the avoidance of animal exploitation. Moreover, Commenter Violet states that "veganism is different than plastic-free or sustainable" and Commenter Brown notes that "environmental benefits are strictly secondary", thus excluding environmental factors from the definition. Commenter Brown's question "Does the word "vegan" not have any meaning anymore?" seems to reflect the frustration that seems to be felt by many towards the varying interpretations of veganism and the possible confusion it can cause.

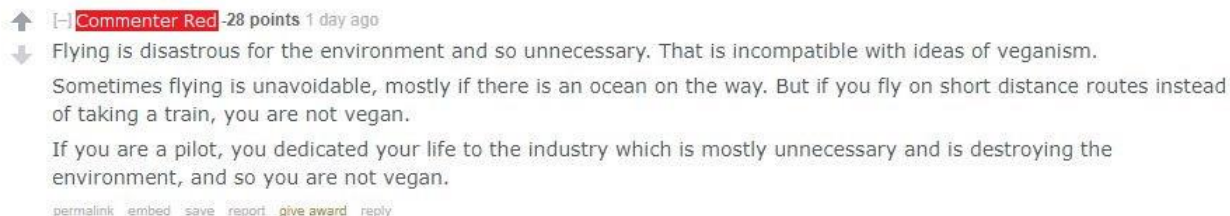
Overall, it seems that the most common definition of veganism in the subreddit is one where veganism is seen as an overarching ideology or philosophy that focuses on the avoidance of animal exploitation. A well-known definition by the Vegan Society might often be utilised to highlight these qualities of veganism. However, while they are few, there are also differing takes on the definition. Such instances are presented in the following two sub-sections.

#### 4.1.2. *Other definitions of veganism*

While definitions that focus on animal rights clearly seem to be the most prevalent on the subreddit, there are also other views on the topic. For some, animal rights and

animal welfare do not seem to be the core theme according to which one should define veganism. In these examples, veganism is defined through an environmentalist view and as a diet; Example 7 puts it as follows:

### Example 7.



In Example 7, Commenter Red remarks that flying is “incompatible with ideas of veganism” due to its environmental impact. They go on to state that a pilot cannot be a vegan, as they dedicate their life to an industry that is harmful to the environment. The comment has sparked a lot of discussion in which most of the other commenters disagree with Commenter Red’s definition.

This definition differs starkly from others in the present data, as it makes no mention to animals. The focal point is purely on the environmental impacts of one’s actions, on the basis of which it is then decided whether one is a vegan or not. The only definition of “ideas of veganism” is that flying goes against them, because it has such negative effects on the environment.

It is also interesting to note that the comment has been noticeably downvoted. While downvoting should not be used to express disagreement, it seems that dissent might possibly be the reason for it in this case. Seeing as how much more common the animal-centric definitions of veganism are on the subreddit, it could be construed that this more environmentally focused definition has not been received well.

In some cases, there does not seem to be a clear-cut overarching philosophy behind the definitions. Instead, they focus more on treating veganism as a diet, while excluding the ideological side. Example 8 presents two of such instances:

### Example 8.





Example 8 contains two instances of participants who define veganism as a diet, although their certainty in the matter seems to vary. Commenter Burgundy seems to be slightly befuddled when it comes to the definition of veganism. However, they offer the idea that veganism entails not eating any animal products. Here, “being vegan” is defined through one’s diet without consideration of ideological factors. The fact that most participants include the ethical aspect in the definition seems to cause confusion for Commenter Burgundy, as they think that plant-based eating equals veganism. However, there seems to be a clear division between veganism and plant-based diet on the subreddit, which will be discussed in more detail in section 4.5.

Commenter White, on the other hand, simply states that “vegan is a term primarily used for diets”. According to them, when someone says they are vegan, they usually only refer to their diet not containing animal products. The ideological dimension of veganism is only mentioned as a possibility. The commenter even deems this definition to be the more widely used and recognised definition among people who call themselves vegans. However, while r/Vegan does not represent the general population, such a view definitely does not apply to the subreddit where most commenters seem to see veganism as a philosophy that focuses on animal rights.

Another instance of definitions that categorise veganism as a diet instead of a lifestyle is presented in Example 9:

### Example 9.





In Example 9, Commenter Turquoise refers to veganism as a diet and remarks that it “isn’t necessarily a lifestyle”. The idea is expressed as a statement without references to it being only the commenter’s opinion or view. Moreover, the use of “Y’know” and “right” in the question concerning the interruption of diets seems to challenge the ideas of the other subreddit participants, possibly even implying their ignorance or lack of understanding.

Similarly to Example 8, veganism is primarily described as a diet, with the possibility of it being a lifestyle seeming secondary. This view seems to tie into the other contested idea of someone “stopping being a vegan”, which some of the subreddit’s participants deem impossible due to the strong ideological basis of veganism. In other words, they think that if someone can stop being vegan, they were never vegan to begin with. The definition offered by Commenter Turquoise includes the idea of “interrupting veganism” as they mention that diets can be interrupted. Thus, the more overarching ideological dimension of veganism is again mostly excluded.

In summary, while veganism is most often defined in the subreddit as a lifestyle that focuses on animal rights, other definitions are also presented. These definitions focus on environmental issues and consider veganism to be more of a diet than an ideology. The variety of definitions is also reflected in the norms of veganism that are discussed and negotiated in the subreddit. Such norms will be discussed in the following subsection.

#### **4.2. Defining norms of veganism**

The second important, recurring theme on the subreddit is the definition of the norms of veganism. While the definitions of veganism characterise what veganism actually is, posts belonging to this category offer more detailed descriptions of what is acceptable when it comes to veganism and what is not. As there seems to be no specific, universally accepted norms for veganism - which most likely has to do with the differing interpretations of its definitions - different norms are constantly discussed and negotiated on the subreddit. Therefore, the ambiguity of the norms can make it

much more difficult to discern which actions are considered acceptable and which are not. The underlying motivations and ideas for veganism can also sometimes enter into the definitions of the norms. In other words, some participants do not regard mere actions to be enough if the motivations behind them are not in line with their definition of veganism.

Some of the topics that seem to spark discussion and disagreements include whether one can be vegan without caring about animal rights, which kind of products are acceptable to buy (e.g. whether animal testing has been included in any part of product development, whether the owner of the company is deemed ethical enough) and who can be called vegan and who cannot. Examples 10–17 illustrate ways in which these topics are discussed on the subreddit.

### Example 10.



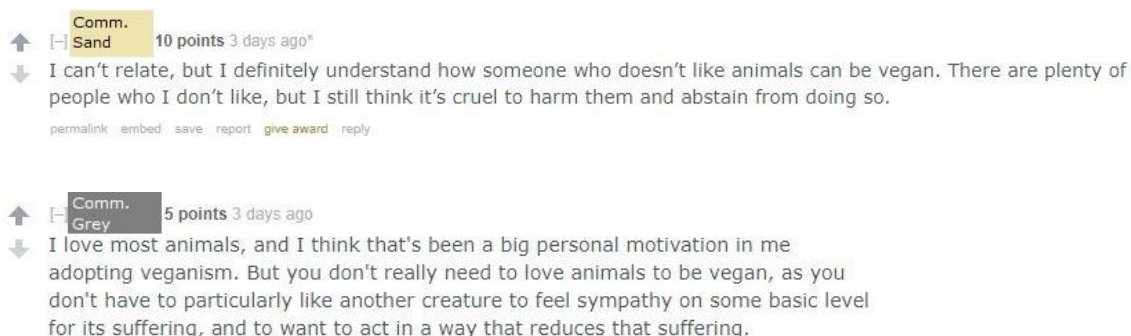
The screenshot shows a Reddit post in the subreddit r/vegan. The post title is "I want to go vegan.." and it was submitted 19 hours ago by the user "self.vegan". The post content reads: "Hi.. I've been eating meat my whole life since that's what I grew up with, but lately i get sick thinking about it, I get this ball in my stomach of nausea when I eat meat.. I want to higher my vibration, but I'm not the best green eater to say the least.. and I'm working out and I need my protein.. I don't know what to do, but I need to raise my vibration." Below the post, there are 29 comments, with the first one highlighted. The comment is from user "Comm. Pink", who is a member of the community for 3+ years and has 10 points. The comment text is: "Instead of trying to 'raise your vibration' you should really go vegan to stop funding the torture of animals, degradation of the planet, and prevent yourself from getting cancer, osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes, and increasing your all-cause mortality rate." Below the comment, there are several links to related content: "12 Plant Foods High in Protein", "The Myth of Complementary Protein", "The Protein Myth", and "Vegetarian Protein Is Just As 'Complete' As Meat, Despite What We've Been Taught". The comment also includes a link to a documentary: "Since you are an athlete you should really watch the documentary that just came out called Game Changers. Athletes perform better on a vegan diet in many different ways."

Example 10 presents how motivations for veganism can be evaluated as suitable or unsuitable by a subreddit participant. Here, Commenter Pink responds to the OP who states that they want to go vegan because they need to “higher [sic] their vibration”. Commenter Pink posits that instead of raising their vibrations, the OP should become vegan for ethical (“stop funding the torture of animals”), environmental (“stop degradation of the planet”) and health (“prevent yourself from getting cancer, osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes, and increasing your all-cause mortality rate”)

reasons. Thus, it seems that Commenter Pink does not regard “raising vibrations” as an acceptable motivation for veganism. Instead of citing a singular acceptable motivation, they instead quote three types of reasons for going vegan. It could be interpreted that the reasons are listed in order, starting with the most important one, but without additional information, it is impossible to say whether this was the commenter’s intention.

Another interesting discussion on the subreddit is whether it is required of vegans to actually *like* animals. The OP of the post raises the question as they themselves are not especially fond of animals despite being “very close to vegan”. While many commenters express understanding of such a view, there are also some who seem to find such an attitude to be incompatible with their perceived norms of veganism. Example 11 presents understanding views on the matter:

### Example 11.



The screenshot shows two comments from a Reddit thread. The first comment is from user 'Sand', who has 10 points and posted 3 days ago. The text of the comment is: "I can't relate, but I definitely understand how someone who doesn't like animals can be vegan. There are plenty of people who I don't like, but I still think it's cruel to harm them and abstain from doing so." Below the text are links for 'permalink', 'embed', 'save', 'report', 'give award', and 'reply'. The second comment is from user 'Grey', who has 5 points and posted 3 days ago. The text of the comment is: "I love most animals, and I think that's been a big personal motivation in me adopting veganism. But you don't really need to love animals to be vegan, as you don't have to particularly like another creature to feel sympathy on some basic level for its suffering, and to want to act in a way that reduces that suffering."

In Example 11, Commenters Sand and Grey express understanding despite having different personal views. Their perspective seems to be that it is possible to be vegan while not liking animals. Overall, they seem to think that there is no need for a norm of liking animals, as long as one adheres to the norm of avoiding animal exploitation. Thus, the motivations behind the actions do not seem to be as relevant as in the previous example. A contrasting view on the same topic is presented in Example 12:

### Example 12.



The screenshot shows a comment from user 'Pink', who has 3 points and posted 3 days ago. The text of the comment is: "/r/plantbaseddiet". Below the text are links for 'permalink', 'embed', 'save', 'report', 'give award', and 'reply'.



In Example 12, Commenters Pink and Gold imply that a person who does not like animals cannot be considered a vegan. Commenter Pink expresses this by linking to the subreddit r/plantbaseddiet which refers to a diet that excludes animal products but does not entail the ethical dimension that is usually seen as a part of veganism.

Commenter Gold expresses agreement with Commenter Pink, also stating that the OP is close to plant-based rather than close to vegan. They go on to remark that humans usually stink and might defecate on the floor which are actions of animals that the OP mentions in a negative light. These commenters thus seem to subscribe to stricter norms of veganism which include the liking of animals as a requirement for being accepted as a vegan.

Another point of contention is the question of whether one can be “formerly vegan” or pause veganism. Many participants on the subreddit seem to find the concept impossible, as according to them, anyone who abandons veganism was never a true vegan to begin with. A post about a Youtuber’s switch from veganism to a carnivore diet has evoked discussion about such ideas on the subreddit. Some norms that are highlighted in the discussion are presented in Example 13:

### Example 13.



**Vegan YouTube star is branded a fraud by her furious followers after revealing she followed the CARNIVORE DIET for 30 days - and insisting the meat-based plan was 'way better' than veganism**

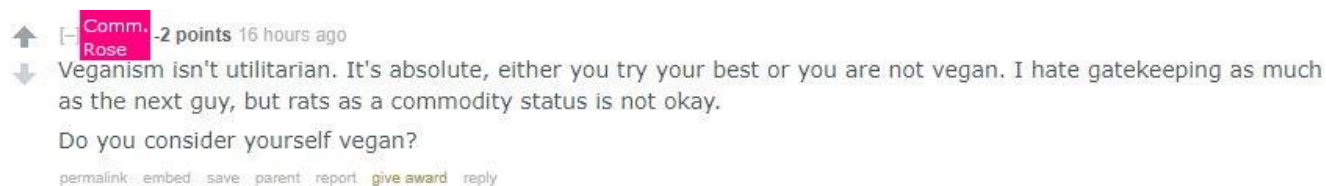


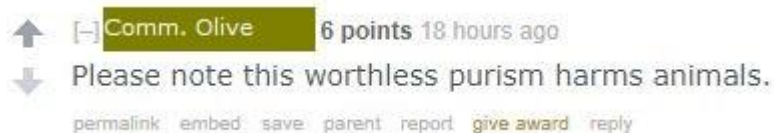
In Example 13, the title of the post itself is an imperative form as it tells people to “stop calling people like this vegan”. The title refers to a Youtuber who has previously been a vegan and then switched into a very meat-centred diet. According to the OP, such people should not be called vegan at all. Commenter Shade agrees with the sentiment by stating that there is “no such thing as an ex-vegan”. Thus, there seems to be an underlying idea of veganism being something that cannot be paused or discarded at whim. Such a norm could be described as a requirement for strong commitment to the ideology. Such normative ideas seem to tie into the recurring idea that veganism is not merely a diet but rather a philosophy and way of life.

When it comes to normativity, the ethics of products and companies are often discussed and disputed. There are differing views on practices and qualities that are deemed acceptable in the production of vegan goods. Therefore, even products that might seem vegan at face value might not be regarded as such by some vegans if, for example, their manufacturing process or impact include ethically questionable factors.

For instance, the company Impossible Foods caused a stir among many vegans by reportedly using animal testing in the development of their Impossible Burger which has been marketed as a vegan meat substitute for burger patties (Impossible Foods 2020). The issue has sparked arguments over whether a product that has utilised animal testing can ever be considered truly vegan. Two different views on the topic are presented in Example 14:

#### Example 14.



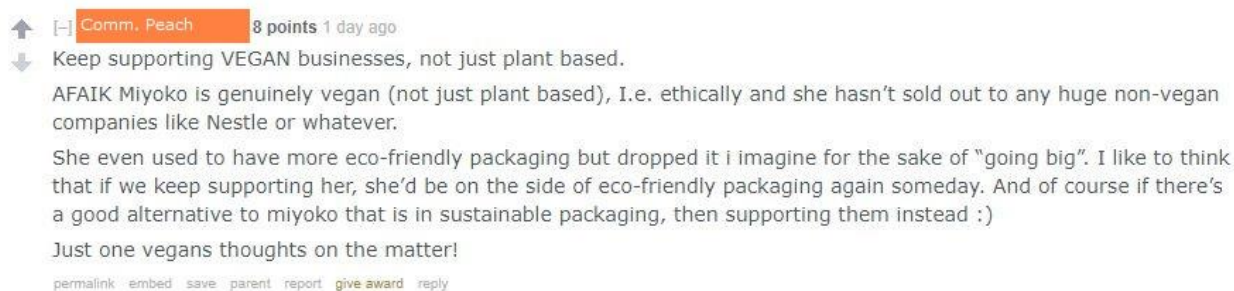


In Example 14, Commenter Rose describes veganism as “absolute” and states that it is not utilitarian. They go on to remark that “rats as a commodity” is not okay, referring to the animal testing done by Impossible Foods. Thus, there seem to be the implied norms that people should try their best to be vegan and that animal testing is not compatible with ideas of veganism. Such norms again tie strongly to the ethical side of veganism, in which animal rights and animal welfare are the priority.

On the other hand, Commenter Olive is of the opinion that “this worthless purism harms animals”, referring to the opposition of the animal tests conducted by Impossible Foods. They seem to subscribe to the idea that the end justifies the means, as the Impossible Burger arguably has the potential to spare a significant number of animal lives by acting as a replacement for animal-based products. Again, the focus of the commenter is on animal welfare, but they approach it from a completely different perspective compared with Commenter Rose. Commenter Olive seems to adhere to the norm that a puritanical perspective onto veganism actually harms animals and is thus not required, or even accepted, in veganism.

A more positive example of brand evaluation on the subreddit concerns Miyoko, a company that produces vegan alternatives for dairy products. In Example 15, Commenter Peach describes the pros and cons of the company and expresses some normative stances towards consumer habits of vegans.

### Example 15.





In Example 15, Commenter Peach uses the imperative when urging other to “keep supporting VEGAN businesses, not just plant based”. They thus make a clear distinction between the two terms, on the basis of their ethical profile. Miyoko is regarded as “genuinely vegan” as it has not been sold to a “huge non-vegan company”. Such a distinction implies that companies that produce vegan but are owned by large non-vegan companies should not be considered vegan. Therefore, for instance, Alpro should not be seen as genuinely vegan because it is owned by Danone which is best known for its dairy products.

The norm about supporting only genuinely vegan companies again puts emphasis on the ethical side of veganism; this is shown, for example, in Commenter Peach’s view of ethics as an instrumental part of the normativity of veganism. These ideas once again highlight the complexity and variety of normative views among vegans, as many might not go this far when it comes to defining which companies and products can be considered vegan.

Certain types of products and ingredients also generally elicit discussion and differing opinions among the participants on the subreddit. Meat substitutes often create discussion about whether products that explicitly imitate animal products should be accepted and used. Moreover, there exists the question of whether ingredients that cause environmental harm through their production can be considered vegan. Opinions of such matters are usually varying and thus highlight the complexity of attempts to define norms for veganism. A rather specific instance of norm construction is presented in Example 16:

### Example 16.

↑ **Comm.** 1 point 1 day ago  
 ↓ **Blush**

I have a feeling it will be a fad. I had one beyond burger and it was underwhelming. Im not sure why people prefer that to some bean/grain patty.

There is a lot of new vegan things coming up in my city thanks to this beyond burger. I tell everyone i meet that unless these restaurants have vegan items on the menu then I will not eat there food. And most places that do have vegan options also have there in house vegan patty as well as the beyond burger.

I also keep trying to tell vegans that the beyond burger is not for vegans. It is for omnis to assist in the transition to a plant based / more economical sustainable diet. I only see it as a temporary solution because once the vegan cooking comes in to play there is so many healthier better tasting choices.

It is also a good junk food option and im all about junk food. However i find other processed vegan junk is far better. Mostly because it does not taste like meat.

Im completely dumbfounded for why the beyond burger is so common with vegans. If its marketed to be meat like then its not for me.

permalink embed save report give award reply

(My emphasis)

In Example 16, Commenter Blush expresses confusion towards the popularity of Beyond Burger among vegans. Beyond Burger is a very similar vegan alternative for hamburger patties as Impossible Burger, as it is marketed as a very meat-like product that is made with completely plant-based ingredients. Commenter Blush directly states that “the beyond burger is not for vegans” and that it is, in fact, “for omnis to assist in the transition to a plant based / more economical sustainable diet”. They go on to remark that if “its [sic] marketed to be meat like [sic] then its [sic] not for me”. These statements seem to imply that products that are labelled as closely resembling meat are not acceptable for vegans. While the reasons for such a view are not specified, there seems to be an implied idea that meat-like products are not compatible with the norms of veganism, no matter whether the actual ingredients used in their production are vegan.

Another frequently disputed issue is the use of palm oil in vegan products. Palm oil is often criticised due to the catastrophic effects its production has on the environment. Palm oil contributes to the deforestation of some of the world’s most biodiverse forests and thus also harms several already endangered species of animals. While many vegans avoid palm oil due to these reasons, there is no consensus on whether such impacts should enter into the definition of whether products can be considered vegan or not. Palm oil has also generated discussion on r/Vegan, as can be seen in Example 17:

### Example 17.

↑ [-] **Comm. Purple** 0 points 4 days ago  
 ↓ In my opinion it is not vegan as I think you could relatively easily avoid palm oil on a whole foods plant based diet and buying alternative shampoos etc. Having said that I am living as a hypocrite because I consume products with palm oil, my diet has a lot of unhealthy processed foods and therefore palm oil.  
 Edit: Basically if an action causes harm to animals and it's possible and practical to avoid said action - then said action is not vegan.  
 permalink embed save report give award reply

In Example 17, Commenter Purple deems palm oil not vegan, and easily avoidable. They state as a general rule that “if an action causes harm to animals and it's possible and practical to avoid said action - then said action is not vegan”. Once again, animal rights are at the forefront of the definition of the norm, but it is not as straightforward as one might first think. While the production of palm oil is undoubtedly harmful to



the environment, it does not in itself contain anything animal based. Such norms that deem products that might cause indirect harm to animals as non-vegan might be especially tricky to adhere to, as one would need to research products and ingredients to uncover their possible negative effects on animals. As such, the majority of vegans seem to consider palm oil technically vegan due to it being plant-based, but a subset of them avoid it due to its environmental and ethical implications.

However, it is interesting to note that Commenter Purple calls themselves a hypocrite because they consume products made with palm oil. Such an admittance shows that sometimes vegans might recognise norms that they do not even follow themselves. Such a phenomenon seems to tie into the notion that is often mentioned on the subreddit of veganism not being about perfection. In the jungle of normativity, everyone needs to choose what to adhere to and what to discard.

In summary, diverse normative practices can be identified within r/Vegan, ranging from direct imperatives and opinions to larger ideological notions. Animal rights and avoidance of animal exploitation are the most prevalent normative centres. However, some norms concerning environmental issues can also be detected. There is also variation within the norms that relate to animal rights, as participants of the subreddit see the extent to which animal exploitation can be avoided differently.

### **4.3 Identifications of self as a vegan**

Rather unsurprisingly, it seems to be very common that the participants of the subreddit identify themselves as a vegan in some way. The identifications are also often accompanied by qualifiers that position the participant as a certain kind of vegan. Examples of self-identification are presented in this section.

In addition to simple identification as “a vegan”, people often use different kinds of qualifiers when referring to themselves as vegans. In the data of the present study, such qualifiers include mentions of the time frame of one’s veganism and other expressions of one’s degree or experience as a vegan. The modifiers included in the identification seem often to relate to the specific discussion at hand in a meaningful

way or otherwise to add relevant information and context to veganism. Examples of such identifications will be presented and discussed below.

### Example 18.

#### First month as vegan



#### First year as vegan after arguing with omnis



↑ [Comm. Seablue](#) vegan 5+ years 1 point 14 hours ago\*  
 ↓ I would love if you could start a thread on this. I've been vegan for 4+ years and am honestly at my wits end with the arguments. I just can't help but debate with these people that say such stupid things and are so inconsiderate towards my lifestyle, animal cruelty and the destruction of the planet. What really irritates me is that the people starting the arguments are doing NOTHING for this planet yet they have the nerve to pick apart my lifestyle and choices?  
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [give award](#) [reply](#)

The original post in Example 18 presents a meme about the frustration vegans experience when arguing with non-vegans, in this case, omnivores. The meme depicts “First month as vegan” with an image of well-known pop culture characters being cheery. It then contrasts it with an image of the same characters looking sad, accompanied by the description “First year as vegan after arguing with omnis”. The meme makes the comparison in an evidently humoristic manner by emphasising the contrast between the concepts through visual means, featuring popular characters who are frequently utilised in meme-making.

Commenter Seablue is responding to another commenter who has offered to help other vegans hone their arguments. Commenter Seablue identifies themselves as

someone who has “been vegan for 4+ years”, thus not only signalling their belonging to the category of “vegan” but also marking how long they have been one.

In this case, there seem to be several different possibilities for the motivation to mention the time frame. For one, it ties into the topic at hand, as Commenter Seablue states that they are “at their wit’s end with the arguments” straight after the mention of their number of years as a vegan. It could be that they want to showcase that the frustration is still present even after years of veganism, while the original post refers to only a year of being vegan. It might also indicate that the arguments with non-vegans get more tedious as time goes on, as the number of disputes grows through time. Secondly, the time frame might work as a way to express that even those who seem to be “more experienced” as vegans might get tired of the disagreements, which might be valuable insight into newer vegans who could look up to the more long-time members of the community. Thirdly, the time frame might work as an indication that the commenter has several years of experience of being vegan and thus, in a sense, “knows what they are talking about”. In other words, the qualifier of “4+ years” might lend their words more credibility and even more authenticity.

The practice of mentioning one’s ‘mileage’ as a vegan is not uncommon in the subreddit: there are several examples of it in the data of the present study. While it seems to be common to indicate one’s experience, and thus possibly also credibility and authenticity, as a vegan by referring to one’s number of years spent as a vegan, expressions of time can also be used to signal one’s inexperience. Some interactors on the subreddit seem to want to signal that they are new to veganism, which is often achieved through similar expressions of time as the indications of experience. Example 19 presents an instance where inexperience is emphasised instead of experience:

### Example 19.



In Example 19, Commenter Pearl expresses to have “been vegan all of 3 months”. Three months is obviously a rather short period of time, which they seem to recognise

based on their use of the expression “all of 3 months”. Thus, the commenter positions oneself as someone who is fairly new to veganism. Such a position indicates that they might not have as much information and experience as those who have been vegan for a longer time do.

Another way of expressing one’s lack of experience as a vegan is to use some other qualifier that clearly indicates that the commenter or poster has been vegan for a short time. Such qualifiers include, for example, the adjective “new” and the adjective “baby”. These qualifiers can also sometimes be combined with expressions of time for clarity, such as in Example 20:

### Example 20.



**Story** Finally had my first confrontation over being vegan...I won't forget it self.vegan  
 Submitted 14 hours ago by **Original Poster**  
 Some background: Been doing this less than a month, so I'm a baby vegan lol. I'm also still a teen so I can't really buy much of my own food. My entire family are omnis, there's not even a single vegetarian in the lot.

In Example 20, the Original Poster identifies oneself as “a baby vegan”. The qualifier “baby” would already suggest that they have been vegan for a short amount of time, but they also mention the time frame in the comment. According to the commenter, they have “been doing this [=veganism] less than a month”, which indeed is generally considered a short time period for having been vegan.

In this case, the elaboration is relevant to the post, which can also be seen through the original poster’s introduction which deems it ‘background’ for the rest of the text. As the post deals with the poster’s self-proclaimed “first confrontation over being vegan”, the qualifiers highlight the fact that the OP has previously been unfamiliar with such disputes that are directly related to veganism. By positioning oneself as “a baby vegan”, the OP also expresses their lack of knowhow when dealing with unpleasant situations such as the disagreement described in their post. All of these discursive choices then lead to the OP asking other participants of the subreddit for advice, which also reinforces their role as a novice. It seems that experience-related identifications often act as pieces of relevant context that help participants form accurate depictions of their situations and offer relevant context for their potential problems and questions.

In addition to expressions of one's level of experience, different qualifiers are often used to define one's 'degree' of veganism. In other words, such identifications are meant to depict 'how vegan' someone is. Example 21 presents an illustration of such representations:

### Example 21.

↑ [-] **Comm. Fire** friends, not food 7 points 23 hours ago  
 ↓ It's my favorite film that I never want to watch again. After being a "mostly vegan" for 12 years, I watched that documentary a little over a year ago. Since then, I haven't been a mostly vegan. I've just been a vegan. Of all the horrifying things I saw in that film, the one that most strongly haunts me even to this day is the fox that had been skinned alive. I don't think I'll ever forget the look in that poor animal's eyes as he lay waiting for death.  
 permalink embed save report give award reply

In Example 21, Commenter Fire markedly identify themselves as “a vegan” by showcasing the contrast between being “mostly vegan” and being vegan. The commenter positions “mostly vegan” as their past identification, with “a vegan” being the current one. They credit the document *Earthlings* as the cause for the change in identification. With these marked distinctions, the commenter seems to subscribe to the rather common belief among vegans that there are no degrees to veganism. In other words, the core idea is that one cannot actually be “mostly vegan”, but rather either is or is not a vegan. The view seems to be relatively common among the interlocutors in the subreddit, as can be seen through the data examples.

Interestingly, while the view that there is no such thing as “partly vegan” seems to be rather prevalent in the subreddit, the data also contains several instances of people using the qualifier “full” or “fully, or a similar variation, to describe their veganism. One of such instances is presented in Example 22:

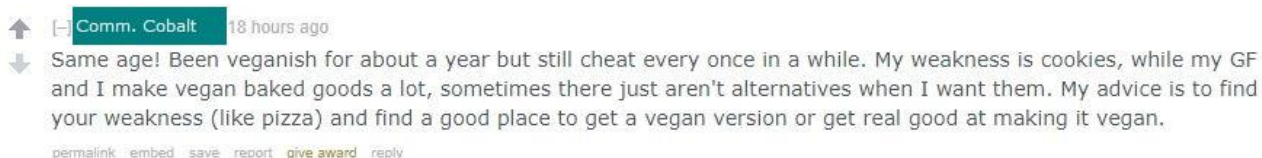
### Example 22.

I've (31m) been a meat eater all my life. As of 36 hours ago, I'm a full vegan. Just wanted to say thank you to this sub! self:vegan  
 Submitted 22 hours ago by **Original Poster**  
 Two years ago, I probably ate some meat or fish with every meal. The last two years I wanted to be at 50/50 meals with meat and meals without. I recently decided to make the switch to become fully vegan and this sub had a lot to do with it. My wife has been vegan for a few years now, even before we started dating so having her around will really help me. Anyway, just wanted to come here and say thank you and to keep up the good work! You're impacting people more than you know  
 41 comments share save hide give award report crosspost

In Example 22, the terms “full vegan” and “fully vegan” are used by the original poster both in the title of the post and the post itself. On one hand, it could be said that the modifier “full” and its variations imply that one can either be “fully vegan” or “partly vegan”. On the other hand, the qualifier could also be seen as merely a way of emphasising that the poster is now actually a member of the category “vegan” instead of other categories to which they might have belonged before. The fact that the poster has only recently transitioned into veganism could be a likely motivation for such an emphasis.

Another interesting aberration from the idea that one cannot be “partly vegan” is the use of terms that in themselves imply some degree of veganism. These terms are often formed by adding an affix to the term “vegan”, and thus coining a term which indicates, in a sense, ‘how vegan’ someone is. In the data, the most prevalent example of such a practice is the addition of the diminutive suffix “-ish” to the word “vegan”, which results in the term “veganish”. Other examples occur in the data more rarely and seem more individual in nature. The term is seen in an identification made in Example 23:

### Example 23.



In Example 23, which is a comment to the original post seen in Example 22, Commenter Cobalt identifies oneself as “veganish”. They seem to connect the idea of being “veganish” to not fully adhering to the norms of veganism, as they mention that they “still cheat every once in a while”. Such an identification highlights that the ways in which people identify themselves can be connected to the perceived normativity of veganism. It seems that some people do not feel justified to call themselves vegan if they do not fulfil certain requirements.

Another way in which the participants of the subreddit signal their vegan identities in a more specific way is to emphasise what ‘kind’ of vegan they are. In a similar manner that is seen in previous research (see e.g. Greenebaum (2012b)), there seems to often



be a distinction between so-called ethical vegans and genuinely ethical vegans among the participants of the subreddit. Example 24 presents identifications where such a specification is central:

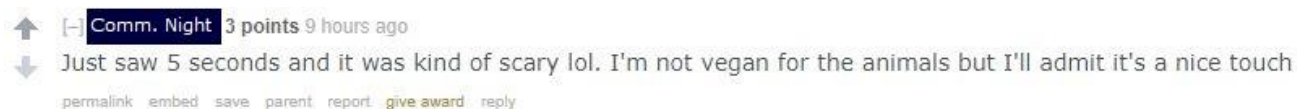
#### Example 24.



In Example 24, Commenter Sky expresses that they are “not Vegan [sic] for the purpose of healthy alternative [sic]”. Such an indication and the strong animal rights perspective of the comment would seem to imply that the commenter regards themselves as an ethical vegan.

While ethical reasons for veganism seem to be the most prevalent motivation for being vegan for the participants in the subreddit, there are also people who specifically identify themselves as vegans for entirely different reasons. Other motivations that are specifically mentioned include environmental reasons and health reasons. Some people also merely want to express that animal welfare is not the motivation for their veganism. Such an identification is depicted in Example 25:

#### Example 25.

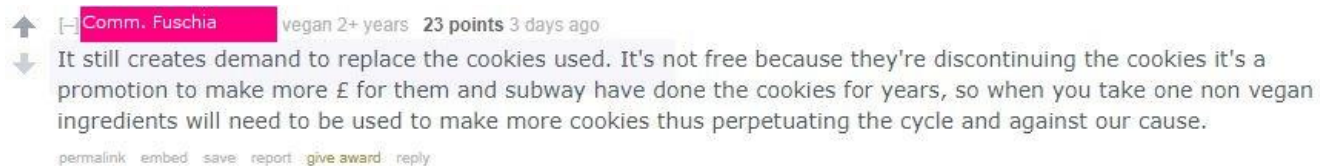


In Example 25, Commenter Night specifically remarks that they are “not vegan for the animals” in a discussion about vegan-themed documentaries. Such an identification does not indicate what the motivations behind the commenter’s veganism are, but it implies that the commenter does not identify as an ethical vegan in the most commonly recognised meaning of the term.

Identification might also be achieved without using specific identifiers. In such cases, participants position themselves as belonging to the relevant category by more indirect means. However, such identifications seem to be much rarer in the subreddit than

direct identifications. An example of an indirect identification can be seen in Example 26:

### Example 26.



In Example 26, Commenter Fuschia positions oneself as belonging to the category of “vegans” by using the phrase “our cause” when discussing the ways in which taking non-vegan food as a free side offer creates demand for animal products and is thus harmful for veganism. By using the pronoun “our”, the commenter positions oneself as a member of the group in question. Therefore, they identify themselves as a vegan, although indirectly.

In summary, identifications of self as a vegan are highly prevalent in the subreddit. While they are sometimes realised through the simple identifier “vegan”, the participants tend to qualify the identification with additional descriptors. The qualifiers most often relate to experience or inexperience as a vegan, perceived degree of veganism, or motivations for veganism. Belonging to the category of “vegan” can also be expressed indirectly, for example by describing vegans with the pronoun “we”, but such instances seem rare.

## 4.4 Identifications of others

As was shown in the previous sub-section, identification of the self seems to be a common practice in the subreddit based on the data. However, identification and dis-identification processes are often directed at others instead of the self. When it comes to communities, there is an inherent element on belonging and membership, and thus practices for defining who is part of the community and who is not often emerge. Such seems to be the case with veganism in the subreddit as well, as participants frequently identify others as vegans and non-vegans. Such processes of identification seem to



highlight the explicit and implicit norms of the subreddit and its participants, as there is still dissent about the definition of veganism even among vegans themselves.

*Identifications of others as non-vegans* is realised through both direct and indirect means on the subreddit, and it seems to often relate to perceived breaches of norms. Moreover, such identifications are often made in response to another participant within the subreddit. In contrast, *Identifications of others as vegans* is more often directed at real-life acquaintances and celebrities. In these cases, the identifications often relate to perceived authenticity and adherence to norms.

#### 4.4.1 *Identifications of others as non-vegans*

The identifications of others in the subreddit are often realised directly with various identifiers, such as “non-vegan”, “plant-based” and “omnivore”. These explicit categories are usually assigned to others, based on their posts or comments in the subreddit and therefore often highlight how participants perceive the norms of veganism. Such identification practices also illustrate how divided the views on this topic can be, as the data contains several differing ideas of who can and cannot call oneself vegan. The identification might also be realised through specifically stating that others are not vegan without more particular category-related identifiers. Example 27 presents an instance where an identification with a specific category is made:

#### **Example 27.**

Anyone else a vegetarian or vegan but don't like animals? self.vegan

Submitted 3 days ago by [Original Poster](#)

Hey y'all I'm a vegetarian, but very close to vegan (occasionally I use eggs and some butter for cooking). I avoid animal products due to animal cruelty, environmental effects, etc. However I don't care about animals. From an environmental perspective, the world would be a lot better off if there were a billion fewer cows anyways. I dogs/cats are not cute, they (generally) smell, leave hair everywhere, poop on the floor, you get the point. I used to find them repulsive, but I've gotten better over time to the point that I tolerate it. I've got plenty of veggie friends but I'm the only one who feels this way. I'm interested if others here also feel the same, regardless I'd love to hear your thoughts.

[16 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give award](#) [report](#) [crosspost](#)



In Example 27, the Original Poster states that they are a vegetarian due to animal cruelty but do not actually like animals, possibly looking for like-minded people in the subreddit. Commenter Gold responds to another commenter who links a subreddit for plant-based diet. The commenter starts by stating “This ^”. The circumflex (“^”), often also called a caret, is often understood on online forums and social media platforms as meaning that others should read the above line or that what was written above is true according to the writer of the symbol (Computer Hope 2020). Thus, the commenter in this example seems to agree with the previous commenter about the fact that the original post would be more suited for another subreddit instead of r/Vegan.

Commenter Gold continues with a direct identification of the OP by stating, “You’re not close to vegan, your [sic] close to plant-based.” They seem to imply that the OP cannot claim to be “close to veganism” due to not liking animals. Such a view would indicate that the commenter sees liking animals as a norm for veganism and thus regards people who do not fulfil the criterion as not vegan.

In some instances, the identification is used to express that the other person is not vegan, without placing them in another specific category. Such an identification process can be seen in Example 28:

### Example 28.

Embarrassed to admit I compromised my values to fit in today... self.vegan

Submitted 15 hours ago by [Original Poster](#)

Maybe this is just a good way to get -10,000 karma, but I just have to let it out.

After being vegan strong for the last 3 years or so, I just didn't want to fight the good fight today. Things in my personal life have been shitty. My wife and I are not doing well. The last thing I was in the mood for today was alienating the strongest part of my familial support structure on a holiday.

My family is pretty cool about the Veganism thing, they just don't know much about it, so it kind of goes half-supported on holidays and big family dinners. For whatever reason this year, though, the options were limited and I just said fuck it. I ate all the non vegan items on the table. I was surprised how well I stomached it, but I feel like shit on a few different levels now.

Anyway, I don't even know why I'm posting this... I guess I just wanted to put my shame on the table rather than sweeping it under the rug.

[10 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give award](#) [report](#) [crosspost](#)



In Example 28, the original post of the thread deals with compromising one's values to fit in with family and relatives. The OP recounts their experience of eating non-vegan food due to convenience and unwillingness to alienate their family members. Commenter Mahogany responds by encouraging the OP to stop worrying about their slip-up and admits such missteps are not uncommon for them if the available options are limited. Commenter Forest then responds to this comment by explicitly identifying the original commenter as a non-vegan by stating, "You aren't vegan then." Again, a largely held norm of veganism, i.e. not consuming animal products, seems to guide the identification, thus making this another example which illustrates the link between identification of others and normativity.

Sometimes, the link to normativity and the definition of veganism is made more explicit. In such cases, the reason for the exclusion from the category of "vegan" is clearly mentioned, which indicates the underlying normativity. The data set contains several such instances of identification where a strong link to the perceived norms of veganism seems apparent, such as Example 29:

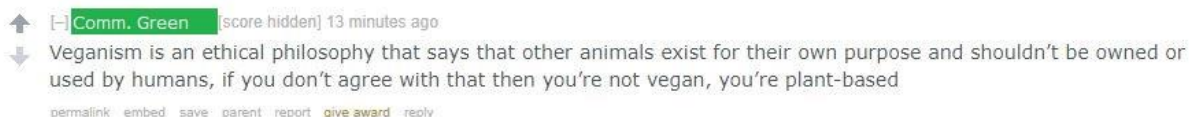
### Example 29.



In Example 29, the Original Poster already makes an identification in the title of the post by stating, "If you support police exploiting dogs then you're not vegan." Therefore, the OP makes a direct connection between someone supporting the

exploitation of animals (in this case the use of police dogs) and that person not being vegan. In such cases, there is no ambiguity in the norm or behaviour to which the reason for the identification refers. The OP also participates in the discussion by responding to a commenter and in that comment, directly assigning an identification to the original commenter. The instance is shown in Example 30:

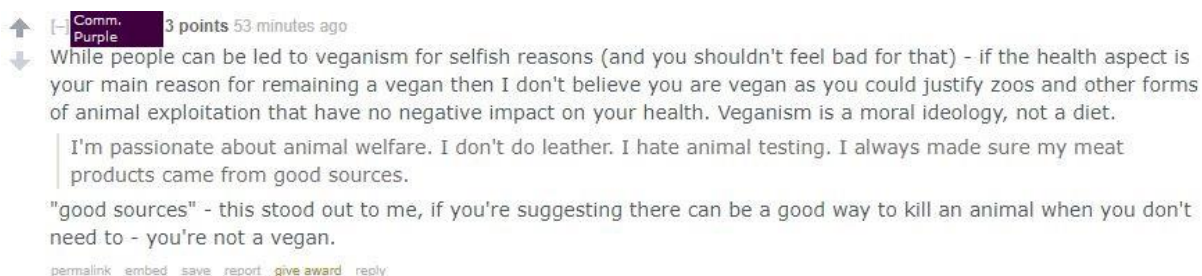
### Example 30.



In Example 30, the response is made to a comment in which the original commenter accuses the OP of gatekeeping veganism and being obnoxious due to the absolute statement in the post title. In their comment, the OP first offers a definition of veganism and then explicitly states that if one does not agree with it, they are plant-based instead of vegan. Thus, the OP very clearly constructs a normative framework for veganism and then assigns an identification to people who do not fit said framework. Moreover, the OP uses the specific identifier “plant-based”, which places the other commenter in an entirely different, labelled category.

Similar instances of identification can be seen in a discussion where the original poster asks whether anybody in the subreddit is vegan for health reasons. The OP describes their own reasons for being vegan as health-related and remarks that the gatekeeping involving veganism makes them feel bad. The post has elicited quite a lot of conversation which contains several instances of commenters identifying the OP as “not vegan”. One of these identifications is presented in Example 31:

### Example 31.





In Example 31, Commenter Purple states that if the OP is vegan mainly for health reasons, they are not vegan as they could justify other forms of animal exploitation. They also remark that if the OP indicates that there is “a good way to kill an animal” when it is not necessary, they are not vegan. In a reply to Commenter Purple, Commenter Azure laments the fact that they are not “a real vegan” because they are vegan for the health benefits. The remark of Commenter Azure reads as rather sarcastic due to the notion that they only got to know they are not “a real vegan” due to a singular Reddit comment. The effect is emphasised with the use of the Sleepy Face emoji which depicts a tired character (Emojipedia 2020b) and could thus be interpreted as an expression of tiredness towards being evaluated as ‘not vegan enough’. Commenter Purple then responds to Commenter Azure that if they are “in it for the health reasons”, they are not a vegan by definition.

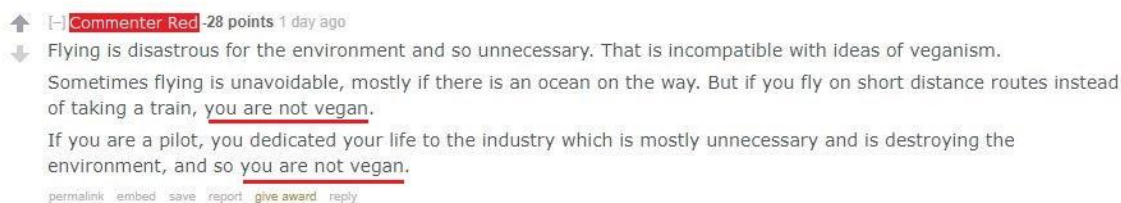
In both these instances, the identifier “not vegan” is assigned by Commenter Purple based on certain norms to which the other person does not adhere. Moreover, in both examples the normativity is related to animal rights and the ethical side of veganism. Such ideas of ethics being an inherent feature of veganism then lead to the persons being identified as not belonging to the category of “vegan”.

Some processes of identification show the interesting dissent when it comes to definitions of veganism. While the previous examples have highlighted the more well-known and generally accepted norms of veganism, such as the avoidance of consumption of animal products and exploitation of animals in general, sometimes participants of the subreddit have more contested manners of identification. For instance, environmental reasons do not seem to be generally accepted as requirements for veganism, although the adoption of a vegan diet greatly reduces one’s carbon footprint. However, some participants on the subreddit seem to hold environmental matters in high regard and even base identifications of others as vegans or non-vegans



on environmental motivations instead of animal welfare -related ones. One of such instances is seen in Example 32:

### Example 32.



(My emphasis)

In Example 32, Commenter Red directly states “you are not vegan” to the original poster due to the OP’s profession as a pilot, thus identifying them as “not vegan”. They list flying short distance routes and being in the aviation industry which, according to them, is “mostly unnecessary and is destroying the environment” as reasons for the OP not being vegan. Such an environment-centric perspective does not seem to be very usual in the subreddit, which makes the identification processes shown here an interesting example.

While section 4.1 shows that ethical reasons are the most represented as the basis for defining veganism in the subreddit, these kinds of identifications illustrate that some participants have highly different views. Although some views on veganism are more widely recognised, these discursive processes offer valuable insight into the ways in which veganism can be interpreted and thus lead to different identifications on individual level.

Sometimes, identification of others is done less directly, by implying that the other person does not belong to the category “vegan”. Such implications can be realised through various means, some of which are presented in this sub-section. The core similarity in these examples is that the commenters make evaluations of the other participants’ identities as vegans without assigning them a specific identification, such as was the case in the previous sub-section. These identification processes thus intrinsically require more interpretation due to their indirect nature. The interpretations of the examples in this section have been made by carefully considering

the norms and practices of the environment where the interactions have taken place, i.e. the subreddit r/Vegan.

In some cases, the indirect identification is implied with the aid of specific visual or typographical elements, such as emojis or scare quotes. Such practices can change the meaning of a statement entirely and should thus be carefully considered as part of the analysis. Example 33 highlights the potential significance of the use of emojis as a discursive practice:

### Example 33.

I keep craving yogurt, what can I eat instead self.vegan  
 Submitted 4 days ago \* by **Original Poster**

I eat mostly vegan and generally prefer natural unprocessed foods rather than the different fake meat and dairy substitutes. (ETA it's not that I'm against processed food generally, it's more that I think it's unnecessary to strive for plant based food to reassemble animal products rather than use its own qualities.)

I've really craved yogurt (plain unsweetened with oat cereal and raisins) I don't really have much interest in soyghurt and such products. Does anyone have some idea of other foods I could replace it with. Something that has the same mix of creamy and crunchy and is easy to prepare.

**18 comments** share save hide give award report crosspost

↑ [-] **Comm. Cyan** 4 points 3 days ago  
 ↓ Key phrase from OP - "I eat mostly vegan" 🙄🤔  
 permalink embed save report give award reply

In Example 33, the Original Poster states that they eat mostly vegan and searches alternatives for dairy yoghurt. The OP also remarks that they “generally prefer natural unprocessed foods rather than the different fake meat and dairy substitutes” and goes on to add that they think “it's unnecessary to strive for plant based food to reassemble animal products rather than use its own qualities”. While there are several comments containing suggestions of plant-based yoghurts for the OP, the post has also elicited a few comments which question the OP’s assessment of plant-based products.

Commenter Cyan replies to the original post by quoting the OP and adding two emojis at the end of their comment. By assigning the utterance “I eat mostly vegan” as the “key phrase” of the original post, the commenter seems to highlight the fact that the OP does not seem to have a wholly vegan diet. It might also be a jab at the fact that the

OP wants to use the inherent qualities of plant-based food, but their diet is, by their own admission, only “mostly vegan”.

Moreover, the chosen emojis emphasise the non-favourable reaction towards OP, as both have largely negative connotations in internet use. According to Emojipedia (2020a), the first emoji, a person “facepalming”, is often used to convey “frustration or embarrassment at the ineptitude of a person or situation”. Moreover, the emoji can also be used in a similar manner as the acronym SMH (= “shaking my head”), which displays disapproval. The second emoji, the eye roll, usually displays mild disdain, disapproval, frustration, or boredom (Emojipedia 2020a). With the combination of both, Commenter Cyan seems to convey a sense of disdain towards the OP due to them eating only “mostly vegan”. Another possible reason for the reaction could be the evaluations the OP has made of plant-based alternatives, without having committed to a completely vegan diet. Overall, the commenter seems to place the OP in the category of “not vegan” through the evaluation of their commitment and the use of negative emojis.

Example 33 illustrates how vital it is to consider all the elements of the comment one wishes to analyse, as emojis can be considered an essential factor when analysing internet content. Other stylistic choices can also drastically change the meaning of what is being said, which should be taken into account in the interpretation of text. In Example 34, a well-known typographical practice is used in the identification process to attain a certain impression:

#### Example 34.





↑ [Comm. Lime](#) [vegan](#) 6 points 2 days ago

↓ Not sure on this one. One of my friends seemed to get the ethics behind veganism, he later on started eating meat out of convenience tho. His gf is not vegan for example. He always seemed kinda conflicted about it from what I could tell. Last week he saw game changers and now is a "vegan" for health. We'll see how long that lasts. But for a while he really seemed legit.

Can't people change their minds? People have tricky psyches. Some people feel kinda bad about eating animals but somehow do it anyways. People can become weak or confused somehow.

Speaking for myself tho I'm 100% sure I will never not be vegan but that's just me.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [give award](#) [reply](#)

The comment in Example 34 is a reply to a comment where Commenter Mint remarks that “if you’re actually vegan, you won’t switch back”. Commenter Lime responds by sharing an anecdote of a friend who was previously on a vegan diet but then started to eat meat “out of convenience”. The commenter adds that the friend in question saw a vegan-themed documentary the previous week is now “a “vegan” for health”. While the underlined phrase could be interpreted as Commenter Lime identifying the friend as a vegan, it is essential to consider the stylistic choices that have been used.

The key issue here are the quotation marks used around the word “vegan”. In fact, in this case, the quotation marks could be seen as so-called scare quotes. Scare quotes can indicate scepticism or disagreement, belief that the words in question are used incorrectly, or that the writer actually means the opposite of the words enclosed in quotes (Siegal 1999: 280). In Example 35, it seems that Commenter Lime implies through the use of scare quotes that they do not actually believe that the friend is a vegan, thus identifying them as a non-vegan. The phrase “We’ll see how long that lasts.” could be said to support such an interpretation.

Another interesting manner in which participants of the subreddit might indirectly imply that someone does not belong to the category of “vegan” is to express that they do not belong to the subreddit r/Vegan. A rather Reddit-specific practice with which such an action is often realised is to link or mention another subreddit in a comment, thus indicating that the linked or mentioned subreddit would be more suitable for the person in question. Instances of this can also be seen in the data set of the present study, as shown in Example 35 and Example 36:

### Example 35.



Example 35 stems from the same original post as Example 10, in which the topic revolves around vegetarians and vegans who do not like animals (page 49). Here, Commenter Pink responds to the OP by simply linking the subreddit [r/plantbaseddiet](#). While seemingly simple and straightforward, such an action seems to imply a certain view of the norms of veganism and thus elicit an identification of the OP. By linking the subreddit that focuses explicitly on the concept of plant-based diet, the commenter seems to imply that the OP does not belong to the vegan-themed subreddit. Therefore, it can be interpreted as the commenter identifying the OP as a non-vegan.

While the OP themselves expresses that they are, in fact, a vegetarian instead of vegan, the commenter has linked specifically the plant-based subreddit as a response instead the subreddit for vegetarianism. As the commenter has not commented anything else in the thread, their motivations can only be speculated. However, based on the data, it is not uncommon for participants in the subreddit to categorise people who express indifference or negative feelings towards animals as non-vegans, with one of the most typical categories being “plant-based”. Such ideas were already shown more explicitly in the previous sub-section, as they contain more direct means of identification. However, similar views could likely be the reason behind the comment in this specific example as well.

Similar instances can be seen in Example 36. In this case, the original post discusses the vegan-themed documentary *Game Changers*, which the OP deems as their motivation for adopting a vegan diet. A commenter then recommends *Dominion*, a documentary focused on the ethical issues in animal agriculture, to OP. The OP deems the documentary “scary” and states that they are “not vegan for the animals”, which prompts the comments presented in the examples.

**Example 36.**

- ↑ [-] **Comm. Plum** vegan 19 points 9 hours ago  
 ↓ That's really the only "vegan" though my dude. If you are going to eat a plant-based diet for your health that's great, but it's called "plant-based". Might check out the other subreddit they will definitely have stuff you're looking for [r/PlantBasedDiet](#)  
permalink embed save parent report give award reply
- ↑ [-] **Comm. Ruby** 4 points 5 hours ago  
 ↓ Veganism = philosophy of not causing unnecessary harm to living beings. It's not limited to diet and isn't necessarily healthy.  
 If you're only interested in the health aspect, check out [r/plantbaseddiet](#). Watch forks over knives  
permalink embed save parent report give award reply

In the first comment of Example 36, Commenter Plum states that a plant-based diet is a good choice for one's health but emphasises that "it's called plant-based". Thus, they seem to imply that the OP is not actually a vegan. The identification is fortified by the mention of the subreddit [r/PlantBasedDiet](#). Similarly, Commenter Ruby guides the OP to [r/plantbaseddiet](#) if they are "only interested in the health aspect". Both commenters seem to have a similar idea of the OP not belonging to the category of "vegan", and thus not belonging to the subreddit [r/Vegan](#). Following such another identification, the commenters guide the OP to the other subreddit which they seem to deem more suitable for the OP. Such processes can be seen as strongly relating to the normativity of the subreddit, as people who are seen as unsuitable for the community are guided elsewhere.

In summary, both direct and indirect means are utilised by participants of [r/Vegan](#) to identify others as non-vegans. When directly identifying others, posters and commenters often indicate that someone else does not belong to the category of "vegan" by assigning them an identifier that clearly refers to some other category. Direct identifications are also realised by explicitly stating that someone is not vegan.

Indirect identifications imply that the other person does not belong to the category of vegan, or in some cases, to the subreddit [r/Vegan](#), without outright assigning an identification for them. Such identifications are often realised with specific discursive or typographical features that significantly affect the meanings that are conveyed.

#### 4.4.2 *Identifications of others as vegans*

According to the data of the present study, it is much more prevalent for participants on the subreddit [r/Vegan](#) to identify others as non-vegans than as vegans. However,

there are also a few instances of the latter in the data set. While such occurrences are rarer, I argue that they are relevant enough to form their own sub-theme, as they also illustrate, in their own part, how identifications are assigned to others on the subreddit.

As can be seen in these examples, the identification processes often provide context or are otherwise relevant in relation to the post or comment. In all of these examples, the chosen identifier is simply “vegan”. It seems that the participants have deemed it relevant to identify the persons in their text as vegans, but the identifications themselves are rarely the main point of the posts or comments.

In some other cases, certain modifiers are used when identifying others. Similarly to the identifications of self discussed in Section 5.1, the modifiers often relate to the amount of time someone has spent as a vegan or the so-called degree of their veganism. Such an identification is presented in Example 37:

#### Example 37.

I've (31m) been a meat eater all my life. As of 36 hours ago, I'm a full vegan. Just wanted to say thank you to this sub! self.vegan

Submitted 22 hours ago by Original Poster

Two years ago, I probably ate some meat or fish with every meal. The last two years I wanted to be at 50/50 meals with meat and meals without. I recently decided to make the switch to become fully vegan and this sub had a lot to do with it. My wife has been vegan for a few years now, even before we started dating so having her around will really help me. Anyway, just wanted to come here and say thank you and to keep up the good work! You're impacting people more than you know

[41 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give award](#) [report](#) [crosspost](#)

In Example 37, the OP states that their wife “has been vegan for a few years now”, identifying the wife as a vegan. The commenter then cites their wife as an important aid for their motivation to become vegan. The qualifier of the wife’s veganism (“for a few years”) seems to serve as an indication that the wife having already been vegan for a while has helped the commenter get interested in veganism.

In two separate examples, the original posters provide an estimation of the persons’ degree of veganism by using percentages. While the idea that anyone cannot be partly vegan seems to be rather prevalent in the subreddit, some participants use percentages or other expressions to convey their degree of veganism, and thus seem to regard such definitions as valid. As the people mentioned are not described as a hundred percent

vegan, one could argue that they are not actually labelled as vegans in these posts. However, it seems that the key identification that is made is indeed that they are vegan, just not 'as much of' a vegan as some others. Moreover, these people are not given some other identification, such as "vegetarian" or "omnivore". "Vegan" is the only clear identification they are assigned, although it is further detailed with the percentage. Such instances are depicted in Example 38 and Example 39:

### Example 38.

**Need some help, wife insists on feeding my kids yogurt...** self:vegan

Submitted 1 day ago by **Original Poster**

I am 95% vegan. In our family we have two young children (aged 2 and 4) who are probably 75% vegan. I don't mind them occasionally eating meat or cheese as long as it's occasional only. However my wife is very pro-yogurt. She believes its probiotic benefits are essential for our children and wants to give it to them every morning for breakfast. We agreed no cows milk, but she's standing firm on the daily yogurt.

I need some help please - how can I convince my wife to stop giving the kids yogurt? She linked to [this research summary](#) as her proof we need to give them yogurt. I'm not sure what to do and would appreciate any advice/suggestions please. Thanks.

TL:DR = I want my kids to drop the dairy, but wife insists on feeding yogurt daily. What advice to make her change her mind?

[24 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give award](#) [report](#) [crosspost](#)

### Example 39.

**Discussion Raising Vegan Children Advice** self:vegan

Submitted 1 day ago by JVaughan96

Hey y'all. This is my very first ever post to reddit..

My husband is 80% vegan. I say 80% because at the house we only eat and cook a vegan lifestyle. I don't buy animal products, or keep them stocked. When he's out, or visiting a friends house for food... he just eats whatever they serve. He was a carnivore before we met.

Now we have a 6 week old son, and I'm breastfeeding him. I'm vegan, so he is vegan by proxy.. I really want to raise him vegan when he starts eating solids.. I don't think my husband will have any issue, considering we'd have to buy more groceries lol.

I don't see any problem in raising a vegan child, especially since we know how to do the vegan thing the proper / nutritious way.. not just beans and rice lmao

I just need some help thinking of ways to counter people when they tell me that its "abusive" or "neglectful" because they are so ignorant and so wrong.

Aside from a conversational boundary... as much as I'd like to be able to just draw the line and not talk about it... I debate through and through lol. So I might as well have some great "points"

TIA!!

[14 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give award](#) [report](#) [crosspost](#)

In Examples 38 and 39, the Original Posters describe their family members as being a certain percentage of vegan. In Example 38, the OP depicts their two young children as "probably 75% vegan". In Example 39, the OP states that their husband is "80% vegan". In both examples, the original posters also describe the diets of the persons in question, as in to explain the identification. It seems that the identifications of "probably 75% vegan" and "80% vegan" are used to identify the persons as being closer to vegans than other categories, although many might disagree due to the largely held definition of veganism. Moreover, these labels seem to tie into the normativity of veganism in the same way as the identifications in the previous sub-



section, as the percentages imply that the original posters know that they cannot categorise these people as simply vegans.

In some cases, the qualifiers do not relate to the experience or 'degree' of veganism, but rather express some specific attributes of the vegan in question. One of such instances of identification is presented in Example 40:

#### Example 40.



In Example 40, the commenter again identifies persons they know personally. Here, Commenter Cherry identifies the vegans they have met as “obviously vegan”. The qualifier “obviously” seems to relate to membership of an activist group. Thus, it seems that Commenter Cherry links the activism, which usually implies an ethical motivation for veganism, to identifying others as vegans. Example 41 depicts a similar identification, but it is directed at another subreddit participant:

#### Example 41.



Indeed, Example 41 presents a rare example of a commenter identifying another participant on the subreddit as a vegan in an explicitly encouraging manner. Here, Commenter Emerald deems themselves as a “terrible vegan who is still learning”. Commenter Teal responds to the comment by stating, “If you are still learning and always trying you are far from a terrible vegan”. Overall, the sentiment of the comment seems to be positive and encouraging. This is further enhanced by the heart emoji that Commenter Teal has added at the end of the sentence.

In Example 41, Commenter Teal identifies Commenter Emerald as someone who is far from “a terrible vegan”, thus solidifying their veganism. They also state that “we’re all still learning”, apparently referencing vegans by the pronoun “we”. Thus, the identification does not seem to connect as strongly to normativity as in many of the other examples of identification processes, but rather be framed with encouragement and the idea that no one is perfect, and everyone is constantly learning more.

In most examples of this theme, the identification is straightforward and often serves as context for the post or comment. The identification is most often assigned to familiar people of the poster or commenter, such as family members or friends. It is much rarer to see identifications that are targeted at other participants of the subreddit which seemed to be rather prevalent in the assignment of non-vegan identities, as was seen in the previous sub-section.

Overall, it is interesting to note that the instances where someone is identified as a non-vegan far outweigh the ones where someone is identified as a vegan. The disparity seems logical since breaches of norms seem to generally elicit stronger reactions than adherence to norms in the subreddit. Thus, it might be that participants of the subreddit feel a need to comment on others breaching norms, while their compliance with norms does not seem worth a reaction.

#### **4.5 Juxtaposition between vegans and others**

A common way to highlight one’s membership in a certain group is to create juxtaposition between the membership group and other groups, thus creating an in-group and out-groups (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 371). Such a phenomenon can also clearly be seen on the subreddit r/Vegan. While the in-group is clearly “vegans”, the out-group can vary greatly based on the situation.

The most common out-groups in these instances are omnivores (or meat eaters) and, perhaps slightly surprisingly, vegetarians. While one might think that vegans and vegetarians are ‘on the same team’, so to speak, many participants on the subreddit are eager to make a clear distinction between vegans and vegetarians. The separation

often highlights the fact that vegetarians are seen as still contributing to animal exploitation due to their consumption of dairy and eggs. Omnivores seem to be the out-group more often in cases where general ignorance and resistance of vegan ideas is discussed.

Instances of the creation of juxtaposition between vegans and other groups will be analysed in the following sub-sections. Sub-section 4.5.1. concerns *Juxtaposition between vegans and omnivores*, while sub-section 4.5.2. contains examples of *Juxtaposition between vegans and vegetarians*.

#### 4.5.1 *Juxtaposition between vegans and omnivores*

It is not unusual for the participants of the subreddit to make a marked difference between vegans and omnivores. This out-group is usually categorically identified as “omnivores”, or in a shorter form, “omnis”. Sometimes, though, the out-group is implied to be omnivores based on context rather than directly stated.

Omnivores are often positioned as an out-group in situations where meat-eating is overemphasised or people feel frustrated with the actions of people who are not vegans. Moreover, the juxtaposition is sometimes used to highlight the unity and shared struggles of vegans, compared with omnivores whose habits are the standard in society. An example of such creation of juxtaposition can be seen in Example 42:

#### **Example 42.**

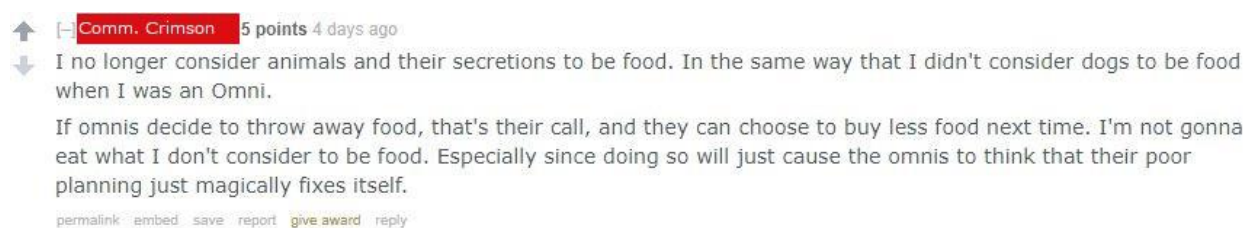


In Example 42, the original post contains an article about US meat industry striking back at companies who produce vegan meat substitutes. Commenter Navy posits the omnivores (“omni’s [sic]) as an out-group by sarcastically referring to a common statement issued by non-vegans of eating twice as much meat as they planned in order to irritate vegans. They replace steaks with “TWO impossible burgers” in order to turn the context vegan. They go on to wonder if the line is not funny anymore now that “the shoe is on the other foot”, referring to the reversed roles of omnivores and vegans.



The apparently sarcastic tone of the comment seems to underline the ridiculousness of the original joke. Thus, the omnivores who have originally used the line are depicted in a rather negative light. The reversal of the line that is often seen as tired and over-used among vegans could also be seen as a tool to create unity and togetherness among the vegans on the subreddit. Another instance where the frustrations towards omnivores and their consumption of animal products is highlighted can be seen in Example 43:

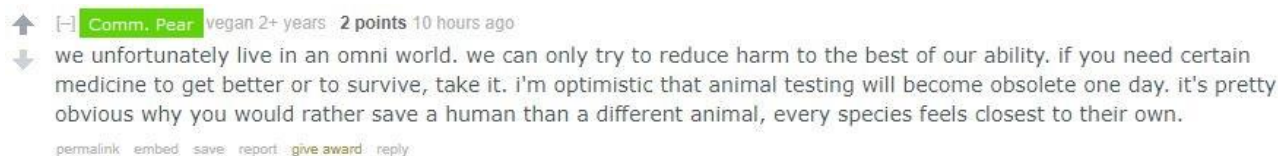
### Example 43.



In Example 43, the original post has the OP conflicted between veganism and minimal waste living, as they ponder on the possibility of eating animal products if they would otherwise go to waste. In a response to the OP, Commenter Crimson highlights a key difference between themselves as a vegan and “omnis” by stating that they do not even see animals and their secretions as food anymore like omnivores do. Therefore, they place the responsibility on such situations on the omnivores who “can choose to buy less food next time”. They also note that eating the animal-based food might make the omnis think that their weak food planning “just magically fixes itself”, again expressing that it should not be vegans’ responsibility to fix the situation.

The description of Commenter Crimson seems to have a frustrated tone, considering the several references to the poor planning and choices of omnis. Overall, omnis are clearly posited as the out-group in the comment, as they are mentioned mostly in negative ways and in opposition to vegans. The comment might also be meant to encourage the OP to keep their eating habits vegan and not worry about fixing a situation which is not their fault. A similar combination of frustration towards omnivores and solidarity among vegans is presented in Example 44:

### Example 44.



In Example 44, Commenter Pear refers to vegans as “we” and posits them against omnivores by stating that unfortunately we live in “an omni world”. They describe how vegans can only try to reduce harm as much as is possible, as the world around caters to the omnivore lifestyle. Commenter Pear highlights the unity of vegans by using the pronoun “we” throughout the comment when referring to vegans. The comment might also act as encouragement for other vegans by reminding them that some things simply cannot be avoided in a world which is not designed for veganism.

In some cases, the out-group is not directly categorised but rather implied through contextual cues. One such instance can be seen in Example 45:

#### Example 45.

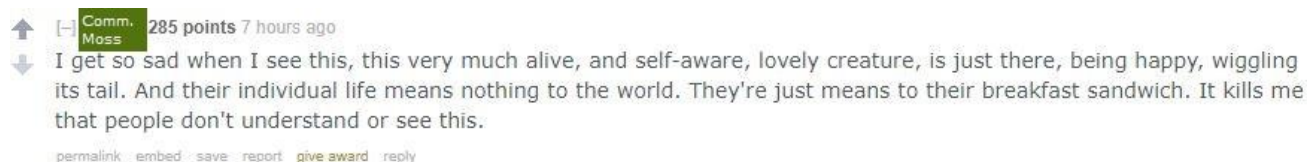


In Example 45, Commenter Indigo does not directly name omnivores as the out-group, but it is strongly implied that their mother is an omnivore and thus does not understand the commenter’s vegan lifestyle. Commenter Indigo describes how their mother used to only prepare meat for herself but decided to offer Commenter Indigo meat after they had turned from a vegetarian to a vegan. Thus, the conflict seems to have developed only after the commenter went vegan, as opposed to the times when they were a vegetarian. The negative nature of the situation is highlighted by the idea that this might be “a passive-aggressive “vEgAnS aRe sTuPiD” thing”. The uppercase-lowercase writing is a well-known meme which is meant to convey a mocking tone (Know Your Meme 2020). Thus, in this case, the mocking would be directed at omnivores not understanding veganism.

In the example, it seems that Commenter Indigo feels frustrated by the situation and feels comfortable sharing said frustration with like-minded peers. Moreover, others

describe similar experiences of their families in the comments, so the sharing might also be a sign of unity among the participants. Another instance of indirect out-grouping is seen in Example 46:

#### Example 46.



In Example 46, Commenter Moss laments on the fact that pigs are such intelligent creatures which are not appreciated enough by the world. They go on to state that it kills them “that people don’t understand or see this”. While Commenter Moss does not specifically mention omnivores or omnis, it is rather clear that they are the described out-group, as the commenter depicts pigs as “just means to their breakfast sandwich”, implying that the people they talk about eat meat.

The positive depiction of the pig and the description of its life not meaning anything to people creates a strong juxtaposition between vegans and omnivores, who are seen negatively. There seems to be an underlying sadness about the current situation in the comment. Overall, it seems to depict sad feelings towards people’s inability to understand the beauty of animals, which is an expression that might be more accepted and understood in a vegan-centred environment than in a general discussion.

In summary, juxtaposition between vegans and omnivores is generally constructed by positioning omnivores as an out-group in various ways. The out-grouping is often achieved through expressions of frustration towards omnivores’ views and their stark opposition to the ideas of veganism. Different discursive practices, such as sarcasm and textual memes, can be used to emphasise the juxtaposition between the in-group and the out-group. The juxtaposition is often also used to reinforce the in-group and express solidarity among its members.

#### 4.5.2 *Juxtaposition between vegans and vegetarians*

While omnivores are an obvious choice as an out-group due to their meat eating and perceived lack of understanding towards veganism, it is also very common to posit

vegetarians as an out-group on the subreddit. Vegetarians are usually understood as lacto-ovo-vegetarians, i.e. people who do not eat meat but consume dairy and eggs, as opposed to vegans who abstain from all animal-based products.

A common view on vegetarians seems to be that they are hypocritical, as they have taken steps towards a better lifestyle by leaving out meat but still contribute to animal exploitation through the consumption of dairy and eggs. This perspective, which focuses strongly on animal rights, usually leads to vegetarians being described in a negative light. Example 47 presents one such case where the perceived hypocrisy is emphasised:

### Example 47.

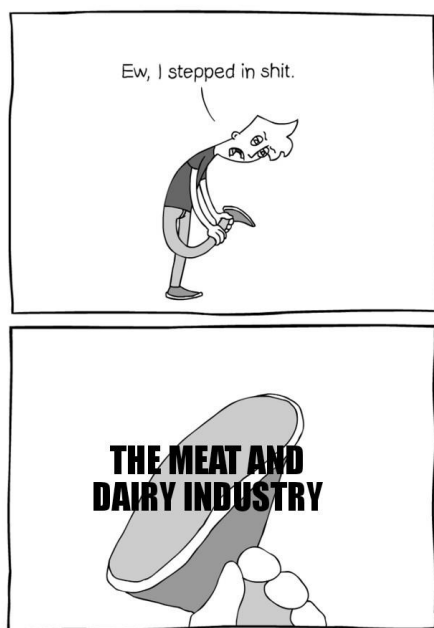
↑ [-] **Comm. Stone** 58 points 18 hours ago  
 ↓ These aren't even eating chickens... They are egg layers. So this much darkness and suffering is so people can eat eggs.  
 "Vegetarian for the animals"  
 permalink embed save report give award reply

↑ [-] **Comm. Jam** 28 points 15 hours ago\*  
 ↓ It's okay, I only buy cage free  
 Edit - /s for all the serious sallies who don't get jokes  
 permalink embed save parent report give award reply

In Example 47, the original post highlights the perceived hypocrisy of people who stop eating beef and pork but still eat chicken by showing the terrible conditions in which chickens live. While the title could be seen as positing omnivores as the out-group, Commenter Stone clarifies that the chickens are not even the kind that will be eaten, as they are, in fact, egg layers. They lament the suffering the animals have to go through just for people to get to eat eggs and bring the focus on vegetarians by sarcastically stating, "Vegetarian for the animals". The statement seems to refer to people who describe themselves as being "vegetarian for the animals" while still arguably contributing to some forms of animal agriculture. Commenter Jam responds by jokingly saying, "It's okay, I only buy cage free". The comment is explicitly marked as sarcastic by the "/s" which denotes sarcasm in online interactions. The comment highlights the hypocrisy of labels such as "cage free" which rarely actually translate to good conditions for the chickens.

In some instances, participants might even express stronger juxtaposition and out-grouping towards vegetarians than omnivores. In such cases, the perceived hypocrisy and perhaps the idea that vegetarians should ‘know better’ seems to be again at the forefront. One such instance can be seen in Example 48:

**Example 48.**



In Example 48, the original post is comprised of a comic where a person steps on poop and then glances down to their shoe only to see that the poop is actually “the meat and dairy industry”. Thus, the comic humorously criticises these forms of animal agriculture. Commenter Pine, on the other hand, states that they “kinda wish it said “vegetarians””, thus positing vegetarians as the out-group that is the poop under one’s shoe.

It is interesting to note that in this case, where the original post already negatively depicts something that opposes vegan values, Commenter Pine wants to specifically replace it with vegetarians. The comment highlights how negative connotations some vegans have of vegetarians and how they often seem to have equally strong opinions

on them as they have of omnivores. These instances of vegetarians being positioned as the out-group further strengthen the distinction between vegans and vegetarians who might still be confused by the general population who are not as aware of the differences as vegans.

In some cases, juxtaposition might also be created in order to demonstrate to vegetarians themselves that their choices are not as ethical as they think. One such instance is presented in Example 49:

### Example 49.

↑ [Comm. Ocean] -7 points 20 hours ago  
 ↓ Well I'm like a 50/50 vegetarian now. I'm not so hardcore that I won't eat something because it has egg or milk in it. To me those reasons of veganism seem very uneducated and purposely lean more towards assuming of animal abuse than just a cow getting milked and infertile eggs. As most of my friends that are vegan, aren't vegan for the health reasons (which I'm actually going for), it's unfair to assume all animals are getting factory mutilated for their sow.  
 permalink embed save report give award reply

↑ [Comm. Currant] 4 points 19 hours ago  
 ↓ Lol, you think milk and eggs are innocent? And what the hell is a fifty fifty vegetarian? Sounds like a fancy way of saying "carnist".  
 permalink embed save parent report give award reply

In Example 49, the original post entails a meme which practically expresses that it is not possible to both eat meat and love animals. Commenter Ocean expresses disagreement while describing oneself as “like a 50/50 vegetarian”. This elicits a response from Commenter Currant who seems to find it humorous that the other person thinks that milk and eggs are innocent. They also wonder what a “fifty fifty vegetarian” even is and notes that it “sounds like a fancy way of saying “carnist””. Therefore, Commenter Currant expresses a strongly negative stance towards the self-proclaimed 50/50 vegetarian.

Here again, vegetarians are described negatively and the belief that milk and eggs are more innocent than meat is put under ridicule. The whole definition of a 50/50 vegetarian is also questioned. There seems to be a strong idea of any kind of animal exploitation being incompatible with the values of veganism, which posits both omnivores and vegetarians as the out-group.

Overall, the comments depict vegetarians in a negative, almost mocking manner. There seems to be a perceived hypocrisy in the actions of vegetarians which irritates the participants of the subreddit. In the same way as omnivores are positioned as the

out-group, the motivation for these juxtapositions seems to be the ethical beliefs of veganism which make it difficult to accept actions that hurt animals, whether they be performed by omnivores or vegetarians.

#### **4.6 Evaluations of authenticity**

The definitions and norms of veganism that are constantly discussed and negotiated on the subreddit also tie into different evaluations of authenticity of vegans. The question of authenticity seems to be often brought up in connection with veganism, as people tend to make evaluations of who belongs to the group of vegans and who does not. Thus, evaluations of the authenticity of one's own and others' veganism are constantly made.

On the subreddit r/Vegan, instances of both evaluations of one's own authenticity and the authenticity of others can be seen. The evaluations of self include participants pondering on whether they are actually a proper vegan and defending the validity of their own veganism to others. In the evaluations of others, there are both instances of questioning and reinforcing the authenticity of others.

##### *4.6.1 Evaluations of one's own authenticity*

In these examples, participants evaluate their own authenticity as vegans, often in relation to the original post or another comment. The evaluations usually focus on a certain norm or idea of veganism which the person relates to their own view of their veganism. There is also often a point of comparison or another person's opinion against which they reflect their veganism and its authenticity.

Normative statements and identifications of others as non-vegans seem to particularly elicit responses where one's own authenticity is validated and reinforced. Such assessments that generate authentication of self might be realised by other subreddit participants or people outside of the subreddit. An instance where such an interaction takes place between two participants of r/Vegan is presented in example

#### **Example 50.**





In Example 50, Commenter Mustard replies to Commenter Denim’s statement “if you’re not “militant”, you’re not vegan” with disagreement. They note, “I’m not militant and I am every bit as vegan as those who are”, thus indicating the authenticity of their own veganism when compared to those who would be considered “militant”.

The perspective of Commenter Mustard seems to be that a militant attitude is not required to be a vegan. They also express that the judgement of the other commenter is not relevant. Such a statement could be seen as defending everyone defining the authenticity of their own veganism instead of focusing on the judgements of others. The evaluation of being “every bit as” vegan as the more militant vegans seems to especially highlight that the authenticity of those who seem less extreme in their veganism should not be questioned merely due to the lack of militancy. A similar case where a process of authentication is elicited by someone outside the subreddit can be seen in Example 51:

### Example 51.



Example 51 includes a similar situation where someone else has questioned the authenticity of the commenter’s veganism, but here it is not another subreddit participant but rather someone the commenter knows in real life. Moreover, instead of the perceived level of “militancy”, the metric with which the commenter is judged is the length of time they have been vegan.



Here, Commenter Fire describes someone they know who has been vegan for seven years acting like “she has vegan wisdom” over the commenter’s “measly 2 years”. Thus, the person seems to question Commenter Fire’s authenticity as a vegan due to their lack of experience. It also seems that the other person has judged Commenter Fire’s veganism due to them consuming vegan meat substitutes. Commenter Fire questions the judgement by stating “like faux meat makes me less vegan somehow??”, with the double question mark indicating that they find the criticism ludicrous. Commenter Fire seems to be implying that their authenticity should not be undermined due to the consumption of products that imitate meat. Moreover, the comment indicates that someone should not question others’ authenticity merely due to being more experienced.

Evaluations of one’s own authenticity can also include questioning instead of reinforcement. Some vegans on the subreddit feel insecure about their veganism and thus wonder whether they can be considered a true, authentic vegan. Moreover, some of them might be unsure whether they can call themselves vegan at all due to the complexity and uncertainty concerning the definition and norms of veganism. A more questioning evaluation of one’s own authenticity is illustrated by Example 52:

### Example 52.

↑  **Comm. Honey** 17 points 2 days ago

↓ 0%, but I’m generally just glad that a)they’ll go to vegan restaurants with me, and b) they do eat about 99% less animal products than a meat eater. If saying “I’m vegan” and internalizing that makes them buy no dead animals, even if they have some freegan practices, I’m for it.

I will typically tell people if they comment on it that part of my lifestyle is not accepted as vegan, for instance, consuming products with sugar, or more chemically products that may have gone through animal testing.

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In Example 52, the commenter defends the right of others to call themselves vegan, even if they deviate from the most widely accepted definition of veganism, while also highlighting the possible pitfalls of their own veganism. Commenter Honey states that parts of their lifestyle are “not accepted as vegan, for instance, consuming products with sugar, or more chemically [sic] products that may have gone through animal testing”. Thus, they seem to highlight the issues that devalue the authenticity of their veganism instead of defending them. By defining the examples as “not accepted as

vegan”, Commenter Honey positions them as elements that can be deemed inauthentic.

In summary, participants in the subreddit both reinforce and question their own identity as vegans, although instances of reinforcement seem to be more common. The authentication of one’s vegan identity is usually elicited by normative assessments made by others, who might represent other subreddit participants or real-life acquaintances. In contrast, doubts towards one’s authenticity as a vegan seem to be more pro-active considerations rather than reactions caused by others.

While these examples highlight ways in which the participants on the subreddit evaluate their own authenticity as vegans, it is much more usual to evaluate the authenticity of others. Examples of the evaluation of others are presented and analysed in the following sub-section.

#### 4.6.2 *Evaluations of the authenticity of others*

Similarly to the evaluations of one’s own authenticity, the evaluations of others include instances of both reinforcing and questioning people’s authenticity as vegans. As the identifications of others, the evaluations often seem to tie into one’s definitions and norms of veganism.

In cases where other people’s vegan identities are authenticated, the persons in question are more often celebrities or other well-known personas rather than participants within the subreddit. Such persons seem to be seen as role models of authentic veganism by some subreddit participants. One such evaluation is seen in Example 53:

#### **Example 53.**



In Example 53, the topic of the original post is vegan heroes. The OP shares their thoughts on Joaquin Phoenix. Phoenix is an actor who has stated in the media that he has been vegan since early childhood. He received a lot of publicity in 2019 due to his

universally praised portrayal as the eponymous main character in *Joker*. Phoenix is quite well-known among animal rights activists, and he was named Person of the Year by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) in 2019. The title is one of the reasons why he was discussed on the subreddit in a few instances towards the end of 2019.

The OP regards Phoenix as someone who inspired them. They remark that “he’s clearly passionate about animal rights and living a vegan lifestyle”, thus granting him a certain authenticity as a vegan. They remark that Phoenix is “clearly passionate about animal rights”, which indicates that he is a vegan ‘for the right reasons’. Moreover, they deem Phoenix as someone who is passionate about “living the vegan lifestyle”. Seeing as how stark a distinction many participants on the subreddit make between veganism and a plant-based diet, merely calling someone “a vegan” is already a sign of respect. Overall, it seems that Phoenix’s activities concerning animal rights and veganism are seen as legitimate and being motivated by the right reasons. A similar evaluation of another vegan activist is made in Example 54:

#### Example 54.

↑ [-] **Comm. Peach** 8 points 1 day ago

↓ Keep supporting VEGAN businesses, not just plant based.

AFAIK Miyoko is genuinely vegan (not just plant based), I.e. ethically and she hasn't sold out to any huge non-vegan companies like Nestle or whatever.

She even used to have more eco-friendly packaging but dropped it I imagine for the sake of "going big". I like to think that if we keep supporting her, she'd be on the side of eco-friendly packaging again someday. And of course if there's a good alternative to miyoko that is in sustainable packaging, then supporting them instead :)

Just one vegans thoughts on the matter!

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Example 54 relates to a vegan company that produces vegan substitutes for dairy products, Miyoko. The owner of the company is deemed as “genuinely vegan (not just plant based)” which grants her authenticity as a vegan. The authentication is indicated by the qualifier “genuinely” when describing her veganism. Moreover, a distinction is again made between veganism and a plant-based diet with the remark of Miyoko being specifically vegan instead of ‘just’ plant-based. It seems clear that a plant-based

diet is not seen as sufficient to be considered a vegan, and in this case, Miyoko fills the requirements to be considered an actual, authentic vegan.

With more questioning evaluations of the authenticity of others, the authentication processes tend to be directed towards other participants in the subreddit instead of public figures. Such evaluations seem to be intrinsically connected to the underlying normative views of the subreddit participants. Example 55 illustrates one of these instances:

### Example 55.

↑ [-] **Comm. Plum** vegan 19 points 9 hours ago  
 ↓ That's really the only "vegan" though my dude. If you are going to eat a plant-based diet for your health that's great, but it's called "plant-based". Might check out the other subreddit they will definitely have stuff you're looking for [r/PlantBasedDiet](#)  
permalink embed save parent report give award reply

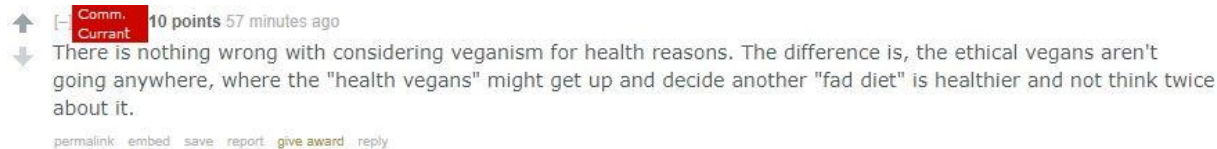
↑ [-] **Comm. Ruby** 4 points 5 hours ago  
 ↓ Veganism = philosophy of not causing unnecessary harm to living beings. It's not limited to diet and isn't necessarily healthy.  
 If you're only interested in the health aspect, check out [r/plantbaseddiet](#). Watch forks over knives  
permalink embed save parent report give award reply

In Example 55, the original post discusses a vegan-themed documentary, *Game Changers*, which focuses on the health benefits veganism can provide. A commenter then recommends that the OP watches another document, *Dominion*, which discusses the negative effects of animal agriculture. The OP notes that they are not really vegan for the animals, which prompts these responses. Commenters Plum and Ruby indicate that if the OP is not vegan for the animals, they are not really a vegan at all.

Commenter Plum states, "That's really the only "vegan" though my dude", referring to being vegan for the animals and thus undermining the OP's veganism. Instead, they define the OP as someone who eats a plant-based diet and recommend the subreddit [r/plantbaseddiet](#) to the OP. Commenter Ruby is of a similar mind, offering a definition of veganism that focuses on animal welfare. Moreover, they also direct the OP to the subreddit [r/plantbaseddiet](#). It seems that both commenters regard the avoidance of animal exploitation as inherent and integral requirements of veganism which the OP does not fulfil. Thus, the perceived contradiction of the OP identifying as a vegan but not doing it for the animals causes them to be seen as inauthentic and not an 'actual

vegan'. A similar evaluation that relates to motivations for being vegan is presented in Example 56:

### Example 56.



In Example 56, Commenter Carrant positions “ethical vegans” and “health vegans” at odds in a very similar fashion as in the survey of Greenbaum (2012). Other commenters within the subreddit voice similar ideas of those who are vegan for the animals and those who do it for other reasons on a broader level instead of focusing on individuals.

Commenter Carrant indicates that ethical vegans are more committed to veganism due to their philosophy by stating that “ethical vegans aren’t going anywhere”. They then note that “the “health vegans” might get up and decide another “fad diet” is healthier and not think twice about it”, thus positioning them as less reliable and less devoted to veganism. The effect of undermining their authenticity is further strengthened by the use of quotation marks with “health vegans”, while they are not used when discussing ethical vegans. Again, the animal-centred ethical side of veganism is seen as essential in order to be seen as an authentic vegan.

While questioning the authenticity of others who are not participants of the subreddit seems to be rarer than evaluating other subreddit participants’ authenticity, such authentication processes also occasionally happen. In such cases, the person whose vegan identity is being questioned has usually done something that is seen as a violation of the norms of veganism. Such an instance is presented in Example 57:

### Example 57.





In Example 57, the topic of discussion is a Youtuber who has gone from a vegan diet to a carnivore diet which mostly consists of meat, citing health reasons as their motivation for the change. Unsurprisingly, the news elicits negative reactions in the participants of the subreddit. However, it is interesting to see that instead of merely criticising the decision of the Youtuber, the commenters heavily question the person's authenticity at the time when they still adhered to a vegan diet.

Commenter Fern expresses the belief that the Youtuber was never vegan to begin with. They state that they believe "she was plant based because she was surrounded by vegans at one point", thus making a clear distinction between her being "plant based" and the actual "vegans" she was surrounded with. Moreover, Commenter Fern adds that they think the Youtuber "didn't ever identify or feel empathy for the animals when she gave them up, in the first place". They go on to state that the Youtuber seemed to only try veganism for their own reputation and to get views on their Youtube channel. In conclusion, the commenter deems the Youtuber inauthentic as a vegan due to the perceived motivations behind their veganism. Thus, not only is the switch to a meat-based diet judged, but the whole time the person was a vegan is dismissed as inauthentic veganism.

Commenter Merlot repeats similar opinions regarding the Youtuber's authenticity. They lament that "the moment a fake vegan goes back to corpse consuming because shits and giggles is the moment that they were never in it to better the world to begin with". The commenter indicates that the person was not vegan for the right reasons by stating that "they were never in it to better the world". The idea is strengthened by the use of the term "fake vegan" which positions the Youtuber as not ever having been authentically vegan. Moreover, Commenter Merlot expresses a similar sentiment as Commenter Fern about Youtubers trying veganism "to get more views" on their channels. While the Youtuber might have adhered to all usually agreed upon norms



of veganism while being vegan, it is not seen as ever having been valid or authentic due to their motivations.

In summary, the definition and negotiation of who is, in fact, an authentic vegan, seems to be a relevant issue amongst participants on r/Vegan. Authentication processes on the subreddit can be both reinforcing and questioning, and they may be aimed at self or others. Moreover, evaluations of authenticity are often realised through granting or denying identifiers such as “real vegan”, or “actual vegan”.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The main aim of the present study was to examine the construction of vegan identities and their authentication on the subreddit r/Vegan. The aim was expressed more precisely in the following research questions:

1. In which ways are vegan identities constructed through linguistic and interactional means on the subreddit r/Vegan?
2. How are these vegan identities authenticated in the subreddit?

In order to answer the research questions, online ethnography, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis were utilised. Online ethnography was used to form an informed view of the nature and practises of the community that acted as the object of study. Then, after data collection, appropriate themes were formed with the framework of inductive, latent thematic analysis. Thus, the data could be ordered into themes that represent the relevant issues in the whole data set, and the possible larger, ideological connections of the data could be analysed. With these means, the data was divided into six relevant themes, which were further split into sub-themes if needed. In the analysis, the questions of identity and authenticity were explored through discourse analysis, highlighting how different linguistic means were used to express both identity and authentication processes.

As shown in more detail in the analysis of the data, the participants of the subreddit r/Vegan express both identity and authenticity as vegans in varying ways. The manners in which identifications and evaluations of authenticity are realised include both positive and negative expressions as well as both direct and indirect strategies. While certain similar instances can be detected through the data set, there is no singular way in which the practices can be summarised.

The findings of the analysis in relation to the research questions will be discussed in the following sub-section. Then, the implications and applications of the present study with regard to academic research and other relevant questions will be presented. Lastly, the possible limitations of the present study and possible ideas for expansion in further research will be considered.



## 5.1 Findings in relation to the research questions and previous research

As previously described, the collected material was divided into six different themes that were deemed relevant representations of the entire data set. The themes were then used as the basis for the analysis. The themes, which went through modifications as the analysis progressed, were finally defined as (1) *Definitions of veganism*, (2) *Defining norms of veganism*, (3) *Identifications of self as a vegan*, (4) *Identifications of others*, (5) *Juxtaposition between vegans and others*, and (6) *Evaluations of authenticity*. Of the themes, the third and fourth themes relate directly to the first research question, while the sixth one is in direct connection with the second research question. The other themes illustrate ways in which the basis for identification and authentication is created through definitions, normativity and distinctions between particular groups. The data entails varying practices for both identification and authentication in relation to veganism, which will be illustrated in this section. Moreover, some of the findings relate to the discoveries of previous researchers. Such instances will also be presented and discussed.

Definitions of veganism vary somewhat in the discussions of the subreddit, but the most common elements in the definitions are the focus on animal rights and the idea of veganism as a lifestyle or philosophy rather than merely a diet. The observation is in line with much of previous research, as it has been found that animal ethics often comprise a central part of identity for many vegans (Freeman, 2015; Haenfler et al., 2012; Rodan and Mummery, 2016). The focus on animals is often realised by offering a direct definition that mentions the avoidance of animal exploitation. Another usual way to put the focus on the animals is to remind everyone that veganism is about animals, not about “us”, as in humans.

However, while animal-centred definitions of veganism are the most usual, there are also differing perspectives. In some instances, environmental issues are raised to the forefront, while others highlight the idea that veganism is primarily a diet, and not necessarily a lifestyle. It should be noted, however, that there are significantly fewer of these definitions compared with the ones focused on animals. The diet-focused perspective has been highlighted as typical in some previous research. For instance,

Dyett et al. (2013) investigate vegans for whom veganism seems to be mainly a diet. However, the subjects investigated in their study listed health reasons as their most prevalent motivation for veganism, while environmental issues were mentioned only sporadically. In the subreddit r/Vegan, mentions of environmental reasons as motivation for veganism seem to be more prevalent than mentions of health reasons in a similar manner.

In addition to definitions of veganism, norms of veganism are prevalently defined in the discussions of r/Vegan. Similarly to the definitions of veganism, the norms usually strongly relate to animal rights. Many of the negotiated norms concern the motivation behind people's veganism. The proposed norm is often that one should be vegan for the animals, while other reasons are principally seen as secondary or irrelevant. The findings reflect those of Greenebaum (2012b): in her study, the ethical vegans she interviewed generally mandated ethical reasons as the 'right' motivation for veganism. The norms discussed on the subreddit also relate to the notion of veganism being a lifestyle, typically defining veganism as a way of life or an ideology. Such norms are often highlighted by statements that indicate that veganism should not only be a diet. Again, a similar notion was also stated by the interviewees of Greenebaum (2012b), who explicitly connected ethical reasons for veganism with it as a lifestyle. In the subreddit, these norms are usually expressed as statements or as imperatives. Reactions to stated norms can then produce dialogue and negotiation regarding the norms.

With the definitions and norms offering a basis for how veganism is generally understood in the subreddit, one can observe the identification processes that take place in r/Vegan. Identifications concerning veganism are abundant in the subreddit, with identifications of the self significantly outnumbering identifications of others. Such a phenomenon was to be expected, as previous research shows that vegans often consider "vegan" to be a significant part of their identity (e.g. Chuck et al. 2016, Greenebaum 2012b). In the subreddit, identifications of the self usually directly indicate belonging to the category of vegans through an identification as a "vegan". Moreover, "vegan" is often accompanied by a modifier which expresses the

participant's level of experience with veganism. Participants of the subreddit often indicate how many years they have spent as a vegan, or alternatively position themselves as novices or as experienced vegans. The modifiers usually relate to the current discussion in a relevant way, for instance by offering additional information about the participant's position in the discussion. Advice is often accompanied with indicators of ample experience, while questions and pleads for help are usually paired with expressions of inexperience. Another way of identification is the use of the pronoun "we" when referring to vegans. However, such more indirect means of identification seem to be rarer in the subreddit than the more direct manners of identification.

While identifications of the self in the subreddit understandably focus on being vegan, most of the identifications aimed at others frame them as non-vegans. Such identifications are realised by assigning different identifiers to others, such as "not vegan", "plant-based", or "vegetarian". Such identifications are usually direct responses to other participants of the subreddit, often questioning the other person's veganism. These evaluations are usually connected with perceived norms of veganism, and the other participant is seen as breaching said norms. Similar practices are employed by the interviewees in Greenebaum's study (2012b), who admit to evaluating the "purity" of others. There are also instances of identification of others as vegans in the subreddit, though such occurrences are significantly rarer. These identifications most often concern people who the writer knows in real life or well-known vegan activists who are in the public eye. Thus, there seems to be an underlying need to evaluate others on the subreddit, while they are rarely identified with reinforcement.

Identification and authentication are reinforced with the creation of juxtaposition between vegans and others. As Greenebaum (2012b: 143) notes, the claims of authenticity are constructed through actions and performances, such as defining group boundaries and differences. The juxtaposition is usually generated through positioning vegans as an in-group and focusing on negative aspects of a particular out-group. In r/Vegan, the out-groups are usually omnivores and vegetarians. While

omnivores are ideologically further away from vegans, it is interesting to note that vegetarians are positioned as the out-group almost equally often as omnivores. In previous research, similar practices were even observed between vegans, as claims of authenticity were managed by forming an in-group of "ethical vegans" and an out-group of "health vegans" (Greenebaum 2012b: 132). While the juxtaposition with omnivores in the subreddit is often connected to situations where omnivores do not seem to understand vegans' views and often relate to the participants' real-life experiences, vegetarians are usually seen as an out-group due to their perceived hypocrisy. In both cases, the juxtaposition seems to stem at least partly from frustration with the others' behaviour. By creating a juxtaposition between vegans and other groups, the participants in the subreddit can highlight the unity and groupness of vegans while denouncing the practices associated with omnivores and vegetarians as unwanted and unacceptable.

The constant negotiation of definitions and norms in the subreddit also creates a fruitful environment for evaluations of authenticity. Both evaluations of one's own authenticity as a vegan and evaluations of the authenticity of others occur in the subreddit, though they differ in nature. The evaluations of one's own authenticity as a vegan often act as reactions to assessments made by other subreddit participants. In such cases, participants usually validate their own authenticity as vegans. Such practices reflect the idea that people engage in identity practices when their authenticity is questioned either by others or by their own self-critique (Peterson 2005). However, some also ponder on the authenticity of themselves as vegans, focusing on the potential weaknesses of their veganism. In contrast to evaluations of oneself, the evaluations of authenticity of others are more often questioning in nature. Such evaluations often undermine another subreddit participant's identification as a vegan or question their proposed views of veganism. There are also instances of reinforcing the vegan identities of others, but in those cases, the evaluations are mostly aimed at celebrities or other well-known persons instead of other participants of the subreddit.

The evaluations of authenticity seem to reflect the definitions and norms of veganism that are most prevalently seen in the subreddit. Thus, identifications or definitions of

veganism that exclude animal rights are often deemed inauthentic, while dedication to the ethical aspects of veganism is usually seen as an authentic manner of being vegan.

Overall, the image that the participants of r/Vegan create of vegans and their authenticity inside the subreddit is somewhat fragmented. While those who identify as ethical vegans seem to be considered more authentic than others and veganism as an ideology and lifestyle seems to be evaluated as a more authentic view than categorising veganism as a diet, there are still also dissenting voices to be heard. Thus, it is impossible to definitively state what and who is, in fact, an 'authentic' and 'true' vegan according to the community.

## **5.2 Implications and applications**

The findings of the present study could offer a sliver of insight into the complexity of veganism and the communities that are built around it. As definitions and norms are constantly being discussed and negotiated, it might seem challenging to grasp what the movement is actually about. Insights from communities such as r/Vegan illustrate how diverse such views can be, and how many differing ideas are contained inside even one community. While some recurring ideas and definitions of veganism can be identified on r/Vegan, there is no unified consensus on who and what can be considered vegan. Instead, there are various differing views on the matter inside the community. Overall, the findings of the present study, combined with similar results from other studies, could provide information on how veganism could be better understood by people who are not familiar with it in their everyday lives.

Moreover, the unifying theme of veganism in the community might affect the community members' identity work in interesting ways, as the theme in itself might offer the participants a certain 'shared identity'. It could be interesting to focus more on uncovering how such a shared identity and ideology might affect the ways in which people behave in spaces that are dedicated to these themes. There has been previous research into face-saving strategies and similar behaviour patterns of vegans (e.g.

Greenebaum 2012a, Buttny and Kinefuchi 2020), but their data has been collected through interviews instead of focusing on internet spaces. The results of such studies might provide an interesting point of comparison to behaviour patterns in vegan-centred groups.

### **5.3 Limitations of the present study and basis for future research**

While the potential merits of the present study have been presented, it is important to also acknowledge its limitations. It must be noted that the study focuses on a singular online community during a limited time period, so the collected data provides only a limited glimpse into the community and does not necessarily depict the entire community accurately. Moreover, as the object of study is a specific community in a specific online environment, broader generalisations of, for example, vegans or Reddit users cannot be made merely based on the findings of the present study.

The chosen methods of analysis also pose certain limitations. The tools of thematic analysis and discourse analysis made it possible to formulate relevant categories of the data and illustrate identification and authentication processes inside those categories. However, the themes were merely my interpretation of the relevant content of the data, and the same data set could be interpreted entirely differently by a different researcher. Moreover, the categorisation of comments proved to be challenging sometimes, as the themes are closely connected. Some comments also discussed several themes, which caused some overlap in the categorisation. Whereas the relevant linguistic and interactive processes in the data were analysed, aspects such as the sequential nature of the discussion or stance taking inside the comments were not considered. The adoption of conversation analysis or stance analysis could provide valuable information into these kinds of interactional processes in the subreddit.

It should also be noted that the environment in which the analysed discussions take place inherently poses some limitations. As the data is mainly textual, different tones and intended meaning cannot always be definitively recognised. For instance, irony, sarcasm, and trolling can be challenging to identify through purely textual material.

Moreover, Reddit as a platform includes some technical elements that are intrinsic to the use of the site, but their potential significance in interaction is difficult to define. The most notable example of such features are upvotes and downvotes, which are meant to be used to define relevant and irrelevant content and not to express agreement or disagreement according to the community rules of Reddit. However, especially downvotes are often used exactly in the way in which they are not intended to be used, to express disagreement with a post or a comment. Such practices could illustrate interesting normative perspectives of Reddit communities, but the underlying motivations behind them are virtually impossible to deduce.

The observation period of the subreddit r/Vegan also elicited interest in other practices on the subreddit, but the scope of the present study did not lend itself to their analysis. An especially intriguing idea is the possibility to observe vegan communities through a Goffmanian lens. As Greenebaum (2012b: 142-143) suggests, the maintenance of an authentic vegan identity can be seen as a form of impression management, which relates to Goffman's (1959) ideas of identity as a performance. Goffman (1959) proposes the idea that people perform their identities in accordance with social norms when in the so-called *front stage*, i.e. observed by others, while their behaviour will be different in a more private, *backstage* environment. While Goffman's ideas have first been presented in the 1950s, they have been used in more recent analysis as well. For instance, Goffmanian views of performance have been utilised in the analysis of identity performances online (see e.g. Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013; Hogan 2010). To me, it seems that an environment such as r/Vegan, or a similar ideology-focused online community, would be an especially fruitful space for such analysis, as it combines the questions of the authenticity of vegans and the identity performances in online spaces, both of which have been connected with Goffman's ideas in previous research. As the limited scope of the present study caused me to abandon the analysis of the data from a Goffmanian perspective, I would be interested to see such research perspectives in the future.

Reddit content also offers a variety of potential data for conversation analysis or stance analysis, as discussions often include turn taking and the wide variety of subreddits

offer plentiful opportunities for active discussion. Moreover, subreddits with different themes, such as fan communities for entertainment or sport, hobby communities, or support groups, could offer interesting insights into different identity practices, normativity, and questions of authenticity. Questions such as enforcement of rules, gatekeeping, and in-group and out-group dynamics in subreddits could, for instance, be interesting future topics of research.

While I did not primarily focus on Reddit itself and its unique features as a platform in the analysis, I hope that the present study illustrates what kind of opportunities and content Reddit can offer for (socio)linguistic research. Moreover, I wish that such notions might encourage future researchers in the same field to consider Reddit and its communities as a potential object of study.



## 6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both identification practices and authentication processes are abundant on the subreddit r/Vegan, and they are realised in varying manners. Identifications are aimed at both self and others, utilising direct identifiers and indirect means of identification. Authentication is also directed at both self and others, with evaluations of one's own authenticity as a vegan being principally reinforcing, and the evaluations of the authenticity of others more often being questioning. Definitions of veganism, negotiation of the norms of veganism and construction of juxtaposition between vegans and others are used to reinforce the identification and authentication practices.

As has been illustrated in the previous section, the present study provides only a glimpse into the community of r/Vegan during a certain timeframe without more general and wide-reaching conclusions. However, I believe that even such a limited view into the subreddit demonstrates some of its relevant practices in relation to identity and authenticity. Furthermore, I believe that the provided analysis answers the research questions in a satisfactory manner, and thus serves the purpose for which it was intended.

In summary, the present study illustrates that construction of vegan identities and authentication of such identities are multifaceted and nuanced processes on the subreddit r/Vegan. While some perspectives are more prevalently expressed and typically accepted, the identity and authentication practices still contain divergence. Consequently, a singular definitive characterisation of an authentic vegan does not seem to exist within the community.

As the findings of the present study align with some previous research, it might be an indication of recurring practices among similarly themed communities. For example, this study enforces, in its part, the ideas that as a result of identifying with a new social group, individuals integrate it into their sense of identity (Cross 1978; DeLamater & Myers 2010; Phinney et al. 2001), and that politicised eaters might see a dietary change, such as a transfer to a vegan diet, as an actual identity (Chuck et al. 2016). Moreover, it reflects previous findings that conclude that the practice of claiming authenticity is

created through actions and performances, such as creating group boundaries and distinction (Greenebaum 2012b).

The findings of the present study also highlight the fluidity and constant change of the definitions and normativity of veganism, even among vegans themselves. The changing nature of the phenomenon makes it a particularly interesting topic for future research, especially as internet spaces provide an asynchronous space for the negotiation of such ideas. It could be that views on veganism are already entirely different in the next five years. Therefore, there is an evident opportunity and need for future research. Moreover, as social media and other internet spaces are also in constant development, new platforms and environments for similar discussions might emerge and offer new objects of study.

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