

Militant, annoying and sexy: A corpus-based study of representations of vegans in the British press

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This article examines discourse representations of vegans in UK newspapers, comparing broadsheets with tabloids published between 2016 and 2020. Taking a corpus-based approach to CDA, we identify a series of discourses, some of which overlap between the broadsheets and tabloids while others are particular to one format or the other. Vegans tend to be evaluated negatively in this context, portrayed as violent, hypocritical, pushy and irresponsible when it comes to their (and their children's) health. Such representations are characteristic of the tabloids in particular, whereas broadsheets provide more balanced coverage, with a greater propensity to present counter-discourses and to provide page space to airing the first-hand perspectives of vegans themselves. In the paper, we make recommendations as to how coverage can achieve better balance, to the benefit of the vegan movement and – by extension – the wellbeing of humans, other animals, and the planet.

Keywords

Veganism, Representation, Print Media, Corpus Linguistics, CDA

1. Introduction

Veganism is a 'philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment' (Vegan Society, online). Following a vegan lifestyle involves, among other things, adopting a diet free from meat, dairy, eggs, and any other animal-derived products. Vegan living can bring countless benefits, not only in terms of animal welfare, but also to human health and the natural environment (ibid.). The world's population of vegans is small but growing. In the UK – the context of this study – vegans represent just 3% of the population, though the majority of these decided to follow a vegan lifestyle within the last five years (YouGov 2022). Vegans

are likely to face negative attitudes and prejudice over their lifestyle. For example, half of UK vegans report facing open hostility and disapproval from family and friends over their veganism (ibid.). In this context, it is important to understand how vegans and veganism are talked about within society, as this can influence attitudes towards vegans, as well as the take-up of veganism. This study aims to contribute such understanding through a corpus-based critical analysis of discourse representations of vegans in British newspapers.

2. Vegans in the press

According to Hall (1997: 61), *representation* is ‘the process by which members of a culture use language [...] to produce meaning [...] things – objects, people, events in the world’. Public, mass media representations of social groups, such as vegans, reflect but can also shape societal views (Fairclough 2015). Systematically negative representations of minority groups can result in negative attitudes and even discriminatory practices (Brookes and Wright 2020a). Given that vegans are, as noted, often the object of such discrimination, analysing mass media representations of them can thus help to uncover discourses which both may give rise to and sustain such negative attitudes.

Studies of (print) media representations of vegans and veganism report a predominance of negative depictions, both of the lifestyle and those following it (Cole and Morgan 2011, Masterman-Smith et al. 2014), unless discussed in relation to celebrity culture (Lundahl 2020). Cole and Morgan (2011), for example, highlight how British newspaper articles from 2007 presented vegans either as oversensitive or militant, while veganism in general was presented as non-commonsensical, difficult to sustain, related to celebrity/fashion culture, or linked to self-deprivation (see also Masterman-Smith et al. (2014) on Australian newspapers).

While these studies provide important insights into representations of vegans and veganism in their respective contexts, their findings are presented in a way that may assume homogeneity between different media outlets. However, studies such as Lundahl’s (2020) suggest the media landscape may be more nuanced in this respect. Where the aforementioned studies agree, though, is that the core ethical foundations of veganism – animal rights – are often absent from media coverage of veganism.

The current study aims to provide the first linguistic (rather than content) analysis of vegan representation. Also being based on a larger and more contemporaneous dataset than previous studies, this analysis thus aims to provide new insight into how representations are

linguistically/discursively realised, including how these may differ between newspaper formats, which in the UK are directed at different groups within society (Baker et al. 2013).

3. Methodology: Corpus-based CDA

CDA is a type of discourse analytical research which studies how ‘social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context’ (van Dijk 2015: 466; see also: Fairclough 2015). Corpus linguistics offers methods for analysing linguistic patterns in large collections of naturally occurring language, or ‘corpora’ (Brookes and McEnery 2020a). The combination of corpus linguistics and CDA can be powerful, with each method able to buttress some of the limitations of the other (Baker et al. 2013; Brookes and Baker 2021; Chałupnik and Brookes 2021). With corpus assistance, CDA can effectively deal with larger and more representative datasets and start from a more objective analytical starting point, such as frequency or statistical salience. CDA can enrich this synthesis by bringing more theoretically robust frameworks for considering context in corpus analyses.

3.1. Corpora

Our data comprise two specialised corpora representing UK national press coverage of vegans and veganism – one containing broadsheets, and the other tabloids. Using *Nexis UK*, we searched for articles containing *vegan** in their headline (the asterisk acts as a wildcard for any set of characters, i.e. to capture terms like ‘vegans’ and ‘veganism’). We searched between 01.01.2016 and 31.01.2020 (the last full year prior to data collection). We only included newspapers which gave at least 100 articles during this period. We grouped results by moderate similarity and removed remaining duplicates.¹ The broadsheet corpus contains articles from the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Telegraph* and *Times* (3,405 articles, 2,653,810 words). The tabloid corpus contains articles from the *Express*, *Mail*, *Mirror*, *Star* and *Sun* (4,750 articles, 2,848,548 words).² A full breakdown of the newspapers in each corpus is given in Appendix A.

3.2. Analytical approach

¹ For this, we used the *WordSmith Tools* duplicate text checker (Scott 2020).

² Online, Sunday and ‘sister’ editions are subsumed under the main newspaper headings.

Our corpus-based CDA is guided by Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional approach, which relates language use to wider social and cultural structures at the levels of (i.) text, (ii.) discursive practice, and (iii.) social practice. At the text level, we examined patterns of language use surrounding noun uses of the lemma VEGAN (including *vegan* and its plural form, *vegans*). This lemma occurred 29,002 times in the broadsheet corpus and 33,751 times in the tabloid corpus. We accessed such patterns using collocation analysis. Collocation is the linguistic device whereby two or more words, by associating strongly together, become bearers of meaning. Collocation analysis is an established feature of corpus-based CDA (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010; Baker et al. 2013; Chalupnik and Brookes 2021), as it provides an effective means of accessing the evaluative and discourse prosodies surrounding mentions of particular social groups, which can be established and reinforced, incrementally, through recurrent collocational patterns.

Using *SketchEngine*³, and its word sketch tool, we were able to group the collocates (L5-R5, min. freq. 10) of the noun VEGAN (i.e. *vegan* and *vegans*) according to their grammatical relationships to our search-term. These grammatical relationships were then ranked using the logDice measure, which indicates the tendency of two words to co-occur relative to their respective frequencies in the corpus. This measure allowed for comparison of scores across both corpora and highlighted word combinations that were exclusive but not necessarily rare. This is particularly useful for discourse-oriented research, where the focus is on the cumulative forces of discourse representations. We included collocates with a logDice score of at least 8 (Brezina 2018).

Not all grammatical relationship categories were equally useful for identifying representational patterns. We excluded from our analysis collocates denoting names of individuals and food products, as well as collocates relating to single news stories, as we deemed these to be less representative of coverage of vegans in general.

To understand how the collocates contributed to representations of vegans, we used the concordance view to qualitatively examine all collocational patterns with their wider co-text, focusing on nomination and predication choices (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Where collocation frequency exceeded 100, we analysed a randomly selected sample of 100 cases. Some high frequency functional collocates (e.g. *do*, *be* and *have*) were diverse in use, and tended to depict representations captured by other, lexical collocates. Thus, we focussed less on these in our analysis.

³ <http://www.sketchengine.eu>

We then interpreted the most frequent representational patterns (along with substantial counter-discourses) as broader representational discourses. We understand discourses in the social constructionist sense, as ‘sets of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events [...] surrounding any one object, event, person etc.’ (Burr 1995, p.48). We interpret the discourses identified at the textual level in terms of the nomination and predication patterns surrounding VEGAN in our corpora, at the discursive practice level in terms of how these discourses may be shaped by practices of news production and consumption, and then at the social practice level in terms of their capacity to both reflect and shape wider societal attitudes and understandings surrounding vegans and veganism in the UK.

4. Findings

Tables 1 to 6 give the collocates of VEGAN across both corpora. These tables correspond to grammatical relationships between the node and the collocates, as determined by the word sketch technique. In the ensuing section, we describe the discourses we identified in both corpora based on the analysis of these collocates, as described in Section 3. Each discourse was the product of multiple nomination and/or predication patterns, and a single pattern could contribute to multiple discourses. For the facility of analysis, we have grouped the discourses according to themes, or precise aspects of representation. As will become clear, these themes constitute axes along which the broadsheets’ and tabloids’ discourses could converge, but also oppose one another.

Table 1: Modifiers of *vegan(s)*

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|------------------|-----------|----------|-------------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>militant</i> | 112 | 9.96 | <i>militant</i> | 249 | 10.81 |
| <i>ethical</i> | 108 | 9.66 | <i>ethical</i> | 89 | 9.27 |
| <i>many</i> | 112 | 9.42 | <i>being</i> | 72 | 9.11 |
| <i>cent</i> | 67 | 9.04 | <i>raw</i> | 68 | 8.92 |
| <i>being</i> | 47 | 8.74 | <i>many</i> | 69 | 8.77 |
| <i>more</i> | 64 | 8.43 | <i>sexy</i> | 50 | 8.60 |
| <i>strict</i> | 37 | 8.35 | <i>fellow</i> | 35 | 8.57 |
| <i>full-time</i> | 30 | 8.34 | <i>hot</i> | 38 | 8.28 |
| <i>committed</i> | 29 | 8.26 | <i>angry</i> | 32 | 8.23 |
| <i>only</i> | 21 | 8.20 | <i>healthy</i> | 32 | 8.13 |
| <i>fellow</i> | 17 | 8.05 | <i>passionate</i> | 24 | 8.11 |
| <i>healthy</i> | 17 | 8.01 | <i>strict</i> | 25 | 8.05 |
| <i>most</i> | 29 | 8.00 | <i>only</i> | 23 | 8.03 |

| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|-------------|----|------|
| | | | <i>more</i> | 27 | 8.01 |
|--|--|--|-------------|----|------|

Table 2: ...is a *vegan(s)*

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|---------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>people</i> | 15 | 9.36 | <i>people</i> | 27 | 10.11 |
| <i>briton</i> | 14 | 9.34 | <i>world</i> | 10 | 8.73 |
| <i>child</i> | 11 | 8.98 | <i>child</i> | 10 | 8.00 |

Table 3: Verbs with *vegan(s)* as subject

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|----------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>do</i> | 132 | 9.71 | <i>do</i> | 155 | 9.72 |
| <i>be</i> | 839 | 9.41 | <i>be</i> | 904 | 9.48 |
| <i>have</i> | 288 | 9.32 | <i>have</i> | 345 | 9.28 |
| <i>eat</i> | 56 | 8.97 | <i>eat</i> | 83 | 9.21 |
| <i>take</i> | 45 | 8.91 | <i>take</i> | 75 | 8.96 |
| <i>make</i> | 49 | 8.79 | <i>make</i> | 56 | 8.87 |
| <i>live</i> | 32 | 8.71 | <i>claim</i> | 44 | 8.80 |
| <i>need</i> | 33 | 8.65 | <i>call</i> | 36 | 8.79 |
| <i>want</i> | 29 | 8.63 | <i>get</i> | 37 | 8.77 |
| <i>go</i> | 35 | 8.58 | <i>storm</i> | 30 | 8.72 |
| <i>mean</i> | 23 | 8.57 | <i>go</i> | 40 | 8.54 |
| <i>tend</i> | 21 | 8.53 | <i>want</i> | 28 | 8.48 |
| <i>get</i> | 23 | 8.51 | <i>target</i> | 23 | 8.36 |
| <i>seem</i> | 20 | 8.45 | <i>live</i> | 23 | 8.29 |
| <i>say</i> | 41 | 8.43 | <i>mean</i> | 23 | 8.29 |
| <i>tell</i> | 21 | 8.41 | <i>need</i> | 20 | 8.15 |
| <i>target</i> | 17 | 8.36 | <i>protest</i> | 18 | 8.13 |
| <i>believe</i> | 17 | 8.30 | <i>say</i> | 49 | 8.06 |
| <i>experience</i> | 16 | 8.28 | | | |
| <i>feel</i> | 17 | 8.21 | | | |
| <i>claim</i> | 14 | 8.14 | | | |
| <i>annoy</i> | 12 | 8.07 | | | |

Table 4: Verbs with *vegan(s)* as object

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|---------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>go</i> | 1,006 | 12.08 | <i>go</i> | 1,369 | 12.27 |
| <i>be</i> | 2,619 | 11.27 | <i>be</i> | 2,895 | 11.50 |
| <i>become</i> | 378 | 10.70 | <i>become</i> | 362 | 10.50 |
| <i>turn</i> | 227 | 10.10 | <i>turn</i> | 276 | 10.19 |
| <i>hate</i> | 33 | 8.15 | <i>launch</i> | 60 | 8.88 |
| <i>spike</i> | 31 | 8.07 | <i>make</i> | 84 | 8.30 |
| | | | <i>raise</i> | 30 | 8.01 |

Table 5: *Vegan(s)* is a...

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>minority</i> | 12 | 10.35 | <i>choice</i> | 15 | 10.64 |
| <i>choice</i> | 10 | 9.51 | <i>time</i> | 13 | 10.30 |
| | | | <i>race</i> | 10 | 10.03 |

Table 6: Adjective predicates of *vegan(s)*

| Broadsheets | | | Tabloids | | |
|---------------|-----------|----------|---------------------|-----------|----------|
| Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice | Collocate | Frequency | Log Dice |
| <i>likely</i> | 15 | 9.97 | <i>malnourished</i> | 23 | 10.65 |
| <i>happy</i> | 14 | 9.91 | <i>happy</i> | 13 | 9.50 |
| <i>more</i> | 13 | 9.13 | <i>pasty</i> | 13 | 9.06 |
| <i>human</i> | 10 | 9.03 | <i>due</i> | 13 | 9.01 |
| | | | <i>healthy</i> | 12 | 9.00 |
| | | | <i>more</i> | 12 | 8.93 |
| | | | <i>prone</i> | 11 | 8.82 |
| | | | <i>deficient</i> | 11 | 8.74 |

Defining vegans and veganism

Both the broadsheets and tabloids define vegans through what they do and do not *eat* and what being a vegan means (*mean*). Across both formats, veganism is often defined as a *choice*, although there are some differences in how this is framed. In the broadsheets, the notion of *choice* is used to give the perspective of vegans who say they should not be punished because of this choice they have made. There is some evidence of this in the tabloids too, though the majority pattern here is actually to legitimise forms of discrimination against vegans (discussed in detail later) on the basis that it is their *choice* to follow a vegan lifestyle. The construction of veganism as a *choice* was also used by the tabloids to criticise vegans and other social actors who are framed as ‘forcing’ veganism onto others.

In the coverage, vegans are also subjected to terminological subcategorization. The broadsheets, for example, describe *ethical* vegans, typically in the context of individuals self-identifying as such in direct quotations or opinion pieces, as well as in arguably ‘positive’ news stories, such as when vegans achieve legal victories which lead to some change in practice or legislation, for example relating to food labelling practices. By contrast, the label *ethical*, along with the collocate *raw*, tends to be used by the tabloids in stories which present vegans in a more contentious, or even negative, light. Although these labels do indeed denote types of vegans, the tabloids ostensibly use these labels to convey a sense in which vegans are extreme or imply that such a lifestyle can be associated with wider patterns of – what is constructed as – deviant behaviour.

Are these the most annoying Big Brother contestants EVER? Fame-hungry raw **vegan** twin sisters who are pro-cannabis and spend their time posting bikini selfies are already dividing the nation (in just 24 hours) (Mail 2018)

Additionally, vegans are subjected to gradation in both corpora. Both the broadsheets and tabloids premodify VEGAN with *strict*. Much like their use of *ethical* and *raw* discussed above, the tabloids are more likely to use the pre-modifier *strict* in contexts where vegans' behaviour is presented as deviant or harmful to themselves and others.

In the broadsheets the collocate *strict* tends to be used in definitions of vegans and veganism, which typically focus on a refusal to eat animal-derived products. The application of *strict* in such contexts is unnecessary (and inaccurate), as such definitions capture the actions of all vegans (regardless of whether they would consider themselves strict).

Strict **vegans** avoid any products derived from living or dead animals, including meat, fish, milk, eggs and honey. (Guardian 2019)

The broadsheets also frequently modify the noun VEGAN with *committed* and *full-time*. The former label is used both in cases where individuals self-identify as *committed*, as well as to refer to vegans in positive contexts, for example when reporting on individuals setting up plant-based food businesses and presenting them as consistent in relation to both personal ethics and business practices. The modifier, *full-time*, is used by the broadsheets in descriptions, or self-descriptions, of individuals as gradually converting or having fully converted to a vegan lifestyle, as well as for the purposes of providing statistics around veganism.

Having defined what veganism is, both the broadsheets and the tabloids also represent veganism as something that is increasing in popularity. Both sets of newspapers discuss the number of *people* who are vegan and, in the tabloids, *being* vegan. The broadsheets are more likely to express this figure as a percentage (*cent*) and to focus on the context of Great Britain (*briton*), while the tabloids on the hand are more likely to discuss the number of vegans in the *world*. The sense in which the number of vegans is increasing is conveyed through a diverse range of linguistic choices, though the most explicit manifestation of this discourse is in uses of the comparative collocate *more*, which appears among modifier and adjective predicate collocates in both corpora.

There are more **vegans** than ever before - 540,000 in the UK, up from 150,000 in 2006, according to the Vegan Society. (Independent 2018)

The notion that the number of vegans in the UK and across the globe has increased is a fairly well established one, as the available evidence indicates. Examining the uses of the

collocates described above, neither the broadsheets nor the tabloids tend to offer positive or negative evaluations of the increase in the number of vegans. To get a better sense of how this trend is likely to be perceived by readers, it is beneficial to look more widely at other collocates and their attendant discourse representations, and how these contribute to evaluations of vegans and veganism.

Violence and victimisation

A discourse we observed in both the broadsheets and tabloids is that vegans are violent, or especially violent. Perhaps the most explicit realisation of this discourse is in the use of *militant*, which was the highest-ranking and the strongest modifier collocate of VEGAN in both corpora. In the tabloids and the broadsheets (particularly right-leaning), *militant* vegans tended to be represented as hateful, extreme and as performing acts of physical violence, vandalism and verbal aggression.

Last week the dairy farmers Jonathan and Dulcie Crickmore revealed that they received death threats from militant vegans after posting a picture of their triplet calves on Facebook. (The Times 2018)

Militant vegans and animal right groups 'spreading terror' (Express 2018)

When identified, the objects of these violent processes in both corpora tend to be individuals or groups working in industries which profit somehow from animal-derived products or services, particularly butchers, farmers and restaurant owners. The broadsheets use *tell* to lexicalise acts of verbal aggression by vegans against non-vegans, while in the tabloids vegans are quoted (*say, claim*) as holding views that are presented as extreme, such as equating violence against animals with violence against humans, and as celebrating or revelling in the misfortune of the aforementioned groups.

While the discourse that vegans are violent could be found in both corpora, we would argue that it was more characteristic of the tabloids, being realised through a larger number of relatively more frequent collocates. Part of the reason for this is that the tabloids appear to focus more intently on stories surrounding vegan protests (*protest*). The activities of the protestors are presented by the tabloids through ambiguous but loaded transitivity choices which imply force (*launch*) and chaos by metaphorically equating their actions to severe weather events (*storm*). In the representative example below, the protestors, who are described as 'militant' and collectivised as a 'swarm', 'storm' the property of a 'distressed' farmer. Their actions are evaluated as 'shocking' and their cause – 'animal liberation' – is arguably delegitimated by being placed in scare quotes.

A swarm of militant vegans have stormed a Queensland cattle farm as part of their fight for 'animal liberation'. The shocking footage showed a distressed farmer look on as about 150 activists entered the property at Millmerran, 75 kilometres west of Toowoomba, at midday on Saturday. (Mail 2019)

The broadsheets, while also providing depictions of vegans performing violent and aggressive acts, did provide a more balanced perspective on this issue, including presenting counter-discourses. As well as exhibiting a narrower range of collocates depicting vegans as violent, they also used the modifier *militant* somewhat differently to tabloids. In a substantial minority of cases, *militant* is used by the broadsheets to suggest that militant vegans are exceptional or few in number. Such representations typically occur in direct and indirect quotes from vegans themselves, or people who are sympathetic to vegan causes, or in the subregister of opinion columns written by such people. This extract quotes a vegan food writer, Stefan Gates, for example.

He also rejects the concept of the "militant" **vegan**, branding it a "carnivore construct". He says: "I'm sure there are some militant vegans, but I've never met one." (Independent 2019)

Within the broadsheets, we also find evidence of a counter-discourse wherein vegans are not only unlikely to be violent but are presented as the victims of hate and discrimination. The processes of which vegans are the object include *hate* and *spike*, for example in stories about restaurant chefs 'spiking' vegan meals with non-vegan ingredients.

Laura Goodman, chef who boasted of 'spiking vegan', offers to resign from Carlini restaurants (The Times 2018)

The broadsheets are also more likely to foreground the vulnerability of vegans as a group by framing them as a *minority*. Part of the reason why we see more sympathetic perspectives on vegans in the broadsheets is because they are more likely to incorporate vegan perspectives into their coverage, for example through direct quotations and articles/opinion pieces by people self-identifying as vegan. These perspectives are also reified in uses of the perceptive verbs *feel* and *experience*, and verbal collocates *claim* and *say*, of which vegans are the subject. These collocates express a range of propositions, but can all be used in accounts given by vegans of aggression and discrimination targeted against them.

But if this disappointing exchange exposes anything, it's the belligerent attitude that, sadly, many **vegans** experience every day, simply for trying to make a positive lifestyle change." (Independent 2018)

Vegans as reasonable or unreasonable

Next, we want to consider a pair of discourses which represent vegans either as being unreasonable or, conversely, as being reasonable. In both corpora, VEGAN collocates with *happy*. In both the broadsheets and the tabloids, this was used to frame vegans as being not happy. The causes of this unhappiness could be presented as associated with vegans being unreasonable or overly sensitive. For example, in this story about vegans' complaints around the use of an animal product (tallow) in a new banknote, the amount of tallow used is described as 'small', which may make the complaints appear unreasonable or unwarranted, and the newspaper foregrounds the perspective of the banknote's developer who brands the concerns as 'stupid'.

When the polymer note was introduced last year, **vegans** were not happy that it contained small amounts of tallow and a petition was sent to the Bank of England asking for the animal fat to be removed. The Australian inventor of the polymer notes responded by saying: 'It's stupid. It's absolutely stupid'. (Guardian 2017)

As noted earlier, another way in which vegans were depicted as unreasonable was through representations of them as being easily offended. Both the tabloids and broadsheets describe vegans who *take* offense, though this representation is more prominent in the tabloids, who also frame vegans' offense in more emotional terms. This was conveyed in the tabloids through the types of emotional states that are attributed to them, and which can accompany descriptions of requests for actions to in turn frame those requests as being driven by emotion rather than reason. The tabloids describe vegans as people who are *passionate* and who *get angry* and *furious*, the latter of which occurs both as a modifier and adjective predicate of VEGAN.

Another way in which the tabloids constructed this sense of vegans as being overly emotional, and by extension unreasonable, was through quoted speech in stories where vegans provide accounts of their encounters with animal-derived food products. Such stories provide some of the few instances where the tabloids provide page space to vegans' perspectives, and through the quotative collocate *say*, these newspapers attribute dramatic reactions to vegans who encounter non-vegan products, such as feeling 'sick', 'puking' and being 'disgusted'. The detail of such descriptions, which typically contrast dramatic and visceral quotes pertaining to the vegans' reactions with relatively mundane descriptions of everyday food items, creates a sense in which the vegans' responses are dramatic and disproportionate to the situation. For example, in the extract below, the vegan social actor is 'traumatised for life', had 'heart palpitations' and 'burst into tears', all after 'biting into' (i.e. not

necessarily consuming) a 'pork sausage roll', which is also trivialised by being labelled as a 'savoury snack'.

Vegan says Greggs 'traumatised her for life' after giving her pork sausage roll
Sharleen Ndungu, 20, claims she started having heart palpitations and burst into tears after biting into the savoury snack at the store in Canterbury, Kent (Mirror 2019)

We also see some evidence for this in the broadsheets through the collocate *go* which, when used with VEGAN as its subject, tends to feature in pun and word-play headlines, for example to describe vegans who 'go nuts' or 'go bananas'. Such constructions function as a somewhat humorous equivalent of the tabloids' depictions of vegans as going 'wild' or 'too far'. In such cases, it is the vegans' reactions that are the foregrounded, rather than the actions of those who caused the upset.

The tabloids – and to a lesser extent, the broadsheets – take a dim view on cases where vegans and others are perceived as overreacting. In the tabloids, we see the use of *need* with VEGAN as the subject in implorations to vegans that they *need* to stop forcing their views on others, as well as that they *need* to stop being overly sensitive.

Vegans need to cut the self pity and moralising (Express 2019)

In another of the few cases where the tabloids incorporate vegans' perspectives into their coverage, they do so to offer criticism of vegans, for example for being unreasonable, too pushy and too serious. Such cases were indicated in the tabloids' use of the collocate *fellow*, and constitute a strategy of legitimising the criticism given as it is framed as coming from a member of the out-group (in this case, a vegan).

JAMES DELINGPOLE says he wishes his fellow **vegans** would add humour to their diet (Mail 2018)

Again, we see evidence of arguably more sympathetic representation in the broadsheets. For example, these newspapers discuss how although many people criticise vegans for being unreasonable and easily offended, *most* vegans are not actually like that.

"There's a very small percentage of people who are loud and annoying," says Kateman." But most **vegans** and vegetarians are wonderful people who understand we should be pragmatic about this." (Guardian 2017)

Vegans forcing their lifestyles on others

Next, we consider oppositional representations of vegans as forcing their views and lifestyles on others versus vegans being marginalised and having others force their views and lifestyles on them. These oppositional discourses were respectively more characteristic of the tabloids and the broadsheets. Beginning with representations of vegans as forcing their lifestyles and views on others, this was indicated in uses of the tabloid collocate *call*, where vegans are framed as ‘calling’ for others to change their lives or practices in some way. Note how in the extract below the vaccine being objected to is described as ‘crucial’, which frames the demand as unreasonable.

A **vegan** has called for people to stop taking the crucial flu jab as the vaccine is made using animal products. (Mail 2019)

Similarly, the tabloid collocate *make* could be used to depict vegans (and others) as forcing (i.e. ‘making’) non-vegans follow practices that are associated with veganism. For example, the extract below was taken from a story about a mother who felt that a school’s decision to serve vegetarian school lunches only was forcing children into veganism. This extract represents a broader pattern whereby such measures are interpreted and framed as attempts to convert people to veganism against their will.

‘This has really got my back up as I feel we are being railroaded in to making our children **vegan** without a choice, no option of meat or fish.’ (Mail 2018)

As this extract attests, such practices are presented as causing irritation or annoyance in non-vegan social actors, with such views sometimes forming the basis of entire articles (including opinion pieces).

There was some evidence of a similar type of discourse in the broadsheets; that is, of vegans as having the capacity to *annoy* others (typically the columnist or ‘voice’ of the article in question). However, in these cases vegans were constructed as annoying in a more general sense (i.e., not in the specific ways done so by the tabloids seen above), and we got a sense of such articles being humorous or tongue-in-cheek, with descriptions of vegans as annoying occurring in concessive clauses, where the main clause evaluates vegans more positively, or even where non-vegans are negatively evaluated.

If you thought that **vegans** were annoying, you haven't seen anything until you have witnessed those fervent carnivores purple with rage at the concept of a vegan sausage, as though they are obliged to shove it down their own throats.
(Independent 2020)

This extract hints at an oppositional discourse we identified in the broadsheets. As noted earlier, the broadsheets were more likely than the tabloids to present vegans as being

marginalised and, in a reversal of the tabloids' representations, as having others' (i.e., non-vegans') views and lifestyles forced upon them. This discourse is underpinned by the tendency of the broadsheets to present vegans' own perspectives and views on veganism, for example through quotations and opinion pieces. Such cases were indicated in the broadsheets' use of the collocate *take*, which refers to articles getting a vegan's 'take' on an issue and the modifier *fellow*, which vegan authors use in reference to their 'fellow vegans'. This gives rise to a counter-discourse to that described above – that is vegans presented as being marginalised and having others' lifestyles and views thrust upon them. We observed such representations in uses of *only*, where vegan authors describe being isolated as a vegan, including being the *only* vegan at the dinner table, or the *only* vegan living in a village.

Vegans as hypocrites

The next discourse is a corollary of the last one, as it involves framing vegans as not living to the standards they are depicted as preaching to and pushing on others, in particular by consuming or using, or having the desire to consume or use, animal-derived products. This discourse was evident in both the broadsheets and the tabloids, for example in uses of shared collocates such as *need*, which could be used to describe vegans as *need[ing]* to live up to their own standards and pay more attention to where their food comes from, and *want*, which was used to imply that vegans are hypocritical for *want[ing]* to consume plant-based products that are designed to resemble meat-based products (in the example below, a burger that 'bleeds').

You have to wonder whether a **vegan** who wants to pay cow killers to cook them a burger that bleeds has really left behind the bloodthirstiness of the whole meat racket. (Independent 2019)

Some aspects of this discourse of vegan hypocrisy manifested in ways that were particular to either format. For example, in the tabloids, a minority of uses of *happy* presented vegans as being *happy* to use certain products that are framed, indirectly, as being animal-based, or to engage in practices or use products that are harmful to the environment.

As meat eaters we don't stop or criticise you for your dietary choice even though 99% of so called **vegans** are happy to go to a farm shop to buy their vegetables that have been fertilised with animal waste! (Mail 2018)

In the broadsheets, hypocritical vegans were also discussed as causing conflict within the vegan community, with some vegans *want[ing]* others to change their behaviour. Such

stories help to construct a sense of diversity within the vegan community, as well as marking another way in which broadsheets provide more space to the perspectives of vegans in their coverage.

Veganism and health

The next discourse we consider is one which represents veganism, and by extension vegans, as unhealthy. Both the tabloids and broadsheets pose questions about vegans' nutrition, specifically through uses of the collocate *healthy* in rhetorical questions such as, 'Is it possible to be *healthy* as a vegan?'. This question is answered in slightly different ways in either corpus.

In the tabloids, veganism is represented overwhelmingly as being unhealthy. For instance, the tabloids describe how vegans are *malnourished* and *deficient*, how they *look pasty*, and are *prone* to illness as a result. Indeed, their consumption practices are framed as being limited in uses of *live* with VEGAN as the subject, in articles describing what vegans 'live off' or 'live on'. As well as this expression implying that a diet is restricted or meagre, such descriptions tended to be accompanied by more explicit descriptions of purported negative health consequences of vegan diets.

A FORMER **vegan** who lived off a gluten-free, grain-free, dairy-free, meat-free and refined sugar-free diet has ditched the plant-based regime and started eating burgers. Virpi Mikkonen [...] claims her vegan diet "brought on early menopause" leading to hot flushes and absent periods. (Sun 2019)

Such tabloid constructions thus contribute further to this sense in which vegans are malnourished or deprived, and, consequently, as having a *need* to address this for example by taking nutrients. The tabloids also report on stories attesting the impacts of vegans' purported health problems in terms of them being so many *times* more likely to experience certain forms of ill-health, also *due* to following a vegan lifestyle. As a result of this, the tabloids also present vegans as being so many more *times* likely to visit a GP.

The study of 1,000 office workers also revealed that **vegans** are three times more likely to take a trip to their GP during the cold and flu season in comparison to the average UK adult. (Mail 2019)

As well as having to *take* more time off work than others.

VEGANS take twice as many days off work due to minor illnesses compared to their meat-eating colleagues, a new report suggests. (Express 2019)

These representations, of vegans having to utilise the healthcare system more than others and being more likely to have to take time off work from illness, could contribute to a sense in which vegans are a financial burden on the country. Indeed, in some cases further into these articles readers are informed of the financial costs associated with these trends.

The broadsheets' approach to the question around the health implications of a vegan lifestyle is more complex, and arguably more nuanced, than the tabloids'. Depending on the particular study being reported on, these articles variously report vegans as being more or less likely than non-vegans to experience certain health problems. These relationships are also presented using more hedged forms (e.g. *tend*, *likely*, *seem*) which imply lower modality and reflect the nuance of the relationships between veganism and health. Moreover, the representation employed by the broadsheets in this regard was also more varied, reflecting the variable findings emerging from scientific research. As such, as well as seeing evidence of warnings around the nutritional limitations of the diet, we also see representations of vegan diets as having health benefits. For example, the use of *live* with vegan as a subject could be used in representations of vegans as being likely to *live* longer than non-vegans due to their lifestyles.

How green is your volley?; Not only does new research show that **vegans live** longer - top athletes are shunning animal products and still going for gold. (Independent 2016)

Vegan parents

A discourse that is related to that pertaining to the unhealthiness of the vegan lifestyle is one which represents vegan parents who raise their children as vegans as irresponsible. This discourse was only visible through uses of the tabloid collocates *raise* and *child*. As noted, such vegan parents were consistently evaluated negatively, as the stories tended to focus on cases where the children's health is presented as having been adversely affected by their parents' decision to raise them as vegans, in some cases resulting in reported intervention from the police or social services.

CHEW IT OVER Good Morning Britain viewers blast 'cruel' mum who is raising her baby **VEGAN** (Sun 2020)

As well as being closely related to the discourse of veganism as being unhealthy, this discourse of vegan parents being irresponsible and this resulting in intervention from the police is also consistent with the wider (particularly tabloid) representation of vegans as deviant described earlier.

The broadsheets, on the other hand, tend to use the collocate *child* in advice-giving passages advising readers on how to ensure that children get the nutrients they need.

But how can one make sure that a child who is **vegan** or vegetarian eats a nutritious, balanced diet? A plant-based diet can be just as nutritious as a non-vegan diet (Independent 2019)

The implicature of such passages is not only that it is possible to raise a healthy child as a vegan (and this can also be stated explicitly), but also that at least some readers will want to raise a vegan child, and thus presumably lead a vegan lifestyle themselves. Thus, this distinction between the broadsheets and the tabloids may hint to differences in how either set of newspapers imagine their readers (Bell 1984). We return to this consideration in a more general sense in the discussion section.

Sexualisation of vegans

The final discourse we consider comprises representations which sexualise vegans by framing vegans as sexually attractive and/or as being particularly skilled at sexual intercourse. This was found in the tabloids, indexed through descriptions of vegans as *hot* and *sexy* and in stories about ‘sexiest vegan’ competitions and headlines which claim that vegans *make* better lovers than non-vegans. Such representations consistently feature in articles on studies surveying such matters, with such uses accounting for the majority of uses of the collocate *claim* in this corpus.

Last year a medical experiment suggested that men who have a **vegan** diet may make better lovers, and that just one meat- free meal could improve their performance in the bedroom. (Mail 2020)

Given that the tabloids are, as we have seen, otherwise likely to represent vegans as weak, sickly and generally not much fun (i.e. as being easily offended, among other things), we cannot help but conclude that the sexualisation of vegans in these newspapers is the product of a subversive kind of article, with such discourse contributing to the news value of unexpectedness.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This article examined discourse representations of vegans in British newspapers, comparing broadsheets with tabloids. Some discourses were prominent in both corpora; both present

veganism as a choice and represent vegans in terms of their consumption practices, as increasing in number, as violent and 'militaristic', as unreasonable and easily offended, and as hypocritical in terms of how consistently they follow a vegan philosophy. Such representations, some of which echo those identified in previous studies, are thus likely to constitute dominant discourses around veganism in British society, to the extent that they cut across newspaper formats in their take-up.

Yet as well as providing new insight into the kinds of systematic linguistic choices that invoke these discourses, our analysis has also elaborated on previous studies by demonstrating important differences between how UK broadsheets and tabloids represent vegans. On the whole, we would argue that the tabloids are more likely than the broadsheets to evaluate vegans negatively. For example, we have provided evidence of the tabloids legitimising discrimination against vegans, presenting vegans as forcing their lifestyles on others, and as being less healthy than the general population which leads to them being framed as a drain on financial resources by having to take more time off work and use the NHS more than the general population. With this generally negative coverage in mind, we interpreted the tabloids' depictions of vegans as 'sexy' and as 'better lovers' than non-vegans as subversive kinds of stories that draw on the news value of unexpectedness and which may even be designed as a form of gaslighting to provoke responses from readers.

While the broadsheets could, as noted, engage in negative representations of vegans, they were also more likely than the tabloids to provide comparatively favourable evaluations through their representations. For example, we found evidence of the broadsheets providing a counter-discourse to the notion that vegans are violent and unreasonable by attributing such traits to a minority of vegans. They also presented vegans as the target of violence and discrimination (rather than just the perpetrators) and conveyed first-hand perspectives of vegans. In terms of health-related discourses, the broadsheets discursively constructed the possibility of leading a healthy vegan lifestyle (in some cases, presenting this as being healthier than non-vegan lifestyles) and, on the basis of such representations, advised (vegan) readers on how to ensure they maintain a nutritionally rich diet themselves and, if they are parents, for their children. At this point, we should acknowledge that the differences reported are not absolute but reflect tendencies, based on differences in statistically salient patterns in each corpus.

In this section, we interpret the discourses identified in terms of the discursive practices surrounding the production and consumption of these news texts, as well as their implications for social practice regarding their capacity to reflect but also shape wider societal practices and views relating to vegans and veganism.

Beginning with discursive practices, the differences between the broadsheets and tabloids described above could reflect the contrasting views and practices relating to veganism that newspapers making up each format perceive in their readerships. Newspapers design their content for their particular ‘imagined’ audiences (Bell 1984), as part of which they aim to present the worlds they believe will be consonant with their readers’ worldviews and value systems. It may be the case that the more favourable representation of vegans and veganism in the broadsheets reflects these newspapers’ perception that their readers will be more likely to hold more positive views towards veganism, including being more likely to be vegans themselves. One factor here could be that broadsheets readerships are may be perceived as being more socially progressive than typical tabloid readers.⁴ Another potential factor is social class. Veganism is socially stratified in the UK, with vegan lifestyles being more likely to be followed by people higher up the socio-economic scale.⁵ Newspaper readership data indicates that people higher up the socio-economic scale are more likely to read broadsheet newspapers than tabloids.⁶ As such, the generally more favourable coverage of veganism in the broadsheets may reflect the fact that these newspapers are aware that their readers may be more likely than readers of tabloids to follow a vegan lifestyle themselves, or at least be sympathetic to the causes associated with veganism, including animal rights and protecting the natural environment. The comparatively negative representations of vegans in the tabloids may thus reflect the inverse of the above; namely, these newspapers’ awareness that their readers are especially unlikely to follow a vegan lifestyle themselves. It may also be the case that the tabloids associate veganism with a broader set of socially progressive views, for example concerning the environment among other issues, which such newspapers have tended to either ignore or regard cynically. Indeed, the tabloids are, as noted, dominated⁶ by right-leaning publications, as veganism and the other types of social causes linked to it are traditionally associated with the political left.

Turning now to social practices, and evidence suggests that the types of negative attitudes towards vegans conveyed by the tabloids’ discourses are widely held within British society. The prejudice that meat-eaters express towards vegans has found to be equal to, and in some cases to exceed, that directed towards other marginalised groups (e.g. black people, gay and lesbian people, and immigrants; MacInnis and Hodson 2017). And if we take as an example one of the most prominent representations of vegans in our tabloid data – that is, vegans as militant and violent – such attitudes may represent an effect of the incremental effect of such representations, with the association between vegans and militancy, violence

⁴ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/03/07/how-left-or-right-wing-are-uks-newspapers/>

⁵ <https://www.vegansociety.com/whats-new/news/find-out-how-many-vegans-there-are-great-britain>

⁶ <https://pamco.co.uk/pamco-data/latest-results>

and other forms of social deviance becoming stronger over time the longer that readers are exposed to it (Fairclough 2015). Indeed, if we accept Hoey's (2005) theory of lexical priming, we may argue readers' exposure to the frequent collocation of VEGAN with *militant* (among other negatively loaded descriptors) may lead to such associations becoming established in readers' minds to the extent that these form mental associations and readers then expect vegans to be described in this way.

It is not all bad news from a vegan perspective, though, as veganism continues to increase in popularity in the UK and many other countries.⁷ In the case of the UK, this may be indicative of the waning power of the news media's power to steer social attitudes. Indeed, the vegan movement has been advanced furthest by forms of media that are alternative to the mainstream, especially online spaces (Wolf 2015).

Regarding social effects, the press as a whole, but the tabloids in particular, seem to be engaged in a cycle whereby negative attitudes around veganism are both reflected in the news but also supported and even created by it. The effect of this may be that we see the social stratification of veganism maintain, with the more unfavourable coverage of vegans in media targeting working class audiences in turn making them less likely to convert to veganism or become more sympathetic towards the vegan cause and engage more meaningfully with it.

As well as its motivations to eliminate animal suffering, a vegan lifestyle can, as noted, bring countless health and environmental benefits. However, negative attitudes towards veganism is likely to prevent people from following, or even learning about and engaging productively with, vegan philosophy. We would therefore argue that it is important to break this tabloid cycle of negative attitudes around veganism. First, we should state that we cannot (and do not) expect all news around vegans and veganism to be positive. Indeed, decades of research into the construction of newsworthiness (see Richardson 2007, pp.91-95) highlights the importance of negativity as a news value. However, it is important to point out that the broadsheets did cover negative news stories around vegans, just as the tabloids did, but that this coverage involved the use of linguistic choices which, as we have seen, lead to representations that are less generalising, better capture nuance by talking about tendencies and specific cases rather in general terms, and which, unlike the tabloids, do not foreground negative attributes of vegans, regardless of whether these are actually relevant to the particular event or circumstances being reported. The tabloids adopting an approach that is

⁷ <https://sentientmedia.org/increase-in-veganism/#:~:text=%20Why%20Is%20Veganism%20on%20the%20Rise%3F%20,has%20a%20wide%20variety%20of%20environmental...%20More%20>

closer to that adopted by the broadsheets would, we argue, result in more balanced coverage. Another important distinction between the broadsheets and the tabloids is that the former was more likely than the latter to incorporate the perspectives of vegans themselves. This meant that the broadsheets could provide representations of vegans and veganism that were based on, or at least closer to, the lived experiences of those who actually follow a vegan lifestyle. The tabloids were much more likely to provide the (unfavourable) perspectives and views of people other than vegans, and when vegans were quoted this was to criticise other vegans, or in contexts where the proposition being expressed could be presented by the newspaper as extreme or overly sensitive.

All of this does not mean to say, though, that the broadsheets' coverage could not be improved from a vegan perspective. We should bear in mind that the tabloids and broadsheets did converge in deploying certain discourses, and our analysis of the collocates in both sets of newspapers indicated little engagement with the kinds of animal rights issues which sit at the heart of vegan philosophy. Both sets of newspapers emphasised the dietary effects of following a vegan lifestyle and engaged little with its ethical motivations. We saw more engagement with animal rights issues in the broadsheets than the tabloids, but even here this felt like a relatively underrepresented aspect of vegan philosophy. While the motivations for following a vegan lifestyle are wide-ranging, studies indicate that those who are likely to stick to vegan living in the long term are those who do so out of concern for animal welfare (Radnitz et al. 2015). Thus, coverage from both the tabloids and the broadsheets which focussed on such motivations and the issues that drive these would arguably better reflect the motivations of the vegan community as a whole, while helping to develop much-needed critical awareness of the origins of animal-derived products and the practices and conditions that surround these. Applying the principles discussed in the previous paragraph could help to produce, we feel, fairer and more balanced coverage of veganism and what are, in vegans, a minority but growing community within the UK.

A limitation of this study, as with much corpus-based research, is that we have not had the space to report detailed analyses of all of the collocates studied. We have instead tried to indicate majority patterns for each. Relatedly, given Lundahl's (2020) finding that vegans are often presented more positively in celebrity interest stories, our decision not to examine collocates denoting individuals' names (including celebrities' names) may mean that there were some more positive representations which sat outside of our analytical scope. This is a topic for future research. Other promising avenues for future research include comparing more systematically newspapers according to political orientation, as well as exploring possible parallels between representations of vegans and other groups who are similarly often framed as 'militant', such as environmental and social rights campaigners. Such

analysis may help to shed light on the extent to which the representations identified here reflect bias against vegans specifically or, rather, reflect broader objections by some against socially progressive groups within society.

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Appendix A. Newspapers in the corpora

| Format | Newspaper | Articles | Words |
|---------------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Broadsheets | <i>Guardian</i> | 762 | 676,845 |
| | <i>Independent</i> | 1,008 | 755,322 |
| | <i>The Telegraph</i> | 753 | 548,396 |
| | <i>The Times</i> | 882 | 673,247 |
| | Total | 3,405 | 2,653,810 |
| | | | |
| Tabloids | <i>Express</i> | 285 | 170,913 |
| | <i>Mail</i> | 2328 | 1,709,129 |
| | <i>The Mirror</i> | 807 | 384,554 |
| | <i>The Star</i> | 428 | 179,458 |
| | <i>The Sun</i> | 902 | 404,494 |
| | Total | 4,750 | 2,848,548 |