

Article

Portraits of Veganism: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of a Second-Order Subculture

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Abstract: Veganism has enjoyed increasing popularity and more sustained scholarly attention during the past several years. Using insights from cultural theory, this study conducts a qualitative discourse analysis of two vegan-promoting documentary films: *Forks over Knives* (2011) and *Vegucated* (2010). Each of these popular vegan-promoting films renders a different portrait of vegans and advances distinct motivations for the adoption of a vegan lifestyle. *Forks over Knives* promotes health veganism rooted in scientific arguments about the dietary benefits of veganism. By contrast, *Vegucated* promotes holistic veganism that, while encompassing personal health benefits, also promotes animal rights advocacy and environmental consciousness. These competing portrayals reveal an important fissure line within veganism, one that may have implications for the growth of this movement. Veganism is a distinctive second-order subculture situated within the broader vegetarian subculture. However, veganism maintains cultural relevance by drawing on quintessentially American discourses of individualism, science, healthy living, and environmental awareness.

Keywords: vegan; vegetarian; culture; discourse; qualitative; food

1. Introduction

The American vegan and vegetarian social worlds have been created and sustained, in part, through popular U.S. media (e.g., magazines such as *Vegetarian Times*, *VegNews*, and *Naked Food Magazine*) as well as through websites and other informational Western media [1,2]. In recent years, films advocating veganism have been produced and widely distributed through popular streaming platforms such as Netflix (Los Gatos, CA, USA). In conjunction with previous literature on individuals' motivations for adopting a vegan diet and lifestyle [3–5], the time is ripe to complement examinations of lived veganism with a careful analysis of vegan-promoting media. This approach can blend prior literature on identity negotiation among vegans and vegetarians with an appreciation for the cultural rhetoric found in vegan-promoting films. Research on vegan-promoting media may illuminate the discursive elements that define and justify veganism as a culturally distinctive diet and lifestyle. Moreover, elite cinematic discourses of veganism may inform the motivations and experiences of vegan individuals.

The present study seeks to augment the limited research on this topic by examining a critical medium through which vegan advocacy and vegetarian identity is disseminated within a Western context. Our investigation is guided by insights drawn from two complementary strands of cultural theory, namely Griswold's cultural diamond perspective and Smith's subcultural identity theory. Using insights from these theories, this study examines how the discourse (rhetorical claims) presented in the documentary films *Forks over Knives* (2011) and *Vegucated* (2010) portray and advocate for veganism as a distinctive lifestyle. Both films use particular claims to promote veganism. Such claims inform these films' audiences of pertinent aspects of vegans' subcultural identity, namely, its ideologies,

practices, and social boundaries. Furthermore, because this analysis is comparative, it provides a comprehensive assessment of veganism as a complex—and even fractured—identity capable of being supported by a range of rhetorical justifications. In short, our study complements current research by examining the media-generated cultural production of Western veganism.

Empirical and Theoretical Background

Vegetarianism is often observed as an alternative lifestyle in that it challenges mainstream assumptions about food, health, and morality [3,6–15]. Vegetarians make up about five percent of the American population, and only about two percent of Americans consider themselves vegan [16]. It is clear that this approach to diet is not very prevalent. However, there is merit in studying distinctive dietary minorities such as vegetarians or vegans to determine the motivations and reasons for people's adoption of a non-mainstream or subcultural lifestyle and to examine how they negotiate their socially marginal status. Aside from religious beliefs, concerns about animal welfare, personal health, and environmental sustainability are the three most frequently cited primary motivations for adopting a vegetarian lifestyle [3–5,7,8,10,12,14,15,17–23].

Broadly understood, reasons for the adoption of vegetarianism are primarily centered around two motivations: ethics and health. Ethically-motivated vegetarians often attribute their adoption of this distinctive identity to animal welfare issues. Such ethics are grounded in the conviction that animals should not be subject to the unnecessary pain and suffering commonly incurred in livestock and related industries, and the belief that animals should be considered “moral beings,” on par with humans [19,23]. On the other hand, health-motivated vegetarians often pursue their distinctive lifestyle with the intent to improve their overall health, combat a present ailment, or prevent the development of a chronic disease [3,7,18,19,21,24]. However, a number of ethical vegetarians direct criticism at health vegetarians, casting the latter's health-focused motivations as self-interested and bereft of altruism [4,7,8,19,21,22]. Regardless of this point of contention, both ethical and health vegetarians commonly express environmental concerns. Such concerns typically involve awareness about the negative ecological impacts of the livestock industry, including the production of greenhouse gases and deforestation [7,8,15,19,21,22].

The adoption of a vegetarian identity is also inflected by gender and other social factors. In Western countries like the United States, vegetarians and vegans are more often women [17,22,25–29], well-educated and affluent, and typically identify as politically liberal [17,19,22,30]. Furthermore, women have a greater propensity than men to believe that vegetarianism helps to minimize animal cruelty, environmental damage, and world hunger [31,32]. The gendered character of vegetarianism may be due, at least in part, to the cultural norms in many Western countries that tend to associate meat consumption with masculinity [17,24,31,33].

In previous qualitative research, abrupt adoption of vegetarianism was reported most commonly among interviewees who became vegetarian at an early age, either as a child or young adult [18,21], or among ethical vegetarians who had a “catalytic” or “conversion” experience [8,14,21,22,34]. These catalytic moments of conversion often followed a relevant traumatic experience, such as reading a book or viewing a film on animal cruelty [8,14,21,22,34,35]. In addition to catalytic experiences, many ethical vegetarians adopted vegetarianism simultaneously with other major life changes, such as “moving to a new area, attending college, or experiencing a divorce,” often to regain a sense of control over a certain aspect of their lives [19,21].

The adoption of vegetarianism and veganism may trigger positive or negative reactions among family and friends. For instance, one study found that most of its participants received support from those in their inner group; yet, some were subject to negative, antagonizing, and even hostile reactions by those closest to them, such as by parents [19] (see also [36]). It is unsurprising then that social support plays a major role in the continuation of this distinctive lifestyle [6,9,14,19,22,36]. Some researchers argue that vegetarians and vegans may adopt additional motivations and secure

social support to help mitigate the persistent challenges associated with managing this marginal identity [8].

Throughout one's vegetarian career (sustained foray into vegetarianism), an individual's primary motive for pursuing this lifestyle commonly evolves [8,19–22]. Exposure to new rationales often invites vegetarians and vegans to reprioritize reasons for the adoption of this lifestyle, and the renegotiation of motives may occur at various points throughout the vegetarian career [8,19,20]. Interviewees in such research often report relying on written literature and television shows as a mode for learning about and adopting other motivations [6,8,14,19,21,22]. Exposure to new information may initiate the adoption of vegetarianism and prompt some participants' movement along the vegetarian spectrum that culminates in veganism [3,8,14,21] (see Figure 1 below).

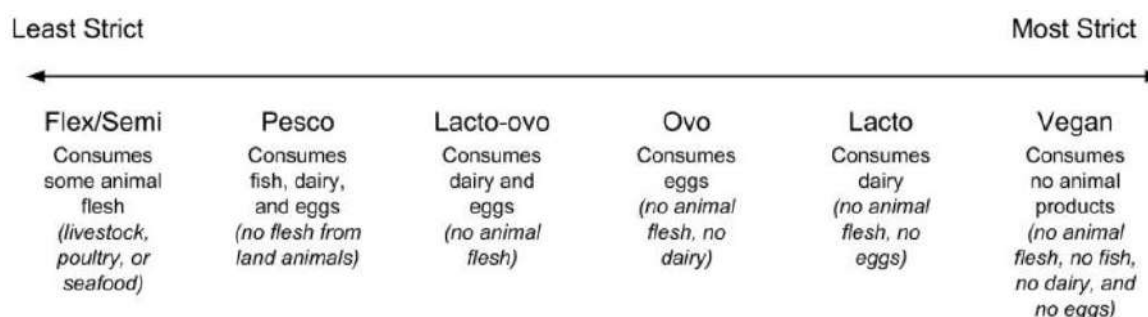


Figure 1. The vegetarian spectrum.

The vegetarian spectrum (Figure 1) is comprised of six diets that range from least strict (flex or semi-vegetarian) to most strict (vegan). The vegetarian career generally entails one's progression along the vegetarian spectrum through the gradual elimination of animal products, whereby a vegetarian will initially remove beef and poultry, then seafood, followed by the removal of eggs and dairy products [8]. While the adoption of the final diet of veganism is often deemed extreme and difficult [8,18,22], many vegans feel that living vegetarian demonstrates an inconsistency between one's beliefs and behaviors [4,14,18,22,23]. This perspective charges that it is unsatisfactory for an ethical vegetarian to believe in animal welfare while supporting the livestock industry by consuming other animal products and byproducts [19,23]. Hence, health vegetarians are viewed as not acting in accordance with their beliefs by consuming unhealthy animal-derived products [23]. Moreover, the fact that veganism lies within a broader spectrum of vegetarianism demonstrates the fluidity of a vegetarian identity.

Another major element of the vegetarian career is the process of attempting to convert others to this lifestyle. In previous research, interview participants acknowledge that aggressive approaches undermine prospects for the conversion of an omnivore to vegetarianism or veganism [19]. Instead, friendlier approaches or more hospitable methods, such as leading by example, approaching the conversation from a health angle, and allowing others to ask them questions about adopting vegetarianism themselves tend to foster a greater chance of adoption of a vegetarian or vegan identity [9]. In these ways, vegetarian and vegan identities are not unlike those of religious minorities. Both are defined by their cultural distinctiveness and efforts to share a non-mainstream worldview must be done with care given perceptions of their peculiarity.

To sum up, the adoption, management, and practices of a vegan or vegetarian identity have important implications for research in this area. For instance, the diet of vegetarians is characterized not solely through foregoing animal flesh, but may also include foregoing seafood, eggs, dairy, or all animal products, with this latter dietary regime being practiced by vegans in particular. Moreover, not all vegetarians or vegans are solely motivated by a singular concern with health benefits. Many may also be influenced by animal rights advocacy, environmental consciousness, or both. The heterogeneous character of those within this marginal subculture demonstrates the need for a more nuanced approach

to understanding the fluidness of a vegan or vegetarian identity as well as the plethora of ideas and beliefs that may characterize this identity.

The current research on this topic, then, is marked by two noteworthy gaps. First, prior scholarship has focused principally on the grassroots of the vegetarian and vegan subcultures, often through qualitative interviews conducted with vegetarians or vegans. Previous research has suggested that media serves as a cultural creator in the propagation of societal norms regarding the treatment of non-human animals [1,37]. In fact, some prior scholarship has examined vegetarian-promoting organizations such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) [1,37–39] and the contours of animal rights advertisements [40]. However, no attention of which we are aware has been paid to the social construction of veganism at a more elite level by cultural creators who wish to promulgate this dietary lifestyle. Second, few researchers have drawn distinctions between vegetarians and vegans. Hence, while these distinctions are important for those within these respective subcultures, the boundaries between different types of vegetarian identities are under-theorized. Our theoretical perspective addresses both oversights in previous research, and it is to those considerations that we now turn.

Our study aims to examine the cultural creation of veganism by elite advocates of this distinctive diet and lifestyle. We use insights from two theoretical perspectives, both of which are situated in the broader tradition of cultural theory. First, we conceive of veganism as a cultural object that is generated by elite cultural creators (prominent advocates of this distinctive diet and lifestyle) and that is “lived” by its grassroots cultural receivers (actual vegans). This understanding of veganism is depicted in Figure 2, which applies Griswold’s cultural diamond [41] to the vegan subculture.

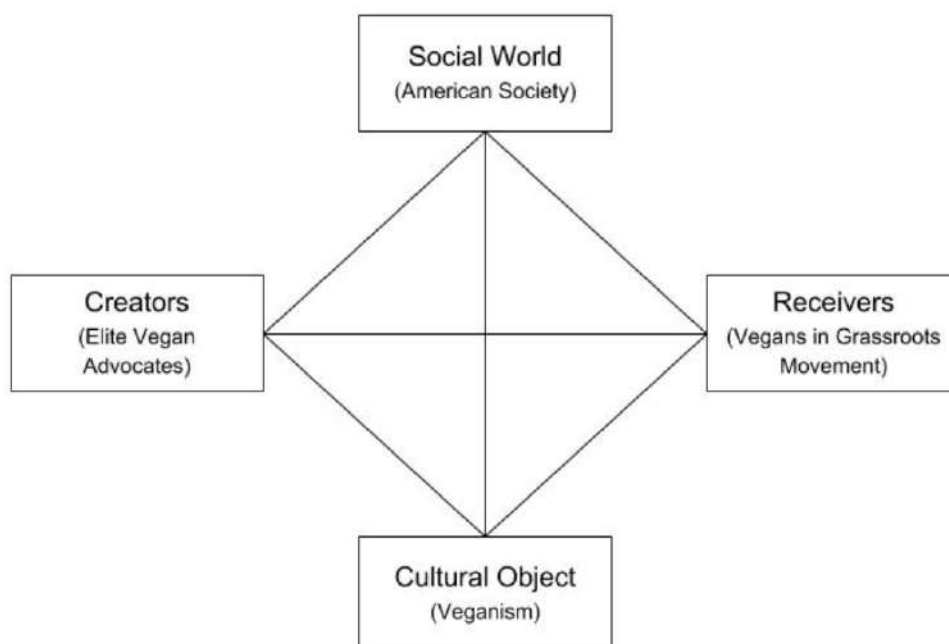


Figure 2. Vegan cultural diamond.

Thus, from a cultural diamond perspective, previous research chiefly emphasizes the grassroots cultural reception of veganism while ignoring elite influences on the creation of this cultural object. To address this oversight, we examine two vegan-promoting documentary films as elite-generated representations of veganism as a cultural object. As such, our analysis of these films illustrates the ways in which prominent advocates of veganism employ distinctive boundary markers—ideological and behavioral representations—to define “authentic” veganism as a cultural object. Furthermore, these films act as widely influential rhetorical devices whose purpose is to disseminate representations of veganism to those within and outside the vegan subculture while providing compelling justifications

for this lifestyle. These films are designed to circulate messages about veganism and what it means to be vegan to a broad, non-vegan audience. As such, these films have the potential to be analyzed as message dissemination tools used within veganism as a new social movement. Our examination of the rhetorical devices in these films addresses their potential recruitment value. By evaluating these films and the processes of elite vegan cultural creation, this study bolsters scholarly understandings of the vegan subculture and the meanings of veganism as promulgated by subcultural elites.

How does cultural creation unfold? Quite often, this form of reality construction is accomplished through the strategic dissemination of claims, often by “moral entrepreneurs” [42] who advocate for a particular vantage point using techniques of persuasion. Claims are designed to render specific depictions of an issue or group to shape broader perceptions [30,43]. Moreover, it is possible for a particular group or event to be portrayed in numerous ways by different claims-makers. Thus, a comparative discourse analysis enables this study to evaluate how the variant claims used by these films—and their moral entrepreneurs—produce distinctive depictions of the vegan subculture.

We also draw on insights from a second variant of cultural theory, namely, subcultural identity theory [44,45]. Subcultural identity theory examines how subcultures employ a technique termed distinctive engagement through which these groups distinguish themselves by establishing boundary markers (e.g., beliefs, practices, rituals, artifacts, language, etc.), while also defining themselves as consonant with select elements of the mainstream culture [44] (p. 93). Thus, subcultural persistence requires a group to sustain particular distinctions that place it in opposition to the cultural mainstream while also selectively embracing elements of mainstream culture to maintain social relevance. In the present study, veganism is best understood as what we call a second-order subculture, a graphic illustration of which can be found in Figure 3 below. Vegetarianism is a first-order subculture that is, in many respects, distinct from the American cultural mainstream. Yet, making sense of veganism requires understanding it as a subculture within the larger subculture of vegetarianism. Consequently, vegan identity is created in reference not only to the broader cultural mainstream of American society, but is defined in relation to (and often against) vegetarianism.

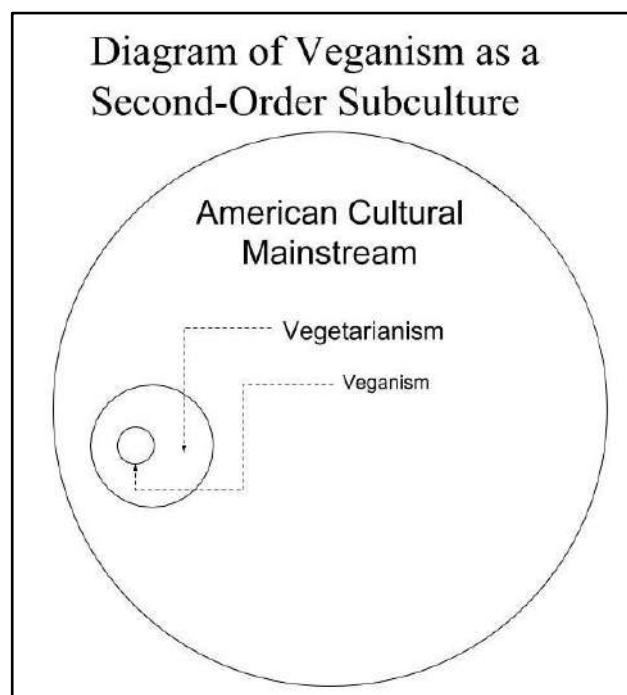


Figure 3. Diagram of veganism as a second-order subculture.

2. Materials and Methods

The method of discourse analysis was used to analyze the depictions, or portrayals, of veganism presented by the two films, *Forks over Knives* (2011) and *Vegucated* (2010). Several analytical viewings, or coding stages, were conducted to identify the broad thematic domains and theme-supporting claims presented in each film. The claims were then analyzed further to categorize them according to their substantive content, underlying rationale, and relation to the broader cultural context, as reported in the Results section. These iterative sets of activities occurred in phases that, while distinct from one another, also built cumulatively toward a comprehensive analysis.

The films *Forks over Knives* and *Vegucated* were chosen as the study's sample based on the following selection criteria widely utilized by qualitative researchers [46]. First, the comparative element of this study required the selection of at least two films centrally focused on veganism for analysis. Adopting a comparative approach helped fulfill the study's objective of capturing a more comprehensive understanding of veganism. Second, the films had to have been produced within the past decade to provide a current representation of the vegan subculture in relation to contemporary American culture. Third, it was essential that units within the sample explicitly discuss the boundary markers (e.g., ideologies and practices) of the vegan subculture. Furthermore, films had to be principally focused on veganism. That is, the films needed to provide information about veganism to the viewer; thus, the documentary film genre was appropriate.

Lastly, the sample had to include films that have been widely viewed and that remain accessible. Both of these films are featured on the subscription-based streaming website Netflix (Los Gatos, CA, USA). *Vegucated* is also featured on the popular free streaming website, Vimeo (New York, NY, USA), and both films are listed for sale and rent on Amazon Instant Video (Seattle, WA, USA) and YouTube (San Bruno, CA, USA), among other online platforms. As of 9 April 2017, *Forks Over Knives* was one of the top 10 documentaries on Amazon's Best Sellers Rank, and had generated over 3000 Amazon customer reviews, which was a small proportion of the number of times the film had been viewed. Similarly, as of the same date, *Vegucated* was in Amazon's top 250 documentaries, and had over 600 customer reviews. Although there are numerous food, health, and cultural documentaries that focus on subjects such as healthy dietary practices or agricultural practices (such as *Cowspiracy* (2014), *Fat, Sick, and Nearly Dead* (2010), *Food, Inc.* (2008), *Food Matters* (2008), and *Earthlings* (2005)), they do not address dietary considerations of veganism. *Forks over Knives* and *Vegucated* were the foremost films screened that adequately met all of the aforementioned criteria.

In line with social constructionism and the claims-making perspective, discourse analysis can be used to obtain "deeper insights into the ideology within [a] text and how language is being used to create social meanings" [47] (p. 238). Discourse "constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people" [48] (p. 358). Therefore, discourse analysis seeks to "examine aspects of the structure and function of language in use... [where] individual words and phrases, and concordances of these can be used to support claims about how grammar works or what words are used to mean" [49] (p. 4).

This method of discourse analysis was applied in the present study to discover the substantive messages conveyed in these films, as well as how the discourse they use supports such messages. In claims-making terms, discourse analysis was used here to unveil the films' portrayal of the vegan subculture, as well as how each film justifies these portrayals. Our approach, then, is generally consistent with the aims of rhetorical analysis in which substantive claims and underlying rationales are both analyzed even as broader social contexts are considered. It is worth noting that our goal is not to render generalizable claims about the vegan subculture. We caution against any effort to generalize based on an analysis of two films, regardless of their wide viewership. What our design can reveal are distinctive claims and rationales for promulgating veganism evident among cultural creators.

Each film was viewed, analyzed, and coded four times. These analytical viewings acted as coding stages to identify and capture the three broad thematic domains discussed below. The use of discourse

analysis requires that the narrative devices of these films be converted into a textual document. Transcribing visual media provides the researcher with an unparalleled familiarity with the texts and the ability to relate verbal claims with sound and visual images. Thematically substantive claims and visual images were transcribed with the researcher taking advantage of the closed captioning provided by *Forks over Knives*. This tool was used to verify the accuracy of the transcription. *Vegucated* did not provide closed captioning; therefore, scenes in *Vegucated* were frequently repeated to ensure the accuracy of transcription. In short, neither of the films' full transcriptions were available to be analyzed; thus, the films were viewed, transcribed, and coded firsthand.

As a multi-layered medium, film uses numerous narrative devices, including language, sound, and visual imagery. The discourse analysis of film is therefore multifaceted and multisensory. For the purpose of this study, discourse analysis guided the extraction of language, sounds, and images used by these films to portray the vegan subculture. The amount of rich data imbued in these films, as well as the detailed transcription process, warranted a sustained analytical effort.

Three analytical categories, or broad thematic domains, were identified in both films: (1) the meaning of veganism (i.e., the definition and key contours of vegan identity); (2) justifications for veganism (i.e., rationales for the adoption of a vegan diet and lifestyle); and (3) the relationship of veganism to the broader (omnivorous) culture within which it is situated (i.e., given the social marginality of veganism, vegan rejoinders against mainstream criticisms).

As the unit of analysis, individual scenes that featured thematically-oriented claims were extracted from the films and recorded on an analytical instrument designed for the coding of these films (coding template available from authors by request). To improve interpretive validity, this instrument was constructed and utilized across six of the eight viewings. The instrument was a digital Excel spreadsheet with columns that read from left to right: "Time," "Claims-maker," "Code," "Claim" (message and/or rationale), and "Visual Images." The first column captured the starting time of a scene featuring a claim. Time was documented to ensure the reliability of the data being recorded as scenes were frequently repeated to safeguard accurate data collection. The "Claims-maker" column noted the person who expressed a claim (and that person's role), except in cases where the film presented textual information without narration, in which case the word "text" was written in the "Claims-maker" column. "Code" referred to the general theme associated with the narrative device being demonstrated (i.e., "Definition," "Motive," "Scientific Information," "Patient Narrative," etc.). The actual narrative claim being made was noted in the "Claim" column. These claims were verbatim transcriptions that were taken directly from the films by the principal researcher (first author). Rationales (claim justifications) were also catalogued in this column. Finally, all visual images that independently presented a claim (e.g., text without narration), as well as those images that worked in tandem with narrative claims, were noted in the "Visual Images" column. In addition to the physical images that were shown, all non-narrative, background sounds and noises that could be heard during the presentation of a claim were also noted within the "Visual Images" column. The notation of visual images, which also included non-narrative background sounds and noises, were neutral, thorough descriptions of the images and sounds being shown and heard. Lastly, a final pass through the data was conducted by sifting through each analytical instrument and highlighting key scenes that exemplified how the film conveyed the particular thematic domain. Each film produced at least two emblematic scenes per thematic domain. Our analytical approach is outlined in Figure 4.

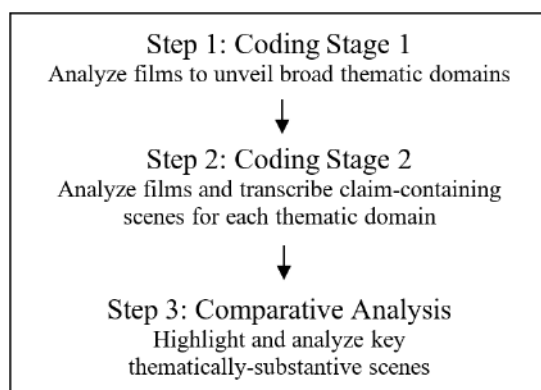


Figure 4. Discourse analysis process.

3. Results

3.1. The Meaning(s) of Veganism: Divergent Definitions

The most striking observation that can be made about *Forks over Knives* (2011) is the general absence of the term “vegan” from this film. This term is used in only one instance throughout the documentary’s entirety. In line with its nutritional and health-oriented nature, *Forks over Knives* predominantly uses the term “whole foods plant-based diet” to depict the film’s primary identity marker. The phrase “plant-based diet” is a less value-laden and more nutrition-oriented term, defined as it is by what one eats rather than who one is. References to a plant-based diet therefore sidestep questions of identity. A definition of “whole foods plant-based diet” is provided by *Forks over Knives* director and narrator Lee Fulkerson:

This means consuming only foods that come mainly from whole, minimally refined plants, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes. It also means avoiding animal-based foods such as meat, dairy, and eggs, as well as processed foods like bleached flour, refined sugars, and oil.

Despite the film’s consistent use of this phrase, however, the dietary regimen it presents is remarkably aligned with the eating practices of vegans. While most vegans may not eliminate all of the processed foods Fulkerson lists, the exclusion of animal products and byproducts, as well as the strict inclusion of plant foods directly reflects literal definitions of the vegan diet [4,6,21,22,34].

In the single case, the word “vegan” is used in an interview with Ultimate Fighting Champion Mac Danzig. Danzig uses this term *both* as a personal identifier *and* as a classification for his dietary regime. In this case, Danzig’s interview illustrates the interchangeable definitions of the terms “vegan” and “plant-based.” Furthermore, the diet Danzig describes is fundamentally similar to Fulkerson’s definition in that both involve abstinence from the consumption of animal products or byproducts, thereby linking, to some degree, the plant-based diet advocated in this film with a vegan diet. While Danzig explicitly describes his diet as vegan, he also explains that he became vegan mainly for medical reasons. This interview serves to demonstrate the skeptical or cautious approach the film *Forks over Knives* adopts toward vegan identity. In short, a health-oriented (rather than ethically-oriented) approach to veganism can be found throughout *Forks over Knives*.

Unlike the health-oriented depiction of a “plant-based diet” in *Forks over Knives*, however, the definition used in *Vegucated* (2010) provides a direct and explicit embrace of the term “vegan.” In *Vegucated*, the term is used repeatedly—well over one hundred times. Moreover, the vegan or vegetarian identity markers presented in these films are rhetorical inversions of one another. While the term “vegan” is a submerged identity marker in *Forks over Knives* that is subordinated to the often used “plant-based” moniker, the prolific number of references to “vegan” in *Vegucated* contrasts with this film’s sparing use of the term “plant-based.”

Early in the film, director and narrator of *Vegucated*, Marisa Miller Wolfson, asks random passersby on a New York City street to define “vegan,” and they do so while looking at the camera. After a number of incorrect and sometimes humorous answers, Wolfson states that, “a true vegan doesn’t eat fish, meat, poultry, dairy, or egg. A vegan also doesn’t buy any clothing made from animals, such as leather, fur, wool, or silk.” Cartoon depictions of these items fill the screen, and as Wolfson lists them off, each item is marked with a large red “X.” A second set of cartoon depictions appears to illustrate the clothing products that “true vegans” avoid. As Wolfson lists these, each of them disappears from the screen.

Wolfson thus attempts to demarcate a strict boundary between an authentic vegan identity and non-vegan identities. This conceptualization of a “true” or authentic vegan has been noted in previous research, typically with reference to a very similar definition presented by the Vegan Society [3,4,6–8,14,23]. The term “true vegan” is not used throughout the film, but the deployment of this term early on in *Vegucated* depicts an all-encompassing vegan standard. Thus, according to this film’s definition, vegans abstain from consuming or using all animal-derived food and clothing products. This claim implies that identifying as vegan entails excluding animal-derived products from one’s life, well beyond the foods a person consumes as part of their diet. The boundary markers are thus constructed not only around the dietary practices of individuals, but also more general consumption habits (shoes, clothing, etc.).

Moreover, the film’s definition and depiction of “vegan” presents the deeper implication that there is an intrinsic reason—or set of reasons—that vegans deploy in foregoing the consumption of animal products *and* animal-derived byproducts. Overall, the undertones of this film’s definition of vegan present the term as more value-laden and ethically motivated than that conveyed in *Forks over Knives*, where it is instead presented as a more pragmatic and strategic dietary choice designed to promote personal health. Based on the characterization of the term “vegan,” its presence throughout *Vegucated* both expresses and reinforces the more holistic meaning of the term vegan than the individually-oriented approach expressed in *Forks over Knives*.

Quite tellingly, the term “plant-based” is deployed only twice in *Vegucated* and is used in very specific instances that reveal it to be only one component of a broader vegan lifestyle. In the first instance, Wolfson (the director/narrator) uses the term “plant-based” when providing a list of the items vegans eat, such as grains, fruits, vegetables, etc. Later Wolfson introduces Dr. Colin Campbell, a nutrition expert also featured in *Forks over Knives*, and briefly discusses his research on chronic diseases in China. In this instance, Wolfson states that Dr. Campbell’s study was conducted on a population that consumed a mostly plant-based diet to understand the link between diet and chronic disease. Its use here distinguishes “plant-based” from “vegan” inasmuch as most Chinese people are not vegan, but instead consume a “mostly plant-based diet.” In both of these instances, *Vegucated* draws an important distinction between “vegan” as a personal identity and “plant-based” as a dietary practice. While the latter is a component of the former, the film again advocates for “true” veganism beyond dietary habits.

Thus, depictions of veganism across these films are dramatically different. The use of the phrase “plant-based diet” and the relative absence of the term “vegan” (with one exception) stresses the nutrition and health orientation of *Forks over Knives*, what is essentially *health veganism*. *Vegucated* relies almost exclusively on the use of the more value-laden term “vegan.” In *Vegucated*, this term is defined quite broadly beyond diet, and essentially argues for what could be called *holistic veganism*.

3.2. Justifying Veganism: Rationales for Change

Discourse analysis involves scrutinizing not only the substantive contours of claims. Rhetorical justifications (rationales supporting specific claims) must also be analyzed. The purpose of both *Forks over Knives* and *Vegucated* is to advocate for the adoption of veganism. As such, both films present particular rationales, or justifications, for their viewers to consider as potential motivators for adoption of either a vegan lifestyle or plant-based diet. While we cannot presume that the justifications offered

in these films neatly translate into personal motivations for becoming vegan, a careful analysis of discursive rationales sheds light on the elite-level cultural production of a vegan identity.

Following closely from its characterization of veganism as a “plant-based diet,” *Forks over Knives* primarily provides health justifications for the adoption of these practices. The film employs numerous nutritional and medical experts to convey the healthiness of a plant-based diet. Not only is the message expressed here that a plant-based diet is healthy, it is depicted as significantly healthier than the standard Western diet. Attempts to support this claim are made, repeatedly, through narration and visual imagery (i.e., article titles and excerpts, graphs, charts, etc.) that cite specific studies and discuss clinically-generated evidence.

The tactic of presenting bar and line graphs to demonstrate the unhealthiness of the Western diet—and animal-based product consumption specifically—can be found throughout the film. For instance, in *Forks over Knives*, Fulkerson provides the following explanation of the bar graph, shown in Figure 5 below, as it appears in the film:

These are the estimated amounts of animal foods produced in nine countries, a figure that’s closely related to animal food consumption. These are the numbers of deaths due to heart disease and cancer in the same countries.

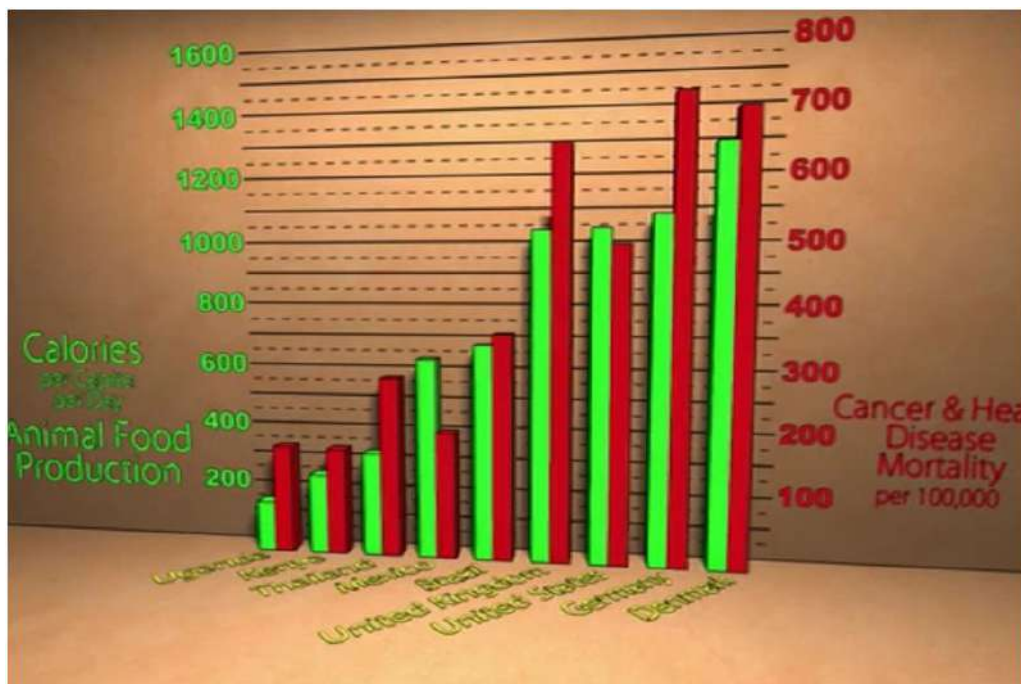


Figure 5. Animal product consumption and mortality rates graph, *Forks over Knives* (2011).

The lime-green bars, which indicate specific nations’ reliance on animal food production, appear at the start of Fulkerson’s explanation. The vibrant red bars, however, do not appear until the start of the second sentence. Together, the graph and Fulkerson’s narration seek to substantiate the argument that the rates of animal product consumption, which is inferred from the countries’ rates of animal food production, are directly associated with increases in cancer and heart disease mortality rates. The bars’ stark color contrast and startling disparity between the shortest bar (Uganda) with the tallest (Denmark), in tandem with Fulkerson’s explanation, are used to provide a vivid justification of the claim that consuming animal products is unhealthy. This information is also designed to illustrate that decreased animal product consumption can be considered healthier.

To lend further credibility to the claim that a plant-based diet is healthier than the standard Western diet, the film also employs narratives from patients who were rewarded with dramatic

health improvements upon changing their diet. Numerous former and current patients describe their health transformations intermittently throughout the film. These patients discuss the previous chronic diseases they overcame through dietary changes, including diabetes, hypertension and high blood pressure, heart disease, and certain cancers.

San'dera Nation, a patient of medical physician and featured *Forks over Knives* expert Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, cheerfully tells the camera that since adopting a plant-based diet, her previous chronic diseases have reversed. She continues the statement by excitedly reiterating her doctor's remark: "Your pancreas is working, [the diabetes is] reversing." Nation also expresses, like many of the other patients, her gratitude and delight with no longer being confined to her previous daily regimen of medications. For instance, another patient, Joey Aucoin, described as having had "over two dozen health problems," expresses his pleasure at being "off the medications." Aucoin's doctor explains that all but one ailment, which is left unstated, was eradicated after his adoption of a plant-based diet. Aucoin speaks in unison with the other patients when he proudly reflects on the dramatic weight loss he experienced and his feeling of increased mental health and overall well-being. These narratives from actual medical patients help underscore the real-world impacts of statistics cited throughout the documentary, thereby putting a face to the numbers, while also legitimizing and validating the film's health justification of a plant-based diet. Though these narratives are told with considerable emotion, they continue to convey the health-focused orientation of the film through rationales of dietary science.

In addition to health justifications, *Forks over Knives* briefly mentions two additional rationales, but largely in passing. A mere two minutes of the entire film is dedicated to discussing the environmental and animal welfare justifications for a plant-based diet. The film presents a few statistics on the environmental impact of consuming animal products, such as the destruction of the Amazon rainforest with deforestation "an area the size of California," explaining that "80 percent of this cleared land is now occupied by livestock." In discussing these rationales further, Fulkerson introduces a representative for those who advance particular justifications apart from health, stating that, "for Gene Bauer ... a deep respect for animals helped him to adopt a plant-based diet." While speaking to the camera, Bauer provides illustrative insight into the justification, with his lush livestock sanctuary farm serving as the backdrop:

The livestock industry is a greater contributor to global warming than the entire transportation industry, according to the United Nations. So, by eating meat, milk, and eggs the way we are, we're harming our own health, we're slaughtering ten billion innocent animals every year in the U.S., and we're destroying the planet.

Although Bauer's statement is set against a bright, cheery milieu, the language he uses is quite evocative. Terms such as "harm," "slaughter," "innocent animals," and "destroy" present a much more emotive and affective claim than what is expressed in majority of the film. At the conclusion of this scene, the film shifts back to its health justification; however, the inclusion of these claims indicates a definitive presence of veganism. While previous research notes that health is the primary motivation for some vegans, the animal welfare and environmental concern justifications are typically deemed more centrally aligned with veganism [3,4,8,14,22]. It is possible that these abbreviated justifications were included to appeal to a wider audience. Regardless, their presence interlaces with more prominent vegan ideologies, and the limited amount of time dedicated to these justifications illustrates the film's focus on presenting itself and its claims as rational rather than affective.

While the primary claim for veganism in *Forks over Knives* is its dietary link with increased health and wellness, *Vegucated* presents a very different set of rationales for the adoption of the vegan diet and lifestyle. The predominant claims of *Vegucated* are animal welfare and health, closely followed by environmental concerns. This film follows three experiment participants, Tesla Lobo, Brian Flegel, and Ellen Mausner, who volunteer as documentary subjects to live as vegans and learn about veganism over the course of six weeks. Collectively, the trio was motivated to participate for health reasons: they wanted to lose weight and desired to look and feel healthy. Similar to *Forks over Knives*, nutrition experts and health statistics are presented to illuminate the healthiness of a vegan diet, especially

compared with the American or Western diet. The participants start and end their journey by visiting Dr. Joel Fuhrman, a family physician and plant-based diet advocate, where they learn about the health benefits of plant-based foods. Dr. Fuhrman also takes the participants' vitals before and after their journey. By the end of the six-week period, each participant had lost a few pounds and their blood work had improved. Additionally, the participants comment throughout the film about feeling healthier and better overall. In following the participants' health journey, this rationally-oriented justification becomes more affective in nature. Furthermore, the health justification, while present, is overshadowed by the highly emotive presentations of ethical and environmental justifications for the adoption of veganism.

In addition to the claim that veganism is superior for one's health, *Vegucated* also presents veganism as better for the environment. The environmental justification is conveyed using statistics, emotive discourse, and footage that illustrate the negative impact the livestock industry has on the ecosystem. Footage used by *Vegucated* shows environmental damage that has occurred because of the livestock and fishing industries. In addition to live-action footage, *Vegucated* also uses animated graphics to demonstrate certain production processes that emit negative ecological impacts. For instance, one such graphic illustrates a cow chewing and gulping water while Wolfson explains the astronomical amount of resources utilized by the livestock industry to produce animal products because of the significant volumes of food and water required to nourish them. Following a statement about the depleting levels of clean water around the world, Wolfson explains that not only do cows drink "fifty gallons of water or more per day," but it also takes a significant amount of water and other resources to produce the food they eat. This claim is designed to convey the negative environmental effects of animal food production while furthering the argument that refraining from animal-derived products is ecologically conscious. Striking statements such as these denote the claim that being vegan is more environmentally sound than non-vegan practices, thereby conveying the environmental justification for veganism.

Beyond personal health and environmental considerations, however, *Vegucated* also pays sustained attention to the ethics of veganism, utilizing multiple narrative devices to convey ethical justifications. The film begins its treatment of this subject by showing the participants' immediate and follow-up reactions to viewing undercover factory farming footage that displays the maltreatment of animals in the livestock industry. The participants were filmed as they sat in a dark room with other unidentified people to watch this undercover footage. A few clips are shown to display the participants' emotional reactions through horrified expressions, uneasy postures, and even crying. Upon their departure from the building, the participants were individually interviewed about what they had just witnessed. The participants expressed a variety of emotions, including horror, disgust, anger, and guilt. All three participants expressed disbelief that they were unaware of such maltreatment prior to viewing the footage. Again, these narrative devices—including the usage of undercover footage that is seen both by the participants watching the footage and those watching the documentary itself, the bodily communication of the participants viewing the footage, and the follow-up interviews of the participants after they had watched the footage—underscore the ethical approach *Vegucated* takes toward veganism.

In addition to this scene, *Vegucated* presents condensed versions of undercover footage of the livestock industry throughout the film. In one instance, livestock sanctuary co-founder Cayce Mell takes the participants to an older slaughterhouse that had been shut down for years. Mell acts as a tour guide for the group as she explains the function of each area and the tools they find there. Throughout the tour, the film shows the viewer undercover footage that depicts the actions explained by Mell. After showing the group a room where livestock such as cows and pigs were "hoisted up" to be slaughtered, footage of a living cow being lifted by rope tied around one leg appears on the screen. As can be seen in the image, the room's floor is blood-stained, and the cow's posture reveals distress and discomfort as this cow is lifted off the ground. As evocative as this image appears to be, it does not convey the cow's long, deep, and distraught moan as the cow's body is dragged across the floor and hoisted off the ground. Images like this are presented to *Vegucated* viewers to convey the claim

that veganism spares animals from such grievous or even horrendous fates. Such footage is intended to evoke distress for viewers, powerfully communicating the ethical justification and highly affective mode of argumentation in this documentary.

Although similar justifications for veganism are presented across both films, they are emphasized in very different ways. Through the various narrative devices they use, both *Forks over Knives* and *Vegucated* present the claim that veganism is better for people, animals, and the environment. These justifications also align with the ideologies held by vegans as cited in previous research. However, the modes through which the films convey these messages are divergent. *Forks over Knives*, despite its brief nod toward ethical and environmental justifications, remains more clinical and rational in emphasizing health-oriented veganism. On the other hand, *Vegucated's* emphasis on ethical and environmental concerns produces a much more affective presentation of holistic veganism that has health benefits coupled with much larger considerations about the welfare of the planet and the animals that inhabit it.

3.3. Vegan Rejoinders to Mainstream Criticisms

Throughout the films, numerous comments that confront misconceptions or stereotypes about veganism and its members are raised and addressed. This dimension of these films reveals how a small marginalized subculture negotiates its non-mainstream status. These rejoinders address the criticisms and negative images of veganism that are common in the omnivorous cultural mainstream. Some of these rejoinders directly address mainstream perceptions or criticisms of vegans. Others imply a stereotype or misconception by via statements that are made in the films (i.e., “I am not...,” “Do I have to be [stereotype of vegan], if I’m vegan?”)

The major rejoinders presented by *Forks over Knives* follow closely from its nutrition and health orientations. For instance, when Fulkerson introduces Mac Danzig, he characterizes the Ultimate Fighting Champion as a “plant-based athlete” who possesses the major qualities of his profession, including “strength, toughness, and endurance.” Danzig elaborates by indicating that he does not fit the vegan stereotype of physical weakness and frailty, and describes himself as having more energy and stamina and “[recovering] better between workouts.” As Danzig explains, “a lot of people, stereotypically speaking, think someone that’s a vegan is like some skinny, hippie type of person.”

Taken together, these claims directly challenge common mainstream views of vegans, particularly those stereotypes of vegans as excessively skinny or light-weight (for similar cultural caricatures, see [50,51]). Therefore, Danzig offers a more culturally attractive vegan identity. He literally embodies a vegan identity that is more healthy and stronger than a non-vegan one. One may even say that Danzig’s self-characterization as a “plant-based athlete” and accompanying narrative provides a competing discourse that intersects with sport and gender (see also [52]), thereby discursively constructing a counter-hegemonic cultural object that positions veganism as more culturally masculine than non-veganism. This counter-hegemonic discourse may run contrary to existing studies that have regarded vegan identity as wholly feminine (e.g., [35,53]), but positioning veganism as masculine may serve to redress existing gender disparities in the adoption of a vegan identity, particularly in light of the fact that vegans are disproportionately women [16,17,22,25–29]. Overall, the film’s inclusion of this statement illustrates its attempt to address negative cultural perceptions of vegans. Rather than addressing a more ethically-oriented stereotype, these rejoinders also demonstrates the film’s health-centered and rational nature.

Similar to Danzig, Rip Esselstyn is introduced as a former “professional triathlete” who “used a plant-based diet to fuel a successful career.” This statement is designed to support the claim that professional athletes, who require high-nutrient intake, operate optimally while consuming a plant-based diet. Esselstyn left his athletic career and became a firefighter, where conventional stereotypes of manhood and proving one’s masculinity are rampant. He states that “guys associate being manly with eating meat,” and this pressure is “exponentially so” as a firefighter. Esselstyn emphasizes the importance of taking personal responsibility for one’s diet and explains how a poor

diet can lead to firefighter fatalities. To resist the broader cultural perception of masculinized meat consumption, *Forks over Knives* features Esselstyn climbing up a fire pole, while shouting, “Real. Men. Eat. Plants! Real. Men. Eat. Plants!”

This scene critiques the gendered view of dietary habits in the Western world, most notably, the feminization of veganism (often noted in previous research) [17,22,24,31]. Esselstyn’s statement directly challenges the idea that eating meat means being masculine, and contrastingly argues that eating *plants* is masculine. Emphasizing the definition of a “real man” and “personal responsibility,” Esselstyn works to redraw the boundaries that constitute “real manhood.” He does so through the aforementioned gender performance, namely, climbing a fire pole, which is a nearly impossible feat with excess bodyweight or lack of muscle. This oppositional discourse is further underscored by the unlikely fashion in which Esselstyn navigates the masculinized world of firefighting, having “used a plant-based diet to fuel a successful career.” And the stressing of Esselstyn’s pre-firefighter occupation, that is, as a former professional athlete, is leveraged to give yet additional credence to the athletic advantages of veganism. Esselstyn is nothing short of a moral entrepreneur for veganism, albeit health veganism.

A third rejoinder in *Forks over Knives* is presented by Dr. Colin Campbell, one of the film’s prominently featured experts. Dr. Campbell directly challenges the charge that humans need food from animal-based products for their protein. Although he concedes once holding this misconception as well, he explains his change of heart: through his research as a nutrition scientist, Dr. Campbell found that “[by] eating whole foods, it’s virtually impossible to be protein deficient without being calorie deficient.” This direct rejoinder asserts that, contrary to popular belief, a person would not be deprived of essential nutrients as a strict vegan. In fact, the vast majority of *Forks over Knives* portrays strict adherence to a plant-based diet as the exact *opposite* of being nutrient-deprived. The film repeatedly argues that a whole foods plant-based diet is exceptionally healthier for humans, as opposed to a diet whose main component is animal-derived products.

Similar to *Forks over Knives*, *Vegucated* presents a professional athlete, Kenneth Williams, who discusses his diet and workout regimen with one of the vegan documentary subjects, Flegel. As a “prize-winning bodybuilder and passionate vegan,” Williams explains that getting adequate protein is not about “the quantity, it’s the quality.” The film presents a photograph of Williams holding up a large woven basket of fruits and vegetables wearing a black t-shirt with the word “VEGAN” in bold on the front. In using the phrase “passionate vegan” and by presenting this photo, it is clear that Williams is a staunch advocate for veganism. The conversation between Williams and Flegel, which focuses on how to acquire protein as a vegan athlete, makes it quite clear that the film is conveying the same rejoinder presented in *Forks over Knives*: vegans are not nutrient-deprived and can even thrive as professional athletes. Yet, unlike *Forks over Knives*, *Vegucated* proudly embraces the vegan label when offering this critical rejoinder.

As multiple athletes are enlisted to give credence to the adoption of a vegan identity, it is also worth noting the importance that both films place on sport and diet. In these two films, both present professional athletes as proof that one can be both vegan and athletic. In a more implicit fashion, both Danzig and Esselstyn in *Forks over Knives* and Williams in *Vegucated* illustrate that vegans can be not only athletic but also can be professional athletes, thereby forcefully addressing mainstream stereotypes of vegans as lacking in competitive athletic achievement.

Interestingly, *Vegucated* presents an additional rejoinder to challenge the cultural critique of inadequate nutrition from a vegan diet, albeit from a very different angle than *Forks over Knives*. After meeting with Dr. Fuhrman at his medical office, all three *Vegucated* participants (documentary subjects) are invited to his home to try vegan food cooked by professional chef, Robin Jeep. Chef Jeep provides the group with multiple courses of vegan items, including visually appealing beet cake topped with cashew whipped cream for dessert. The scene depicts the participants and family members of Dr. Fuhrman tasting the food with expressions of delight, gratified moans, and wide smiles. Despite her stated dislike for vegetable-based dishes, participant Lobo finally succumbs to enjoying the dessert,

proclaiming, “Look! I finished it!” Dr. Fuhrman explains that it is essential to try different foods to see what you will and will not like.

Dr. Fuhrman’s statement as well as this scene in general criticize the mainstream critique that being vegan entails a severe limitation of dietary options. Rather than conceptualizing veganism as an identity defined by limits (such as foregoing meat, eggs, dairy, or all animal products altogether), being vegan instead opens up a wide horizon of new dietary options. As opposed to being deprived of tasty food choices, *Vegucated* illustrates that it is easy to find delicious vegan items that expand rather than restrict one’s culinary prospects.

Lastly, *Vegucated*, like *Forks over Knives*, addresses the culturally accepted idea that being vegan somehow interferes with the expression of one’s gender identity, particularly for men. *Vegucated* director and host Wolfson takes her three documentary subjects to a vegan clothing and accessories store called “Moo Shoe.” While in the store, Flegel (a male documentary subject) tries on a faux-leather jacket and exclaims, “There ain’t nothing girly about being a vegan. If I had this jacket, I’d be like the most desirable man in the city because I would look like a bad boy. But then it’s like *sensitive*, you know?” While speaking to the camera, Flegel pulls the jacket backward to show the vegan authentication tag and emphasizes the word “sensitive.” His statement challenges the mainstream feminization of veganism (Flegel is both “bad boy” and “sensitive”), even as it situates veganism firmly around relations of desire (“I’d be the most desirable”). At the same time, this discourse draws on ethical justifications of veganism by presuming that he will be perceived as more attractive to women because he does not consume animal products, thereby underscoring both his masculine sensitivity and his altruism. This discourse is in line with emerging gender ideologies that have been described as “new manhood” (see [54]).

Overall, these rejoinders combat mainstream charges of deprivation and emasculation that are often associated with a vegan identity. While Williams’ discussion about protein in *Vegucated* is linked to health considerations, the concept of deprivation has emotive overtones. Moreover, the film presents these depictions to highlight that being vegan does not necessarily mean culinary sacrifice and blandness, and even constructs a counter-hegemonic discourse that veganism serves to bolster expand than restrict one’s dietary regimes. Furthermore, *Vegucated*’s discussion of the gendered nature of veganism is more aligned with the ethical and affective justifications rather than the rational or health-oriented rejoinders present in *Forks over Knives*. *Vegucated* also emphasizes its holistic depiction of veganism by challenging negative perceptions of the vegan diet (deprivation of nutrients and food choices) and lifestyle (vegan clothing). Therefore, the rejoinders presented in both films combat similar misconceptions but with different points of emphasis.

4. Discussion

Using insights from cultural theory, we analyzed two documentary films: *Forks over Knives* (2011) and *Vegucated* (2010). We explored three facets of vegan identity cultural creation: definitions of veganism, rationales for the adoption of and adherence to a vegan diet and lifestyle, and vegan subcultural negotiation within the broader cultural mainstream. Sharp contrasts between these two films surfaced for each one of these analytical domains. Vegan identity was defined in largely consumptive, dietary terms in *Forks over Knives*, a film in which the word “vegan” was uttered only once. Rather, this film generally described veganism as a “plant-based diet.” We called this approach *health veganism* because it focused on dietary choices rather than broader political or ethical commitments. By contrast, *Vegucated* embraced the “vegan” label throughout the documentary. This film defined veganism in a multipronged fashion in terms of diet and lifestyle, animal welfare concerns, and environmental consciousness. We called this approach *holistic veganism*.

Where justifications for the adoption of a vegan lifestyle were concerned, health veganism rested on medical arguments about the putative superiority of a plant-based diet for health and longevity. These rhetorical devices were accompanied by a didactic and rational mode of argumentation, such that supporting evidence for the adoption of a plant-based diet was often presented in the form of charts,

graphs, and other types of scientific claims. The rational (even utilitarian) mode of argumentation for health veganism found in *Forks over Knives* also emphasized the personal health benefits of a plant-based diet. Furthermore, while additional research would be needed to examine documentary production processes, it could be argued that this film is less critical of key ideological elements of Western culture (e.g., the logic of capitalism, the objectification of animals and the environment). In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that health veganism is more likely than holistic veganism to become incorporated into mainstream culture over time. Health veganism resonates with key facets of the cultural mainstream (e.g., utilitarian individualism) and is less critical of established institutions, values, lifestyles (e.g., capitalism, science, and fitness). Health veganism is, in the end, apolitical and certainly not radical.

Holistic veganism featured in *Vegucated* mixed rational argumentation with affective motivators. Like *Forks over Knives*, *Vegucated* emphasized the health benefits of veganism while supporting these claims with scientific and medical rationales. However, *Vegucated* also enlisted the discourse of animal rights, replete with graphic depictions of animal cruelty designed to evoke emotional responses in the documentary subjects and the film's viewers. Thus, in *Vegucated*, rational argumentation was interwoven with affective rhetorical devices (poignant audio, stirring music) and moving visual images. Moreover, *Vegucated* provided vivid depictions of environmental degradation designed to elicit emotional reactions among viewers. Where both animal and environmental welfare are concerned, *Vegucated* emphasized the altruistic implications of dietary and lifestyle choices for other creatures and the planet at large.

Finally, each of these films offered distinct rejoinders to mainstream cultural criticisms of veganism. The promotion of health veganism in *Forks over Knives* focused mostly on the nutritional soundness of a plant-based diet by seeking to rebut mainstream criticisms of a vegan diet as nutritionally deprived, emasculating, and badly suited for an active lifestyle. In that film, medical experts and competitive athletes (e.g., a professional mixed-martial arts champion, a triathlete) were used to redress these criticisms. At the same time, *Forks over Knives* adopted mainstream cultural discourses of health, fitness, and medicine to market veganism as a sound and reasonable alternative to the conventional American diet. Hence, health veganism adopted a more conciliatory posture toward the cultural mainstream with its focus on physical wellness and its general avoidance of larger political and ethical debates related to the production or consumption of food.

For its part, *Vegucated's* emphasis on holistic veganism left it tackling many of the same dietary criticisms of the vegan lifestyle as articulated in *Forks over Knives*, while also addressing other critiques related to vegan-inspired animal rights activism and environmentalism. *Vegucated* charted three documentary subjects' conversion journeys to veganism by recounting the significant physiological changes they experienced. Yet, consistent with holistic veganism, *Vegucated* also traced their heightened awareness of animal cruelty in the livestock industry and the environmental toll resulting from the mass production of meat. *Vegucated* viewers were therefore invited to recognize that these critiques of the food industry are not as outlandish as they might otherwise seem. *Vegucated* also mainstreamed its portrayal of veganism by using a presentation format that blended documentary filmmaking with reality television, thereby creating a personal connection between the documentary subjects and the viewers.

There are a number of noteworthy conclusions and implications to draw from this study. First, our investigation provides insight into the broad range of vegan boundaries and identity markers. Both films subtly position veganism as what might best be understood as a second-order subculture (or sub-subculture) that is distinct from—and, in many respects, superior to—the broader subculture of vegetarianism. Core discursive boundaries of a vegan identity include ethics and lifestyles, such as the incorporation of a plant-based diet and the belief that veganism is both healthier and more ethical than vegetarianism and the standard Western diet (though whether such comparisons are implicit or explicit depends on the cultural creator). Other boundaries of a vegan identity include foregoing animal products and byproducts such as the buying of leather, fur, wool, or silk; while the participants

in *Vegucated* abstained from the buying of such products, it is unknown if those depicted in *Forks over Knives* did the same. The absence of this issue in *Forks over Knives* is nevertheless telling.

The films' definitions of veganism reveal that the key contours of a vegan identity may be both numerically diverse and frequently contested. Veganism is a polysemous identity, such that various dietary and lifestyle practices may be associated with it, including the elimination of animal-based foods, and even the exclusion of other animal-derived products. In offering justifications for veganism, the films also present different ideological tenets that may animate the adoption of a vegan identity. Health rationales for the adoption of a plant-based diet are less political. While *Forks over Knives* is critical of government subsidization of low-quality food, its criticism is centered on the adverse health consequences of this government policy rather than the environmental consequences of subsidizing industrial livestock production. *Forks over Knives* could also be seen as promoting a self-interested form of veganism focused on the improvement of one's own physical health and longevity, with little attention to animal welfare or environmental concerns.

In contrast to *Forks over Knives'* health veganism, the holistic veganism in *Vegucated* argues for a more altruistic orientation aimed at reducing animal cruelty and environmental degradation. Holistic veganism is also more inherently political, inasmuch as *Vegucated* adopts a bolder oppositional posture toward the livestock industry and, at least implicitly, the excesses of capitalist profiteering in this industry. The motivations for adopting health, ethical, and environmental veganism have been found in previous interview-based research [4]. Our study adds to this literature by underscoring how these orientations are not only observed at the grassroots of the vegan subculture, but are very much a part of the cultural creation (production) of veganism by its more ardent elite advocates.

Second, this study offers implications for veganism as a social movement. Previous research has observed a convergence in motivations among vegans over time. While some may identify as vegan for primarily health reasons, such as those in *Forks over Knives*, they often gradually come to identify with either of the other commonly held rationales stated here, namely, animal rights advocacy or environmental concern [8,19–22]. This combination of films, then, reflects a shrewd social movement strategy of graduated recruitment. A person's initial point of entry into veganism may relate largely to dietary concerns, thereby explaining the greater popularity of *Forks over Knives*, especially in relation to *Vegucated*. However, once individuals become situated within the vegan subculture, they may then be exposed to other rationales for (or benefits of) the adoption of a vegan lifestyle. Therefore, veganism initially pursued as a diet may ultimately serve as a springboard to advocacy in the realms of environmental concern and animal welfare.

Third, there are important theoretical implications to this study. While we have certainly paid sustained attention to the cultural distinctions that mark veganism as different from the American mainstream, these films also selectively appropriate key elements from mainstream culture to underscore the relevance and reasonable nature of veganism. This approach resonates with the processes understood to constitute subcultural identity negotiation [44] as well as boundary maintenance of a vegan identity [36]. For instance, *Forks over Knives* presents veganism in a didactic, clinical manner focused on health in a way that resonates with the nutritional science discourse that currently pervades much of American society. Moreover, such a presentation corresponds with cultural discourses of health, individualism, and responsibility designed to instill viewers' confidence regarding the realistic prospects for sustaining a vegan identity through a plant-based diet. By contrast, the reality television format of *Vegucated* invites viewers to form an attachment to this film's documentary subjects as they travel on their conversion-like journey from a conventional American diet and lifestyle toward veganism. And somewhat reminiscent of the television mockumentary, *Vegucated* combines the treatment of emotionally riveting issues with more light-hearted and uplifting moments, often by way of candid personal reflections spoken by the documentary subjects directly to the viewer.

In this respect, our analysis reveals that a subculture's mainstreaming of a marginal lifestyle can occur through a combination of substantive elements (film content, articulation of claims) and stylistic components (rationales, modes of argumentation). In both of these films, stylistic elements

of mainstream cinematic culture are utilized to situate the films within the broader genre of critical documentaries (e.g., *Sicko* (2007), *Food, Inc.* (2008)). As such, these vegan-promoting documentaries can adopt a posture critical of the conventional American diet and lifestyle while doing so in a fashion that viewers are likely to find reasonable and recognizable. The novelty of the content is counterbalanced by the use of familiar media and filmmaking techniques.

Taken together, the films present multiple justifications for being vegan, including health considerations, animal rights advocacy, and environmental concerns. The films' documentary subjects exhibit different motivations for pursuing veganism, but all are engaged in a significant amount of boundary work given the marginal positioning of this identity in American society. Hence, this second-order subculture is portrayed as culturally diverse and respectful of individual pathways into this community. The rejoinders presented by vegans to combat mainstream criticisms, misconceptions, or stereotypes are an attempt to normalize mainstream perceptions of vegans. In presenting such rejoinders, the films actively work to engage the mainstream by seeking to correct erroneous ideas about veganism (e.g., provides insufficient protein, emasculates men through a lack of meat consumption). In short, both films aim to destigmatize this distinctive identity.

There is, of course, an important limitation to our study and a corresponding caveat. In this study, we have intentionally opted to provide an in-depth analysis of two vegan-promoting documentaries. In making this choice, we have privileged depth of understanding over considerations about breadth, generalizability, and the like. Hence, we hasten to caution against any attempt to apply our findings in a broad and generalized fashion to "the vegan subculture." In fact, our findings indicate that there are diverse motives associated with veganism (health, environmental welfare, social justice, etc.). The movement often called "veganism" is characterized by fragmentation. For this reason, some prefer the dietary label, "plant-based" to the term "vegan." Just as individuals may be motivated to become vegan for different reasons, our study reveals that there are diverse justifications that leading documentarians of veganism enlist to disseminate messages about this lifestyle. We are well aware that an analysis of two documentary films—no matter how widely viewed the documentaries or how in-depth the analysis—does not provide a sound argument for generalizing our findings and we strongly caution against doing so. Moreover, strategies used to disseminate veganism may vary even more widely among leading advocates than our study has indicated, such that techniques used by documentarians may be different than those employed by other cultural creators (e.g., activists affiliated with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). In short, we believe our study significantly expands the knowledge base about veganism, but there remains much additional work to be done.

Among fruitful directions for future research to emerge from our study, scholars might examine the extensive extra-cinematic discourse that circulates around each of these films. Both *Forks over Knives* and *Vegucated* have film-supporting websites. Testimonials from these supporting sites, along with viewer commentary available through online viewing platforms (e.g., Netflix, YouTube), could be used to examine in more detail the cultural creator and receiver linkages that are part of the cultural diamond as well as the social world through which such messages are conveyed. Viewer commentary would also provide an excellent study of reception that complements existing documentary analysis, such as the one provided here.

In addition, to what degree have these films expanded the vegan subculture among the American population? Up-to-date survey research is needed to determine the proportion of the contemporary population that identify as vegan or consume a plant-based diet, and the catalysts—cinematic and otherwise—for such lifestyle changes. This study reveals that consideration should be given to the terminology used in such survey items. For instance, some people may consume a plant-based diet, but may not self-identify as vegan. Moreover, inquiring about consumer habits such as the wearing of leather or the use of other animal byproducts can draw useful distinctions between different types of vegans. Nonetheless, this study has illustrated the diverse ways in which vegan identity has been defined and disseminated from an elite advocacy perspective.

The existing though limited amount of scholarship on veganism also demonstrates the need for a more thorough account of the pathways through which people come to adopt a vegan identity. As we have demonstrated here, a vegetarian is not equivalent to a vegan. And vegetarianism may not always be an intermediate step on the path toward veganism, particularly for those drawn to the health benefits of a plant-based diet because health veganism does not require a transformation in political and ethical sensibilities. It is also possible that viewers of these documentaries who have vegan friends are the most motivated to move toward veganism given the two-fold impetuses—media messaging and social network integration—to pursue this lifestyle. We cannot answer such questions, but they are certainly worthy of continued scrutiny. Until such research is conducted, our study demonstrates that veganism is a movement marked by diverse identities and ideological dexterity.

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