



'Real men grill vegetables, not dead animals': Discourse representations of men in an online vegan community

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines discourse representations of men in a large online vegan community. The analysis reveals a set of discourses which provide oppositional representations of vegan and non-vegan men, wherein the former is aligned with hegemonic masculine norms and the latter represented as transgressing or falling short of these norms. We interpret these discourses as providing means for the forum members to resist societal-level discourses which frame veganism and vegan men as feminine or 'unmanly', while also performing a social support function of reassuring posters who express concerns about how their veganism may impact how others perceive them and their masculinity. However, we also argue that such discourses can be considered problematic from an ecofeminist perspective, as they orient to and reinforce a hegemonic gender hierarchy which has enabled, and continues to enable, gender oppression, animal exploitation and the broader destruction of the natural world.

1. Introduction

Veganism, as defined by *The Vegan Society*, can be considered 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' (*The Vegan Society*, n. d.). There are currently around 78 million people following a vegan lifestyle worldwide (Meyer 2020). Most vegans live in the global West and come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Vegan Society 2016). However, the most striking demographic trend underlying veganism relates to sex, as almost two-thirds (63 %) of vegans are female (ibid.). Humanities and social science researchers have explained this gendered dynamic by pointing to the apparent incongruity between cultural perceptions around veganism on the one hand and normative masculine or male identities on the other. However, the intersection between veganism and masculinity has yet to be subjected to (critical) discursive inquiry.

This study addresses this gap by examining the discourses used to represent men within 'the largest vegan community on the internet', r/vegan subreddit. Specifically, we examine how representations of vegan

and non-vegan men intersect with broader discourses around veganism in this digital domain. This article is divided into five sections. Following this Introduction, Section 2 lays the theoretical groundwork for the study by introducing the concepts of gender and (hegemonic) masculinity, including considering how these relate to veganism. Section 3 sets out our methodology, describing our data and the approach we take to analysing it, which draws on Critical Discourse Analysis and ecofeminism. Our findings are reported in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5, which also provides a concluding summary of our main arguments and reviews the study's strengths and limitations.

2. Background

2.1. Gender and masculinity/ies

In recent years, gender has become widely understood as a social construct – a set of expectations created by society regarding what it means to be, for example, a man or a woman. Butler (1990:17) argued that gender expectations often become dichotomised and polarised, and entail 'the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female"'. Such expectations form part of what

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Butler (1990:33) describes as the 'rigid regulatory frame', wherein certain attributes and characteristics and, as argued by Milani (2015:11), 'certain bodily shapes, poses, facial expressions, haircuts, clothing, activities, linguistic features, and styles of speech' are continuously and consistently attributed to a particular sex. Among the broad range of practices that have become gendered is eating (Lupton 1996). This is a social practice that is of particular relevance to the present study and something we return to in the next section.

Following the view of gender set out above, masculinity can be understood as comprising various characteristics and forms of expression which become culturally attributed to men. Because masculinity interacts with other socio-cultural variables, such as age, social class and sexuality, the concept is a pluralised one. As such, it is possible to speak of different forms of masculinity or *masculinities* (Johnson 1997; Milani 2015). As some masculinities are viewed within society as being more desirable or prestigious – being tied to societal 'ideals, fantasies, and desires' about what it means to be a man (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:838; see also Connell 1995) – they gain a hegemonic – i.e. dominant – cultural status. In global Western contexts, the performance of hegemonic masculinity has been interpreted in expressions of such qualities as autonomy, bravery, physical strength, resourcefulness, the suppression of emotions and – in some cases – the enactment of violence (Baker 2008:123-124).

Through repetition, social practices that encode qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity become naturalised, meaning that they gain the appearance of being natural and commonsensical. Since hegemonic masculinity inevitably entails the subjugation of other forms of gender expression – including other forms of masculinity and, correspondingly, people who identify with these – the naturalisation of hegemonic masculinity sustains and stabilizes unequal power relations. The gender order – that is, the power structure that sustains and is itself sustained by the dominance of hegemonic masculinity over all other forms of gender expression – can thus be conceptualized as a hierarchy with hegemonic masculinity, and the values and qualities it encapsulates, placed at the top. All other gender identities are thus situated underneath, granted less power and viewed as digressing the hegemonic norm to varying extents.

2.2. Veganism and masculinity

As noted in Section 1, among the specific social practices that can become gendered and attributed to the expression of hegemonic masculinity is eating. Lupton (1996:104) argues that '[t]here is clearly a gendered division of food in contemporary western societies, incorporating a number of assumptions concerning types of food men prefer and those women prefer'. Meat consumption specifically is normatively linked to hegemonic masculinity (Lupton 1996; Adams 1990, 2003), being able to index its expressive attributes, for example the suppression of emotionality and assertion of dominance over others, where the entitlements of one eclipse the rights of all others (Connell 1995). As Fox (1999:27) points out, 'meat is a highly visible reminder and reinforcer of patriarchal control in all of its manifestations'.

Through its rejection of scripts cited in the expression of hegemonic masculinity (i.e. the consumption of animals, dominance over the natural environment) and its ethical dimension, being imbued with attributes normatively associated with femininity (i.e. emotionality and empathy), veganism is hypothesised to run counter to many of the core aspects of hegemonic masculinity described above. The transgression of the gender order in the case of vegan men is demonstrated in research which examines how their masculinity is perceived. Thomas (2016), for example, examined how the masculinity of omnivorous, vegetarian and vegan men is assessed, finding that vegan men are viewed as less masculine, particularly when following a vegan lifestyle by choice.

The tangible influence of the rigid regulatory frame on the gendering of veganism can be observed in how veganism is discussed in the media, wherein emphasis is placed on those aspects of veganism that are

normatively linked to masculinity, while those normatively linked to femininity become obscured. Brady and Ventresca (2014:316), for example, observe how favourable media reporting of veganism and/or vegan men engages in rhetorical work which ensures that aspects of vegan men's subjectivity 'cohere with, and even reinforce, dominant masculinity', for instance by emphasising the men's rationality and physicality. Likewise, Johnson (2011) observes the emphasis placed on certain expressive attributes of hegemonic masculinity, including physicality, virility and compulsory heterosexuality, in US health magazines and books promoting veganism to men. Wright (2015) observes the media construction of health-conscious vegan men, or 'hegans'. In this context, veganism is observed to be framed as a rational choice with concerns around physicality forming the main basis for what informs dietary and lifestyle practices.

An emerging body of research has explored self-reported accounts of veganism and masculinity. Greenbaum and Dexter (2018) and Mycek (2018) carry out such studies, discussing issues surrounding masculinity and veganism with 20 vegan men. Both studies point to the fact that, while the vegan men often attempt to engage with the gender order, they do so by masculinising practices which are normatively associated with femininity (e.g. framing compassion as a form of rebellion). Greenbaum and Dexter (2018) label this type of process as the performance of 'hybrid masculinity' – that is, 'the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities' (Bridges & Pascoe 2014:246).

Greenbaum and Dexter's (2018) and Mycek's (2018) studies thus start to interrogate how vegan men position themselves in relation to issues associated with gender and veganism, including vegan eating practices. However, both studies rely on elicited data and, as noted by the researchers themselves, are based on relatively homogeneous groups of research participants (mainly white and usually heterosexual men who have been educated to graduate level). There is considerable scope, therefore, to investigate the relationship between veganism and masculinity as it is discursively constructed in more naturalistic contexts, and by a wider – and likely more diverse – range of discourse participants. Online contexts such as the one considered in the present study, r/vegan subreddit, offer promising sites for such investigation of multi-vocal representation of men, masculinity and veganism, bringing together as they do a diverse and geographically dispersed set of discourse participants. Furthermore, since platforms such as Reddit have been observed to provide space for the establishment of communities or networks (Wolf 2015), as well as the negotiation and propagation of the broader goals of movements such as veganism (Wrenn 2017), the paper also interrogates the role of this online platform in creating, maintaining and/or challenging ideas around gender and veganism through discourse, and considers what the broader social consequences of this might be.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

In this study, we zoom in on the discussion of men, masculinity and veganism observed in the specific context of the social media platform, Reddit. Reddit, as discussed by Squirrel (2019), brings together the affordances of social media, including user-generated content, networked audiences, online message boards, anonymity, volunteer moderation and subject specificity. Reddit importantly provides space for affiliation, where the interests of its users, 'redditors', become topicalised under specific subsections of the platform, i.e. subreddits. There are currently millions of subreddits focusing on topics of interest of their specific users (Metrics for Reddit, n.d.). This includes the r/vegan subreddit which, at the time of writing, has around 536,000 members. The issue of whether the term 'community' can be used in relation to contexts such as r/vegan subreddit has attracted some debate in recent years

(for discussion, see Panek et al. 2018). Squirrell (2019) convincingly proposes the consideration of online groups' self-perception and self-reference when considering whether they can be described using this term. In the case of the r/vegan subreddit, there is certainly evidence of users employing the term 'community' self-referentially, including in the title of the forum.

In engaging with the notion of how this online community discusses and represents men, particularly in relation to veganism and notions of masculinity, rather than attempt to closely analyse all r/vegan subreddit threads, for practical purposes we decided to focus on threads that would be most likely to contain explicit occasionings of relevant representational discourses (introduced in the next section). Specifically, we used the website search function to identify and then manually scrape all threads containing mentions of the words *man*, *men*, *male* or *males* at least once in their title and/or three or more times across the thread's constituent posts. This amounted to 14 threads, including 1,127 posts published between 2014 and 2020. A consequence of this approach is that our data does not necessarily capture threads in which men are represented more implicitly. However, it does at least represent all instances in which men might be judged to be 'topicalised' in the discussion in some way, as opposed to just being mentioned in passing.

Following Eysenbach and Till's (2001) recommendations for qualitative research on internet communities, we judged this website to be a public online space, due to its large number of users and the open access to its content. Nevertheless, we have removed any mentions of names, locations and other information by which posters' offline identities may be identified. The anonymity of this public forum means that we cannot be certain of the identities of any of the forum users, including their gender identities, nor whether they do in fact identify as vegans. However, this does not hinder our analysis, as it is not the users themselves that are the object of our study but, rather, the discourses they draw upon and propagate in their posts. In this sense, we are interested in the ecology of gendered discourses around men that characterise this particular online environment, regardless of the posters' demographic characteristics. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham.

3.2. Analytical approach

Our identification of the discourses used to represent men in the r/vegan subreddit was guided by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough 2015). CDA is broadly a perspective on discourse analysis which combines close analysis of linguistic choices with theoretically informed accounts of context in order to elucidate the processes through which language and discourse (re)produce social practices and privilege certain practices over others. In this study, we subjected all 14 threads, including their constituent posts, to a qualitative CDA in which we focused on the presence and functions of gendered discourses used to represent vegan and non-vegan men. For this purpose, we adopted Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional approach to CDA, underpinned by a broadly social constructionist view of discourses which, following Sunderland (2004:6), we take to mean 'ways of seeing the world, often with reference to relations of power and domination'. From this perspective, '[i]deology can [...] be seen as the cultural materialist antecedent of the post-structuralist use of discourse, and [...] discourse can be seen as carrying ideology' (*ibid.*). Gendered discourses, then, are those discourses which carry ideologies relating to gender, and which function to establish the 'boundaries of social practice through which appropriate gendered behaviour is regulated', providing the parameters through which people are 'represented or expected to behave in particular gendered ways' (Sunderland 2004:21, original emphasis), as per the notion of the rigid regulatory frame. It is through discourse that certain types of men and masculinities become valued, while others are devalued, all in line with and contributing towards the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity (as discussed earlier). Importantly, as well as being the subject of such discourses, the language users in our data can

also 'use discourses themselves, "drawing on", "invoking", "producing", "reproducing" and even "inserting themselves" within discourses' (Sunderland 2004:6, original emphasis).

Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional approach involves analysing discourse at three levels: (i.) the textual level; (ii.) discourse practice; and (iii.) social practice. Analysis at the first level involves identifying the linguistic structures within texts through which discourses are entextualized. In this study, our analysis of discourses focuses on identifying linguistic choices which offer repeated representations (and with that, evaluations) of men and men's actions. In particular, we set out to identify discourses entextualised through linguistic choices respecting nomination and predication (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). The former relates to how men are named and referred to, while the latter relates to how they are described and what qualities or characteristics are attributed to them. A nomination strategy might therefore involve referring to a man using terms such as 'man', 'boy' or even 'bitch', while a predicational strategy could involve describing men in terms of qualities they possess (e.g. being 'real') or in terms of actions or processes of which they can be the agent or recipient (Brookes and Baker 2021). Nomination and predication strategies, and accordingly the discourses they invoke and propagate, can be articulated through a wide range of linguistic choices. Therefore, we took an inductive approach, broadly aligned to that advocated within grounded theory (see Johnson 2014), allowing for the consideration of a wide range of linguistic features which could contribute to nomination and predication and which have informed previous poststructuralist critical discourse research on gender (e.g. Mills 1997; Sunderland 2004; Baker 2008). This includes lexical choices pertaining to nouns used to denote men, verbs denoting processes attributed to men, and adjectives and adverbs which describe men and the processes attributed to them. Yet it also involves the consideration of pragmatic phenomena (i.e. humour, implicature and sarcasm) and rhetorical devices (i.e. metaphor, juxtaposition and narratives), which perform both a representational but also evaluative function. On a practical note, individual posts were analysed and coded for the gendered discourses they were interpreted to contain. Multiple codes could be applied to a single post. Both authors analysed the data independently before sharing analyses and agreeing on interpretations.

At the second level outlined by Fairclough, i.e. discourse practice, we consider the contexts in which the posts containing gendered discourses were written. This informs our interpretations of the functions of the discourses in context, for which we consider preceding posts to which the discourses are responding and subsequent posts which follow those discourses, as well as wider observable community norms.

The aim of CDA is not only to describe discourses but to also explain and critique the social and ideological conditions which both give rise to and are enabled by those discourses. This brings us to the third level of Fairclough's approach, sociocultural practice, at which point we set out to explain how the discourses and texts under analysis relate to, by both reflecting and indeed constituting, the wider society in which they are situated. At this point, CDA often becomes an interdisciplinary endeavour (van Dijk 1995). In the present study, our analysis will, as noted, also be informed by principles from ecofeminism. While CDA allows us to identify specific discourses around men, masculinity and veganism, and to interrogate how these are entextualized in the context of the forum, ecofeminism provides us with a theoretical lens for interrogating and explaining the social conditions in which such discourses take root. The ecofeminist perspective adopted here serves as an important tool for interpreting the broader motivations for, and possible consequences of, the discourses that we observe. While feminist theory that works in tandem with CDA offers to account for 'the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining hierarchically gendered social orders' (Lazar 2007:141), ecofeminist-informed CDA – we argue – promises to move beyond the single axis of gender when examining how unequal power relations are constructed and maintained. Ecofeminism offers here a more holistic perspective and one which allows us to account for cumulative forces of oppression,

recognising parallels between the processes that lead to the oppression of women and marginalised groups, and the exploitation of the natural environment, including non-human animals (Adams & Gruen 2014; Adams 1990). In doing so, ecofeminism ‘addresses the various ways that sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism are informed by and support speciesism and how analysing the ways these forces intersect can produce less violent, more just practices’ (Adams & Gruen 2014:1). Ecofeminism calls for a society in which there is no dominant group, recognising that as soon as the rights of one are perceived as being more important than the rights of another, this creates a pyramid of unequal power relations, where consequently those positioned at the bottom of the pyramid are exploited and treated unfairly. Adopting a critical ecofeminist position, our analysis will thus seek to problematise the discourses in our data in terms of how they contribute to the maintenance of unequal power relations and a gender order which sustains the oppression both of humans and non-human animals.

4. Findings

In this section, we report on the discourses we identified in the threads. For the facility of analysis, we group these into three sections: i.) discourses around vegan men, ii.) discourses around non-vegan men, and iii.) counter-discourses. As will become clear, many of the discourses reported across these sections relate to each other, not least in terms of how they allow users to construct relational forms of identity. Moreover, while the discourses contribute to the representation of different types of male identity, they also contribute representations of social practices, especially those surrounding veganism and eating, which are intimately tied to the types of vegan and non-vegan identities that are discursively constructed and represented on the site.

4.1. Discourses around vegan men

Across all threads sampled, posters tended to draw on discourses which aligned veganism and vegan men with dominant cultural symbols of hegemonic masculinity. Such alignment of veganism and hegemonic masculinity was often a response to thread-initial posts in which the contributors acknowledge explicitly the difficulties that men encounter when others learn of or otherwise witness their veganism. The examples below, and those thereafter, have been selected because they were judged to be representative of the particular discourses under discussion.

1. A lot of men won't go vegan because they think it will make them less masculine in the eyes of other men.
2. My wife introduced me to veganism when we started dating, I've been fully vegan now for about 6 months after slowly transitioning. But whenever I'm without my wife, whether with friends or family, they all just sort of expect me to “food cheat” on her.

In Extracts 1 and 2, the contributors recount vegan men's experiences of gender-related oppression or discrimination because others view their gender as being incongruous with their decision to lead a vegan lifestyle. One thread in particular contained twelve posts in which contributors' described experiences of encountering a discourse of submissive and ‘whipped’ husbands and boyfriends who only follow a vegan lifestyle because their (typically female) partners make them do so. As part of this, posters recount cases where others have expected them to ‘cheat’ on their veganism by consuming animal products behind their partners' backs (Extract 2). Contributions describing the social challenges that posters themselves and other men face when trying to become vegan are typically greeted with expressions of social support, including those which directly challenge the notion that veganism makes men ‘less manly’.

This is exemplified by the other type of typical thread-initial post –

namely, posts which present the proposition that vegan men are, by virtue of their veganism, more masculine than non-vegan men. For example, Extract 3 presents a meme featured across several thread-initial posts.

Real men grill vegetables not dead animals



3.

The meme carries the text, ‘Real men grill vegetables[,] not dead animals’. The notion of authentic maleness is evoked through the predication strategy in which the noun ‘men’ is qualified with the adjective ‘real’. In this case, the adjective ‘real’ is applied to men to whom veganism and actions associated with veganism are attributed, while those men who consume animal products are thus implied to be lacking such authentic maleness attribute. The notion of authentic maleness is, in turn, closely aligned to the hegemonic masculinity framework, which is often evoked by such references to ‘real men’ and what they do (Messerschmidt 2000). The referencing of hegemonic masculinity is also visible through the depiction of barbecuing – a potent cultural symbol of masculinity in the global West (Neuhaus 2003). In the post, ‘real men’ specifically ‘grill vegetables[,] not dead animals’, which could be interpreted as an attempt to realign hegemonic masculinity with veganism rather than the consumption of meat.

Such representations attribute masculine cultural symbols, in generalising terms, to all vegan men. Yet such a discourse was also used in relation to specific vegan men, usually the posters themselves or, if the poster was the partner of a vegan man, to their partner. An example of such attribution is presented in Extract 4.

4. I'm a 6'7" biker. ex military. And I'm vegan. But I guess I'm no longer an American man because I choose compassion to battle my demons.

In the extract, the self-ascription of many scripts of hegemonic masculinity, one's tallness (‘6'7"’) and engagement in masculinised hobbies (‘biker’) and work (‘ex military’), intersects with notions of national identity (being ‘an American man’). The person's veganism (‘I'm vegan’) in turn is equated with a redemption narrative (‘I choose compassion to battle my demons’), where the militaristic metaphor of ‘battle’ again evokes a characteristically (hegemonic) masculine frame. In the post, there is some reference to the challenging of the person's maleness – and, by proxy, their masculinity – as well as their national belonging, all on the basis of their veganism. However, through the sarcastic framing of such reference, the dissociation of maleness, masculinity and national belonging with veganism is critiqued.

This type of post is fairly typical of those we identified as containing gendered discourses in this subreddit, in the sense that it serves, we would argue, to align veganism with a hegemonic masculinity framework. This results in the creation of a relational kind of representation which positions vegan men as being more masculine than non-vegan men. In the remainder of this section, we explore some of the more

specific masculine traits that are attributed to vegan men, and which are, in many cases, represented as being enhanced by their veganism, starting with evidence of a discourse that vegan men are physically stronger than non-vegan men. This is found in 31 posts across seven threads. Extracts 5 and 6 exemplify this type of representation.

5. I'm male and have heard crap like this about my vegan diet. What makes it easy to ignore is that it typically comes from a male that is softer, rounder and less muscular than me (not that I subscribe to popular male beauty standards). Reminder: Brad Pitt is vegan.
6. ...as a weight lifting enthusiast I have been able to amass a good amount of muscle, and as a vegan I have been able to become the strongest and best shape of my life.

In Extract 5, non-vegan men are, through predication choices, attributed with qualities such as being 'softer', 'rounder' and 'less muscular', the latter also indexing a lack of physical strength (a hallmark of hegemonic masculinity). In Extract 6, ideas around strength are implied through a nomination choice, specifically the poster self-labelling as a 'weight lifting enthusiast', as well as through predication, where this poster describes themselves as 'amass[ing] a good amount of muscle' and 'becom[ing] the strongest and best shape of [their] life', the latter in particular emphasising physicality in superlative, and evaluatively positive, terms.

This discourse pertaining to the pronounced physical strength of vegan men could also be linked to representations of vegan men as being capable of violence (Extracts 7 and 8).

7. I could kick the shit outta this man.
8. I boxed and trained MMA, still hit the gym daily, and shoot guns.

In both extracts, actions such as 'kicking', 'hitting' and 'shooting', all of which denote processes linked to the enactment of violence, are ascribed onto vegan men. This is visible also in the descriptions of hypothetical scenarios in which these men could inflict violence on non-vegan men, such as the scenario outlined in Extract 7.

Another set of discourses that contributed to the alignment of vegan men with ideal models of masculinity relate to the topic of hormones. This was visible in 9 posts across 2 threads, with Extracts 9 and 10 exemplifying their use.

9. That's odd, since vegan men appear to have more testosterone.
10. I've actually become hairier since going vegan. Luckily, my voice didn't get lower, otherwise I would be cracking walls

In Extract 9, the poster constructs, through predication, an equivalence between veganism and heightened levels of testosterone – described by [Stibbe \(2004:49\)](#) as 'the ultimate symbol of masculinity'. The post is made in response to a thread-initial post which inquired whether consumption of soya could lead to increased oestrogen levels and the development of 'man boobs' in vegan men. In Extract 10, veganism is attributed to self-attested bodily changes that are associated with heightened levels of testosterone – a predication strategy that is also visible across other posts in this thread.

Another discourse depicts, through predication, vegan men as being more sexually successful than non-vegan men. We observed this in 17 posts across 6 threads, exemplified by Extract 11.

11. A lot of guys were absolutely shocked that not only was I not gay, and a girl didn't make me go vegan, but I was also getting laid more than they were. LOL. I blew some insecure teenage minds back in the day.

The relational dimension is particularly clear in this discourse, as non-vegan men are both implicitly and explicitly construed as being less sexually successful than their vegan counterparts, and as having weaker

erections, including being more prone to erectile dysfunction. We return to this in the next section. This discourse is frequently couched in posts which resemble so-called sexual 'conquest narratives'. In Extract 11, for example, the action of 'getting laid', a euphemism for sexual intercourse, is ascribed to the poster ('I'), who then describes how he was more sexually active than other, non-vegan men.

The link between veganism and heightened sexuality is also established more explicitly, in particular in comments in which posters attribute veganism to improved sexual performance, particularly in comparison with the sexual performance of non-vegan men or their previous, non-vegan selves, as in Extract 12 below.

12. Someone on this thread mentioned ED. I had ED for a while (which was embarrassing 22 to 23) and as soon as I went vegan I have been "harder" than ever. There is nothing manly about a limp dick. Since being vegetarian and now vegan I look better, more aesthetic, better sex, better mood, everything!

In Extract 12, the poster presents a personal narrative in which becoming vegan provides means of resolving erectile dysfunction (ED). The resolution of the narrative involves predication, as the poster describes having 'harder' erections, 'better sex' and being in a 'better mood', where the comparative adjectives function to contrast their current state with that before they became vegan.

Linked to discourses around vegan men's heightened sexual drive and performance is a discourse, again articulated through predication, which represents vegan men as being more sexually attractive than non-vegan men. This was observed in fifteen posts spanning four threads, including Extract 13 below. Such posts typically function as responses to other posts, usually thread-initial ones, in which other users express concerns that veganism will make them less attractive.

13. Yes, it is so unmanly it makes you instantly attractive to mountains of sexy, principled and intelligent women. What a disaster.

In most cases, the attractiveness attributed to vegan men was explicitly or implicitly presented as being towards women in particular. In Extract 13, the women are qualified also as 'vegan', 'sexy', 'principled' and 'intelligent'. On the one hand, we could view this as responding to original posts in which other users disclose concerns about being perceived as unattractive by women specifically. On the other hand, and since this discourse was also utilised in response to more general concerns about entering into relationships as a vegan (i.e. cases where sexual preference was not indexed), we could view such posts as encoding a heteronormative assumption, keying into a discourse of compulsory heterosexuality to more closely align vegan men to hegemonic models of masculinity (see [Johnson 2011](#)).

While the discourses explored so far can be viewed as aligning vegan men with hegemonic models of masculinity in a mainly physical sense – through predication strategies which frame them as physically strong, capable of violence, having a particularly strong sex drive and performance, and being sexually attractive – other discourses focus on vegan men's mental and emotional characteristics. Indeed, through predication vegan men are also framed as being emotionally strong, brave, and protective of weaker others. This is visible across 33 posts in 10 threads. Again, part of this discourse involves representing (both explicitly and through implication) non-vegan men, in opposition, as cowardly (see Extracts 14 and 15).

14. Men protect beings that can't protect themselves.
15. I went vegan, at least in part, because of masculinity. The drive to be a strong protector of those I care for necessarily meant starting with the avoidance of causing harm to those I care for. I began to see eating animal products as inherently weak - that paying lip service as an "animal lover" while pussyfooting around glutinous consumption with whiny nonsense like "but + I just love

cheese tho" and "I just couldn't give up xyz" is real weakling shitheel crap that inspires nothing but disrespect.

Compassion for others is arguably at the heart of veganism. Yet what is telling about posts such as these is that it is not the compassion of the vegan men that is framed as stemming from or even contributing towards their masculinity but, rather, we would argue, their desire to protect and 'stand up for' those weaker others. Representations of vegan men as protecting others recurs throughout the threads and are referenced both through predication (e.g. 'protect[ing] beings that can't protect themselves' (Extract 14)) and nomination (e.g. 'strong protector' (Extract 15)). This, in our view, is likely the case because attributes such as courage and protectiveness are more closely aligned to hegemonic masculine frameworks than compassion is.

Yet bravery and protectiveness are not the only reasons that are given in the forum for men becoming vegan, as demonstrated in Extracts 16 and 17.

16. Like come on team, I'm here for my own personal logical reasons.
17. The fantasy of absorbing the life-energies of an animal, making you stronger. Good thing we have science now...

In 10 posts across 3 threads, users draw on a discourse that veganism is a choice that men make because it is rational, logical, or motivated by 'science' (Extract 17), rather than being based on emotion. Again, by contrast, the practice of consuming animal products is presented as irrational or illogical, the benefits of which are for example framed as 'fantasy' (Extract 17).

Other qualities ascribed onto vegan men through predication include the prototypically masculine traits of willpower, discipline and restraint. This is visible in 11 posts across 3 threads, and exemplified in Extracts 18 and 19.

18. I think it's pretty fucking manly to have the willpower to choose not to eat meat.
19. Buy McDonald's - get respected as manly for eating meat. Exercise self-discipline and go vegan - get regarded as too weak to consume meat. People are so fun.

In Extract 18, 'willpower' is explicitly labelled as a 'pretty fucking manly' trait, where it is linked here specifically to the willpower involved in deciding not to consume meat.

Finally, one of the most pervasive discourses we identified in our data, evident in 74 posts across 10 threads, was that vegan men are more masculine or 'manly' because they are self-determining and do not care about the opinions of others. This is exemplified in Extracts 20 and 21.

20. Not giving a fuck what others think about your choices is the manliest of all
21. "You are a big pussy for not going with the flow!" Any man who's that terrified of being different needs to man up:)

Again, such representations involved the use of both implicit and explicit predication, whereby non-vegan men are depicted as acting as others want them to, thus being presented as conformist and non-autonomous. In Extract 21, this is framed metaphorically as non-vegan men 'going with the flow' (i.e. as lacking the qualities of autonomy and agency), as surrendering to some larger force, and consequently as needing to 'man up'. By contrast, the quality of 'not giving a fuck' (Extract 20) is attributed to vegan men and equated with the superlative form of masculinity, being described as 'the manliest of all'.

[Connell \(1995\)](#) argued the value of autonomy and independence to be a central feature of hegemonic masculinity. This thesis has since been supported by research observing the centrality of such notions as autonomy, independence and self-determination to the construction of coherent masculine identities (see also, [Baker 2008](#)). For example, in

their interview study with men talking about body projects, [Gill et al. \(2005:46\)](#) reported how the 'men were keen to characterise any decision – particularly those about their bodies – as entirely their own, unaffected by influence from parents, teachers, friends, lovers or the media'. We would argue that the discourse that vegan men are autonomous, self-determining, and pursue a vegan lifestyle regardless of the opinions and advice of others thus helps to align such men with similarly normative, hegemonic masculine ideals.

4.2. Discourses around non-vegan men

While veganism and vegan men tended to be construed in ways that aligned them with hegemonic masculine ideals, the opposite is true for non-vegan men, who were represented instead as falling short of this ideal or as otherwise contradicting what is expected of them, as men, through their consumption of animal products. Such representations were encoded both implicitly and explicitly in the discourses we examined in the previous section, where the alignment of vegan men with masculine norms *due to* their veganism accordingly implied that men who are not vegan do not meet such criteria. Yet such discourses were not just implicit but could be drawn on explicitly in the threads. For example, in 16 posts across 5 threads, users framed, through predication, non-vegan men as having lower levels of testosterone and higher levels of oestrogen, a hormone responsible for the development of female reproductive systems.

22. Animals products contain estrogen. The stereotype is wrong.
23. Everybody knows real men drink estrogen-filled breastmilk instead! /s

Extract 22 exemplifies how this association between oestrogen and female physiology can be used to construct meat-eating as a feminising practice, while Extract 23 demonstrates how it can also contribute to the infantilisation of non-vegan men through the equation of their consumption of cows' milk to a baby's consumption of its mother's 'breastmilk'. The sarcastic tone of Extract 23, marked by the use of '/s', also provides a means constructing authentic maleness ('real men') as incongruous with the practice of dairy consumption.

Such representations are indicative of a broader discourse which infantilises non-vegan men. This is visible in 14 posts across 6 threads, and could reify through certain nomination choices. For example, in Extract 24 below, vegan men are referred to as 'men' but non-vegan men are labelled as 'boys' and 'children'. Through predication, the actions of the latter are then evaluated, amongst other things, as 'childish'.

24. Bowing to peer pressure and continuing to something unethical knowingly is childish and cowardly in my opinion. This kind of behavior is what separates boys from men, to be quite honest. We aren't children anymore. We don't have to hide our misdeeds from Mommy and Daddy. We should have the backbone to say what we mean and stand by what we do regardless of who finds out. Anything less is so spineless that it's pathetic.

While we saw in the previous section how vegan men tended to be presented as physically strong and brave, non-vegan men, by contrast, were constructed as cowardly in 46 posts in 10 threads, as exemplified in Extracts 25 and 26.

25. Eating something you didn't kill yourself is the most cowardly thing you can do. Most meat eaters don't want anything to do with the death and suffering, they just want a burger served up without asking any questions. Super manly.
26. Tell me again how you buy your prey at Walmart.

Such representations could manifest in nomination choices, for example with non-vegan men straightforwardly labelled as 'cowards', or

through predication, being ascribed the trait of being ‘cowardly’ (Extract 25). Most commonly, this discourse was underpinned by predication – specifically, the act of purchasing slaughtered animals was evaluated as cowardly and as being less ‘manly’ than hunting. In Extract 26, for example, the act of buying meat and hunting animals, the latter evoked through metaphoric reference to such animal-derived products as ‘prey’, are juxtaposed. The function of this juxtaposition is arguably to ridicule non-vegan men for their inability to embody the hyper-masculine trope of the male hunter-gatherer (Armengol 2020).

Another discourse which parallels those analysed in the previous section is one which constructs non-vegan men as lacking sexual virility and as being particularly likely to suffer from erectile dysfunction (ED). We observed this in 16 posts across 6 threads, as exemplified in Extract 27.

27. ED has got to be my favorite irony of the carnist culture. Meat-eating is the cause of so much male frustration. The artery-clogging effects of a lifetime of eating meat causes erectile dysfunction. Yup. Real manly, making your dick not work anymore.

Here, ED is equated with ‘so much male frustration’ and is directly attributed to ‘carnist culture’, ‘meat-eating’ and ‘a lifetime of eating meat’. This poster specifically responsabilises non-vegan men for their erectile dysfunction by discursively emphasising their active role in ‘making [their] dick[s] not work anymore’ by eating meat. Both erectile dysfunction and meat consumption are dissociated from hegemonic masculinity through the sarcastic evaluation of men who eat meat and have ED as ‘real manly’ (an appraisal which again draws on the notion of real or authentic masculinity).

In the previous section, we saw how vegan men are frequently represented as being not only virile but also sexually attractive, mainly to women. We briefly considered how this might be explained by, and indeed contribute towards, the compulsory heterosexuality that underpins hegemonic masculinity (see Johnson 2011). A similar discourse can be found in 12 posts across 4 threads, where users metaphorically construct an equivalence between the act of consuming meat, especially sausages, and the performance of oral sex on a man (Extract 28).

28. In my country 99 % of people thinks that to be a man you have to eat meat. Meat, meat, meat in every fookin dish. I respond usually to them “YEAH, BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING MORE MANLIER THAN TO PUT SAUSAGE IN YOUR MOUTH”.

By construing non-vegan men – through sarcasm – as failing at compulsory heterosexuality (one of the attributes of hegemonic masculinity), such posters deny vegan men the possibility of embodying this masculine ideal.

Another, less frequent way in which the masculinity of non-vegan men is delegitimated is through the use of – at times derisory, misogynistic – nomination choices. For example, in Extract 29, non-vegan men are labelled using the derogatory term, ‘bitch[es]’.

29. Basically, I began to feel that if I paid for defenseless creatures to be tortured and killed, or even to have their rights violated in any way, just because I didn’t feel like eating something else that day, that I wasn’t a real man, I was a little bitch, and I’m not going to go through life content to be a little bitch.

The gendered (feminine) nature of this derogatory term allows for the masculinity of non-vegan men to be put in question, through the linking of ‘failed masculinity with femaleness’ (Bucholtz 1999: 449). In contrast, vegan men are referred to in this post in terms of their authentic maleness (i.e. ‘a real man’), allowing for the construction of relational and oppositional relationship between non-vegan and vegan men, where one group’s masculinity is delegitimated and the other’s is

enhanced. Paradoxically, the misogynistic nature of the language that is used here to delegitimise the masculinity of non-vegan men can be interpreted to uphold the broader gender order, and hegemonic masculinity that sits within (atop) it.

In 15 posts across 5 threads, men who consume animal products are constructed, through predication, as being insecure about their masculinity, with the practice of animal consumption thus presented as a means by which these men seek to resolve their insecurities.

30. My view is that the only kind of guy that cares whether other men think he’s “manly” is inherently fragile, because (IMHO) “real men” are secure with themselves and don’t really give a flying fuck if their choice of dinner or clothing or music or car makes other less secure guys consider them less “manly”.

This discourse could be viewed as something of a parallel to that, analysed earlier, which represents vegan men as assured and self-determining, which included constructions of them as being secure in their masculinity to the extent that they do not care about others’ opinions. In Extract 30, vegan men – described here as ‘real men’ – are presented as being ‘secure with themselves’. Non-vegan men, on the other hand, are referred to as ‘guys’ who are ‘other’ – again pointing to the discursive construction of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy (Wirth-Kolba 2016) – and they are also ‘less secure’, placing the two groups in direct comparison to one another through the reliance on the quantifier ‘less’.

Viewed alongside the discourses examined in the previous section, the representations examined throughout this section demonstrate how both vegan and non-vegan men could be linked to masculine traits, for positive or negative evaluation. We can begin to see by this point, then, how the representational discourses explored across the previous two sections fit together; namely, to align vegan men with ideal (hegemonic) masculinity and to construct non-vegan men as falling short of this ideal.

4.3. Counter-discourses

Across the previous two sub-sections, we observed that the dominant discourses in this online community typically align vegan men with hegemonic masculine ideals, simultaneously challenging the dominant societal discourses around veganism, men and masculinity (see Section 2). However, in a minority of cases these contextually dominant discourses were seemingly rejected by posters who produced counter-discourses. For example, there are 11 cases of obvious trolling posts, distributed across two threads. Some of these posts contradict the discourse that vegan men are more ‘manly’ or ‘real’ than non-vegan men.

31. I like eating meat. I am not a real man. I am a fake man, and my penis is not real.

The post presented above, for example, echoes the predication choice, frequently observed throughout the forum, of ascribing to non-vegan men the quality of *not* being ‘real men’. What follows outlines the hypothetical implications of not being ‘a real man’, giving rise to incongruity between the expected and the given, ultimately to humorous effect. The humour employed in this instance interpreted as sarcasm specifically, and thus constitutes a means for posters to critique the notion that men are not ‘real men’ because they are not vegan.

Other posts are more specific in challenging particular aspects of the discourses around vegan men which predominate in the forum. For example, there is a particular concentration of trolling posts, such as Extract 32 below, in the thread which features the meme in Extract 3 as its initial post.

32. That’s why his arms are a toothpick

The trolling visible in Extract 32 serves as a counter-discourse to that we saw earlier which, through predication, posits that vegan men are stronger and more muscular than non-vegan men because of their plant-based diets. As noted in Section 2, physical strength, indexed also through muscularity, forms an important attribute of hegemonic masculinity. Here, this particular attribute is delegitimised by likening the vegan man's arms metaphorically to 'a toothpick', thereby implying these to be thin and non-muscular. The conjunction '[t]hat's why' at the beginning of the post in turn establishes a link between the man's veganism (see Extract 3) and his lack of muscularity, as a consequence rejecting the proposition of a connection between veganism and hegemonic masculinity.

Yet the dominant discourses in this forum could also be challenged in more creative ways, other than trolling, as exemplified by Extract 33.

33. ...no shit? i'm vegan myself, but being vegan dosen't necessarily meet societies standards of manliness? i thought thats a given

In the post above, the poster describes their self as a 'vegan', opting for a non-gendered naming strategy, and equates the action of 'being vegan' with potentially transgressing 'societies standards of manliness' [sic]. As well as constructing veganism as a break from socially imposed masculine norms, in four posts users aligned veganism with positively evaluated feminine qualities while distancing it from negatively evaluated masculine equalities, as in Extract 34.

34. veganism's feminine compared to eating dead animal flesh ... it's about compassion, preservation, etc. consider taking up a hobby like boxing, inhaling petrol, or mutilating ur genitals if u need more corrosive/masculine energy in ur life xD

In this post, veganism is framed, through predication, as 'feminine' and is equated with positively valenced scripts such as 'preservation' and the expression of 'compassion'. In contrast to this, masculinity (here, 'masculine energy') receives a negatively-valenced evaluation of being 'corrosive', being instead linked to actions associated with violence and self-toxicity.

In other cases, users drew on discourses designed to redefine what it means to be a man or 'masculine' by orienting to qualities traditionally associated with femininity, rather than those traditionally attributed to masculinity. This discourse was evident in 7 posts across 3 threads, and is exemplified in Extracts 35 and 36.

35. having compassion & empathy are the manliest qualities:
36. Its as if these men have a mental image that is a parody of being manly. Why is gentleness, thoughtfulness, and kindness mocked?

In these extracts, qualities such as 'compassion', 'empathy', 'gentleness', 'thoughtfulness' and 'kindness' are labelled as 'manly' (Extract 36) or 'the manliest' (Extract 35). Such representations can be linked to the construction of hybrid masculinities observed by Greenbaum and Dexter (2018), in which qualities traditionally associated with femininity are reconfigured into more traditional masculine frames.

The final set of discourses we observed to counter the dominant narrative of hyper-masculine vegan men in this forum characterised posts which questioned *any* connection between veganism and gender, seemingly in an attempt to challenge such gendered associations altogether. This is a substantial counter-discourse, occurring in 58 posts across 10 threads.

37. Stop with the "real men" shit. Even though I know this is in response to the idea that "real men" eat meat. Either way this idea and phrase needs to die.

As Extract 37 shows, such posts could be underpinned by an apparent concern about the effects that oppositional discourses, such as those

which juxtapose vegan and non-vegan people, might have in terms of furthering the vegan cause. We should bear in mind that, while substantial as a counter-discourse, this was still a minority position across the posts we analysed, and was itself frequently countered by other users who expressed the view that posts targeting non-vegan men were necessary as a retaliation to wider societal discourses which are perceived to oppress vegan men. Yet as well as challenging the association between veganism and masculinity, posts such as that in Extract 37 can also be interpreted as challenging those societally dominant discourses which construct veganism as a feminine social practice.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The foregoing analysis has uncovered a range of representational discourses around veganism, men and masculinity in the r/vegan subreddit. Focussing on two main areas of discursive representation – vegan men and non-vegan men – we have argued the discourses which predominate in this context to be closely aligned to the notion of hegemonic masculinity. We broadly observed two sets of complementary representational discourses, entextualized primarily through nomination and predication choices, which represent vegan men as embodying the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and non-vegan men as falling short of these. This delineation is constructed particularly in relation to physical attributes (e.g. strength, capability to commit violence, virility and attractiveness), and mental and emotional attributes (e.g. rationality, autonomy, willpower and bravery). The discursive delineation of boundaries between the two groups and the construction of an opposition between them is further reinforced through a discourse of authentic maleness. 'Real men' and the practices associated therewith are ascribed, through predication, to vegan men. By contrast, the practices attributed to non-vegan men, such as purchasing slaughtered animals from a supermarket and participating in hunting and other blood sports, are, for most part, constructed as the antithesis of what 'real men' do. This discourse of authenticity here provides means of legitimating the masculine identities of vegan men while delegitimizing the masculinities of non-vegan men. Importantly, the attributes and qualities that we have observed to be linked to the 'real' and hyper-masculine vegan men represented in this forum, and which are indeed ascribed to their veganism, adhere closely to a hegemonic kind of ideal masculinity.

At this point, it is worth emphasising this relational and dialogic nature of the discourses observed in the context of the forum and outside. Specifically, we observe that the alignment of veganism with frameworks of hegemonic masculinity is often a direct response to the gender-based taunting experienced by vegan men, as often recounted in thread-initial posts. The dominant discourses in this forum could thus be interpreted as providing means for its members to resist societal-level representations (e.g. Extract 21), as well as serving a kind of social support function (e.g. Extract 30), being drawn upon in contributions which ostensibly seek to reassure other posters who have expressed concerns about the impact their veganism may have on how others perceive their masculinity.

Despite performing these important functions of countering societal-level representations and providing a source of social support, the dominant discourses observed in the context of the forum importantly never offer to uproot gender hierarchy. Instead, the representations of vegan and non-vegan men these discourses offer function simultaneously to rearrange the positions of both groups within the gender order. If we draw on Bornstein's (1998) metaphor of hegemonic masculinity as a 'pyramid of power', these discourses can be viewed as seeking to dislodge non-vegan men at the top of the pyramid in order to replace them with vegan men. Whatever their functions might be, such discourses can be considered problematic from an ecofeminist perspective, as they orient to and reinforce a hegemonic gender hierarchy which has enabled, and continues to enable, the oppression of women and marginalised groups, as well as the exploitation of non-human animals and the broader destruction of our natural

environment. The intersections between different forms of oppression afforded by the maintenance of the gender order are highlighted in the interactions in our data, for example through the articulation of discourses of compulsory heterosexuality, homophobic sarcasm and the use of derisory terms for women and women's body parts to negatively evaluate non-vegan men.

The levels of complicity in this hierarchy may be surprising in the context of an online vegan community, and this is certainly something we were not expecting to find. Yet the harmful effects of hegemonic masculinity on those falling short of gender ideals are also well-documented (e.g. Connell 2000, Galasiński 2008, Rosen & Nofziger 2019), with further evidence for this coming in the forum itself in the many posts in which users disclosed offline experiences where their masculinity had been questioned or challenged on the basis of their veganism. It is perhaps somewhat ironic, then, that the very discourses that contribute to different forms of oppression and animal exploitation are drawn upon so extensively within this context, in the main by users who ostensibly identify as vegans, for the purposes of resistance and to provide social support. This could be viewed as evidence of the dominance of these hegemonic norms, as well as of their pervasiveness, which is such that they have become a weapon of first resort even for members of what is, in the vegan subreddit, an online community whose shared values otherwise contrast sharply with those that we might otherwise associate with hegemonic masculinity.

In what we assume to be an online community comprised mostly of vegans, we cannot help but feel that the discourses which predominate in this context represent something of a lost opportunity; namely, to challenge hegemonic masculine norms by promoting qualities such as compassion and empathy, which can be viewed as more consistent with a vegan philosophy. Some posts did exhibit discourses to this effect, though these represented a minority position. Nevertheless, we have argued that such discourses – which seek to realign masculinity with traits traditionally associated with femininity or even which reject gender stereotyping altogether – may offer an alternative that is more productive from an ecofeminist – and in fact, vegan – perspective. We might be encouraged by such posts, as well as by the potential for the forum to perform a social support function for vegans experiencing stigma and to facilitate critical discussion of animal exploitation and how this relates to identity issues including gender, sexuality and social class.

While CDA is an interdisciplinary research endeavour, to our knowledge there have been few attempts to integrate CDA with principles from ecofeminism. Our evaluation is that this has been a productive synthesis for our purposes, with the ecofeminist perspective complementing the concern with power and inequality that characterises CDA but adding to it a more focussed layer of critical interpretation which has resulted, we feel, in a more nuanced account of discourse – one which considers its effects in terms of the environment, including animal exploitation, as well as gender. The ecofeminist lens adopted in the study has, we feel, enabled us to move beyond a single-issue focus and to respond more sensitively to the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and exploitation and how these might play out in discourse.

A limitation of our findings is that, while they apply to cases where sex and gender, and particularly men and masculinity, are indexed explicitly in the forum, we cannot be sure of whether and how such discourses might be utilised in cases where masculinity is indexed more implicitly in discussions of, and among, vegans. Future research could begin to shed light on the generalisability of the representations identified in this study by examining those discourses at the intersection of veganism and masculinity in other contexts, for instance in mainstream media or campaign materials produced by vegan and animal rights campaigns. For critical discourse researchers embarking on such projects, their analyses may be enriched by the incorporation of an ecofeminist perspective.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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