Memes and Veganism: Representations of Vegan Identity and Its Alterity

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This research aims to identify the underlying discourses in the representation of vegan identity and its alterity in memes. We made a structural analysis of 276 memes published in two Chilean vegan accounts on Instagram. The results reveal that the discursive structures of the memes studied consist of two evaluation axis (one practical and one ethical-political) that generate a typology of representations about vegan identity (authentic vegan) and its alterity (impostor nonvegan, authentic nonvegan, impostor vegan). We also found two interactions that deepen the definition of the authentic vegan identity. In these interactions, conflict and ridicule toward the nonvegan prevail. We conclude that online contexts and the use of memes as the analysis unit allow an emerging conflictive side of veganism that had been hidden in previous works. This article invites others to delve into the study of vegan identities and existing negotiation strategies in both online and offline spaces.

Keywords: memes, veganism, authenticity, identity, Instagram, discourse analysis

The Internet and social networks have created a new space of mediated communication. Memes, as a communicative device, have gained popularity, especially on Instagram. Scholars have analyzed memes because they require a shared culture to understand their meanings (Kassing, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2013; Yus, 2018). Among the essential potentialities of memes is the representation of identity product of the allusion to self and alterity and the diffusion of counterhegemonic political thoughts thanks to its ability to go viral in informal spaces.

Veganism generates identity in its members and counterhegemonic discourses (Becker, 1963; Giacoman, Alfaro, Aguilera Bornand, & Torres, 2021). Internet and social networks play a crucial role

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in veganism due to the possibility of sharing information, interests, experiences, and practices that shape vegan identity (Laakso, Niva, Eranti, & Aapio, 2021; Stano, 2021). In a society characterized by meat consumption (Joy, 2011), memes can contribute to the vegan political criticism (Huntington, 2015) while building a counterhegemonic discourse (Luqiu, 2018). Multimodal artifacts are used by vegans as a form of activism in different social networks, taking advantage of their viral potential (Jeffries, 2020).

Despite the importance of social media in constructing vegan identity (Laakso et al., 2021; Stano, 2021) and the power of memes to express social imaginaries (Shifman, 2013), there are no studies about the representation of vegan identity and its alterity through memes. Moreover, only a few scholars have investigated veganism in Chile through social sciences (Giacoman et al., 2021), a country that highly values meat consumption (Orellana, Sepúlveda, & Denegri, 2013). Our work seeks to resolve this gap by identifying the underlying discursive structures in the representation of vegan identity and its alterity in memes of two Chilean vegan Instagram accounts. The novelty of this research is to use memes to analyze the vegan social identity construction.

It is relevant to study how vegans, as counterhegemonic identities, represent themselves and others. Most research about vegan identity explores how vegans negotiate their identity to downplaying their veganism, or how nonvegans negatively depict vegans due to their political expression. Understanding how vegans represent vegan identity and its alterity in online context could help us reveal elements of vegan identity hidden in previous works.

Given the political and counterhegemonic nature of ethical veganism (Greenebaum, 2012), combined with the ability of memes to represent political views through humor and polarization (Penney, 2020), in this research, we use structural discourse analysis (Martinic, 2006). This analysis makes it possible to recognize basic units of meaning and the symbolic structures underlying the data, identifying oppositions.

This article dialogues with two corps of literature. First, it adds to the existing research of the negotiation of vegan identity in interactions with omnivores (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Greenebaum, 2012), examining how the (re)presentations change in online contexts through memes where a conflictive side of veganism is exalted. Second, it contributes to the literature on memes, specifically the use of memes as identity communication devices (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016; Procházka, 2018; Yus, 2018) and delegitimization of others (Kassing, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017), examining how counterhegemonic identities, like veganism, can be represented in memes through delegitimizing others, where new identity features emerge. Our third contribution is methodological. We propose that the structural discourse analysis (Martinic, 2006) is the best technique for analyzing political memes.

Literature Review

Memes as an Expression of Identity

Adopting a definition of Dawkins (1976), Shifman (2013) states that Internet memes are a group of digital elements that have circulated, transformed, or been imitated by many users. Most memes have three characteristics of humor: they have incongruous elements, the public is invited to participate in a game and is perceived as superior (Shifman, 2011). In addition, they allow people to spread ideas, establish communities, and participate in the culture (Kulkarni, 2017; Silvestri, 2013) through images based on popular culture (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019).

Wiggins and Bowers (2014) classify memes into three categories: spreadable media, emergent meme, and meme. The first type refers to unaltered multimedia messages that may not go viral. An emergent meme arises when such spreadable media is altered and gains viral traction within a specific digital culture. Finally, once an emergent meme is replicated or used as a template, it evolves into a full-fledged meme. The work of Wiggins and Bowers (2014) allows us to classify types of multimedia content and differentiate memes created by the users and those already established in online culture.

Memes usually simplify reality by communicating complex elements such as experiences, meanings, and political positions through images and text (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2013). To understand, create, and appreciate memes, the existence of a common culture that shares symbolic elements is necessary (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Pérez Salazar, Aguilar Edwards, & Guillermo Archilla, 2014; Procházka, 2018; Shifman, 2011). The concept of encyclopedia from Umberto Eco (1984) is a useful concept to understand this. Eco describes it as a system of knowledge that an individual possesses, enabling them to interpret and understand texts.

Encyclopedia is crucial for individuals who create and consume memes. The memes that individuals find funny or engaging are often those that resonate with their own encyclopedia. Therefore, a meme that references a particular cultural phenomenon or social trend may be understood and appreciated only by individuals who are familiar with that phenomenon or trend. This can be the case with vegan memes. Memes often go viral because they resonate with a particular group of people, who then share them with their networks.

Memes are a powerful tool for setting boundaries of a community and representing a social group identity (Gal et al., 2016; Procházka, 2018; Udupa, 2019; Yus, 2018). Many memes refer to the self and the alterity by pronouns like "I," "me," "you," "us," or "them," presenting them as opposite sides. The adjectives that are usually attached allow people to connect with memes. These contribute to a feeling of representation, (re)producing identity through identification or rejection, that is, I am *X* because I am not *Y* (Kauria, 2020; Procházka, 2018).

This is also true in political identities. People use memes to criticize political discourses and social issues through humor and polarization (Huntington, 2015; Kulkarni, 2017; Penney, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins, 2017). Ross and Rivers (2017) analyzed political memes of presidential candidates in EEUU

using the theory of legitimization. They find memes used delegitimization strategies such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Kassing (2020) also explores delegitimization, but he focuses on sports memes. He mentions that memes are used as discursive weapons (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017) to delegitimize the rival. Furthermore, memes disseminated ideas and political beliefs in informal spaces thanks to their viral features, especially counterhegemonic discourses (Hristova, 2014; Luqiu, 2018). This attribute of memes is especially relevant in groups with a political vocation, such as ethical veganism.

Social media accounts that disseminate memes are often anonymous, which allows them to share content more freely. Suler (2004) has described the online disinhibition effect as online users' tendency to behave more uninhibited than in face-to-face interactions due to the sensation of anonymity and disconnection of the person behind the screen. The online disinhibition effect can positively and negatively affect online interactions. On the positive side, it can lead to greater self-expression and creativity. On the negative side, anonymity makes it more probable to share offensive or taboo content because users feel less responsible for their online behavior and therefore less likely to consider the consequences of their actions (Davison, 2020; Vickery, 2014).

Vegan Identity

Veganism is a lifestyle that rejects consuming animal products (Vegan Society, n.d.) and is characterized by a change in consumption practices and reconfiguration of the values associated with animal exploitation, which contribute to identity construction (Fischler, 1988; Giacoman et al., 2021). This identity relates to the counterhegemonic nature of vegan practices and discourse that defy carnism (Joy, 2011).

Following the communication theory of identity, Paxman (2021) identifies four layers of identity: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. The first corresponds to the self-perceived identity, and the second refers to those aspects that people represent to others. The relational layer occurs in interactions with others, and the fourth layer explains how identity relates to larger groups.

Authenticity is another core element of vegan identity because one of their ethical goals is to achieve coherence between beliefs and practice (Greenebaum, 2012). In online and offline contexts, vegans build a discourse of authenticity (Greenebaum, 2012; Neuman, 2020). Ethical vegans conceptualize vegans for health reasons as inauthentic by classifying them as nonvegans who only follow a plant-based diet. Thus, vegans identify themselves through deidentification from other vegans (Kauria, 2020).

Furthermore, in constructing personal identity, the opposition to other groups is also a constituent element (Rosenfeld, 2019; Wrenn, 2020). Rosenfeld (2019) mentions that omnivores are perceived negatively due to their food choices, whereas vegetarians are conceptualized as hypocritical and inconsistent, criticizing the lack of agreement between the animalistic discourse and the practices (Kauria, 2020; Wrenn, 2020). The conceptions of both alternative groups reflect a vegan identity as "nonvegetarians" and "nonomnivores," which has been evidenced in both online (Kauria, 2020) and offline contexts (Rosenfeld, 2019; Wrenn, 2020).

In contrast, vegans are stigmatized by nonvegans, conceptualizing them as people that constantly need to express their worldview and classifying them as hypocrites, arrogant, and intolerant (Aguilera-Carnerero & Carretero-González, 2021; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). Facing this context, vegans use strategies to present themselves in face-to-face interactions. Among these is the search to avoid conflicts (Paxman, 2016; Twine, 2016) and consider the possible reactions of others to their actions (Krogh, 2021).

Paxman (2021) observes that downplaying veganism in social situations, not thematizing their lifestyle, and sharing their food are strategies to facilitate interaction with nonvegans. Similar results were obtained by Buttny and Kinefuchi (2020), highlighting the special care in not presenting themselves as extremist around other nonvegans, which shows veganism as a personal choice. Vegans use these strategies because omnivores perceive the theming of animal suffering as attacks on them as people and their ethics (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Greenebaum, 2012; Krogh, 2021; Twine, 2014).

Vegans relieve their feelings of loneliness on the Internet, considering it a safe space. Thus, in social networks, they can discuss and exchange stories, experiences, concerns, and interests in veganism, reproducing shared meanings (Davis, Love, & Fares, 2019; Laakso et al., 2021; Lawo, Esau, Engelbutzeder, & Stevens, 2020).

Considering all of the previous factors, we propose that studying the vegan counterhegemonic discourse in online spaces is relevant to understanding the complexity of vegan identity. We hypothesize that participating in vegan online communities would allow emerging different representations of the vegan identity and its alterity from those enacted in an offline context where identity negotiation is necessary to maintain personal relationships and fight vegan stereotypes. This is exacerbated by anonymity, making expressing the users' thoughts without accountability more probable. For the study of identity representation, in a group that usually identifies and deidentifies itself through membership and opposition, the structural discourse analysis is presented as the best alternative (Kauria, 2020).

Method and Data

We analyze a case study on two Chilean Instagram accounts dedicated to posting vegan memes to develop an in-depth understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of the representation of vegan identity and its alterity. We first analyzed Memes Veganos Chile (n.d.) and added a second account, Los Vegandores (n.d.), to strengthen the analysis. Memes Veganos Chile (n.d.) has 652 publications and 8,251 followers, which makes it the most famous Chilean account that publishes vegan memes, and Los Vegandores (n.d.) has 244 publications and 1,430 followers, making it the second most popular.

There are three main reasons why we choose these accounts. First, they have the most followers. Second, they use humor and mockery to represent vegan imaginaries and disseminate the vegan lifestyle. Third, thanks to a first look at the memes shared by these accounts, we can establish a priori that these accounts illustrate the counterhegemonic lifestyle of ethical veganism. This type of veganism works based on strong moral and ethical oppositions against carnism that shape their identity (Joy, 2011; Kauria, 2020).

Considering the different layers of identity proposed by Paxman and the importance of others for the confirmation of vegan identity (Greenebaum, 2012), we selected those memes that characterize vegans, their alterity, and the interaction between the two. We identified vegans by references to self and nonvegan alterity by the otherness. We selected 276 memes that fit the criterion. We removed the memes where 100% of the comments said that the meme was inappropriate.

We based the analysis of memes on the structural analysis of discourse (Martinic, 2006), which focuses on discourses' semantic and structural dimensions. This method allows us to identify the basic units of meaning, organize them, and then reconstruct underlying models in the texts (Martinic, 2006), which is an advantage considering that memes are multimodal (Vásquez & Aslan, 2021). This analysis aims to recognize implicit structures in each meme. Memes are conceptualized from their double meaning: signifier and sign (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). On the one hand, understanding the meme as a signifier involves considering its inner coherence and meanings. On the other hand, considering the external structure to which it refers adds a new layer of meaning, helping to understand the complete sense of the meme.

Specifically, we analyzed each meme independently. We start analyzing memes published by Memes Veganos Chile. Following Martinic (2006), in the first stage, the relations of opposite categories were defined, unified by a code (e.g., vegan vs. nonvegan—type of person according to diet). If the opposite category was not explicit in the meme, we generated a free tag, using parenthesis, representing this. These opposing categories have an ethical-normative dimension, so we constructed a valuation index in the second stage. This index indicates whether the interlocutor positively or negatively assesses each category (e.g., rational (+) vs. irrational (−)). During the third stage, memes were analyzed together. Thus, the characteristics attributed to each category were condensed (e.g., vegans are rational). In the fourth stage, these condensations were synthesized in speech structures, represented in action diagrams or cross-structures (Martinic, 2006). Finally, we analyzed the memes of Los Vegandores, confirming our results and deepening some aspects of our findings.

Analysis and Discussion

Identity From Alterity

Vegans base their identity in offline contexts on excluding animal products from consumption and against animal abuse (Greenebaum, 2012). Both features are highly appreciated in both accounts, whereas the opposite is negatively valued. Both accounts follow an anti-speciesist veganism, visible in opposition to other groups with different practices or values. These accounts used memes that depersonalize the characters in them, representing group identities instead. This differs from other articles where memes depict a single person or a team (Kassing, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017). From antagonisms to various groups, these Instagram accounts communicate the characteristics of both external and internal groups. We identify two main oppositions in the discourse of memes: a practical axis and an ethical-political axis.

First, there is an opposition based on food practices, distinguishing between those who consume animal products and those who do not. Thus, there is a "me," "we," and "vegans" as opposed to a "you," "them," "omnivorous," "vegetarians," "someone," "people," or "the world." Food practices exposed in these memes are used as markers of belonging and exclusion, defining each group's identity (Fischler, 1988). Both accounts judge these practices from their moral component because the consumption of animal products refers to animal exploitation on farms. Therefore, of this opposition, nonvegans and their practices are negatively assessed, and vegans are positively valued (Rosenfeld, 2019).

CUANDO ALGUIEN NO VEGANO TE DICE QUE TUS PUBLICACIONES HIEREN SUS SENTIMIENTOS

"COMES ANIMALES... NO SABÍA QUE TUVIESES SENTIMIENTOS!"

Translation:
When non-vegans tell you that your posts hurt their feelings.
You eat meat... I didn't know you had feelings!

Figure 1. Practical axis example 1 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021a).

As Figure 1 shows, both accounts make a moral evaluation of the act of consuming animals in everyday life to delegitimize nonvegans and classify them as insensitive and disgusting (Ross & Rivers, 2017). This meme has a standard format, but the vegan narrative readapts it to establish the nonvegan insensitivity perceived by vegans. On the contrary, we can interpret that vegans are seen as sensitive people thanks to their food choices.

The reviewed memes show a vegan identity and alterity through binary categories. In the case of Figure 1: you (−) / me (+), eats meat (−) / does not eat meat (+), and insensitive (−) / sensitive (+). The condensation of these distinctions results in two opposite identities: vegans and nonvegans. By joining all the oppositions present in memes, nonvegans are represented as "people who promote animal exploitation," "speciesists," "garbage," "unethical," "brainless," "unevolved," "weak," "selfish," "people without feelings," "psychopaths," "murderers," "abusers," and "accomplices." In contrast, vegans are represented as "(anti-speciesist)," "(ethical)," "(reasonable)," "(evolved)," "(strong)," "(empathetic)," "(sensitive)," and "(innocent)." It is worth noticing that most of the time the subject of the memes was a nonvegan. Therefore, most of the characteristics found about vegans were implicit, and hence, presented in parenthesis.

CUANDO VES UNA FOTO ANTIGUA EN LA QUE SALES COMIENDO CARNE

Translation:
When you see yourself eating meat in an old picture.

Figure 2. Practical axis example 2 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021b).

Figure 2 shows that this negative evaluation applies to themselves, and they feel disgusted simply by remembering that they were meat-eaters. The typical use of this meme refers to a person hearing his voice and being disgusted about it. Here, that disgust is intensified, representing an aversion to their former practice of meat-eating and the kind of person they used to be. Figures 1 and 2 evaluate based on the practice itself but not on their beliefs, although these notions are close.

The second evaluation axis refers to individuals' beliefs regarding animal exploitation. From this second axis, what is at stake is the active declaration of their ethical-political view. Both accounts value positively those who declare being against animal abuse. As a counterpart, they negatively assess those who do not explicitly refuse animal exploitation, assuming their indifference.

Translation:
Uf it is hot in here! I'm going to take off my sweater! (Bart dialogue)
Eating meat is murder. (On the T-shirt)

Figure 3. Ethical-political axis example (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021c).

Figure 3 shows that those who assume an ethical-political position against animal exploitation permanently explain the situation's seriousness to those unaware. Specifically, this meme represents Bart Simpson wanting to communicate something out loud without saying it. He uses the high temperature as an excuse, removes his sweater, and reveals a T-shirt with the statement "Eating meat is murder" (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021c). Here, the use of this *The Simpsons* scene tells us that they want to express their thoughts but not necessarily get into a debate. The statement is not debatable. This position differs from memes where Lisa Simpson is the protagonist, where she says an unspoken truth out loud and is ready to expose arguments to defend her posture. We found both types of memes in the accounts. This meme demonstrates vegans' willingness to make animal exploitation visible, valuing this action

positively. In contrast, both accounts represent people not interested in animal exploitation as unsympathetic and hateful. The analyzed memes show this: they attribute to nonvegans a lack of sentiment toward animals, in addition to treating them as "clowns," "irrational," "unevolved," and "speciesists."

From the practical and ethical-political axes presented earlier (Martinic, 2006), we build a cross-structure representing four ideal identity types shown in Figure 4. These ideal types express the coherence between the ethical-political position and practices, where the authenticity of each identity is at stake (Greenebaum, 2012). On the one hand, it distinguishes between authentic vegan (+)(+) and impostor vegan (+)(−).On the other, it makes the distinction between authentic nonvegan (−)(−) and impostor nonvegan (−)(+). We will explain each ideal type in the following pages.
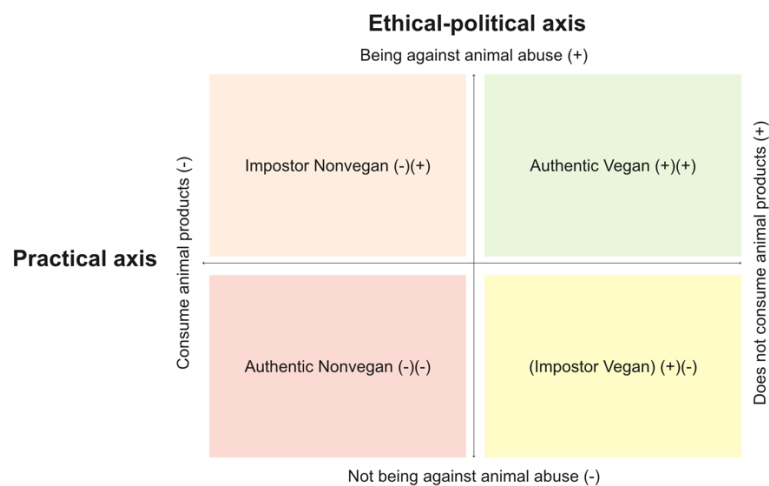

Figure 4. Cross-structure.

Authentic Nonvegan

Both accounts characterized authentic nonvegans as people who, despite being aware of the consequences of their actions, declare themselves indifferent and continue to consume products of animal origin.

Translation:
When you enter a vegan group saying things like "I like meat."

Figure 5. Authentic nonvegan example 1 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021d).

Figure 5 reflects this representation well: It shows five vegan people and one nonvegan (disguised as the character Big Bird of Sesame Street). On the Internet, we can find this meme commonly used to interpret someone making a fool of themselves in front of others. Here, the use of Big Bird, a character from Sesame Street, is not random. Big Bird's ignorance characterizes him, he is often wrong, and he is not afraid of looking stupid when he does not know something. This account uses this meme to represent authentic nonvegans as fools. Here, the foolish attribute is not due to not knowing something but to knowing something is wrong and doing it regardless. As we see in the text, the authentic nonvegan enters a vegan group to declare that he likes meat, despite knowing the symbolic load of meat in this environment. The authentic nonvegan shows his indifference to animal abuse through this statement, seeking to generate discomfort in vegans. In addition, this meme shows a working context where the nonvegan is out of place and makes a fool of himself, representing him as an annoying "clown" (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Here, we can see the superiority of the vegan group by turning the authentic nonvegan into an annoying subject negatively valued, a delegitimation strategy confirmed in literature (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

Figure 6. Authentic nonvegan example 2 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021e).

One of the most emblematic conceptualizations of the authentic nonvegan is the one in Figure 6. Here, Hannibal Lecter represents an authentic nonvegan: a character from films and books that murders and eats people for pleasure. The coldness of these acts demonstrates his lack of empathy and status as a psychopath. Internet memes only used the image of Hannibal Lecter to make jokes about him, such as "I ate my wife, it was love at first bite" (Imgflip, 2023), having no external meaning. Therefore, we can assume this is an emergent vegan meme (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014) that represents the vegan worldview by matching Hannibal and meat-eaters. The comparison between the victims of Hannibal and the animals killed for human consumption is evident. Authentic nonvegans justify their food choice by pointing out that food is just a personal decision, making the victims invisible, even if it involves other people or animals. Both examples show moral evaluation and rationalization strategies to portray authentic nonvegans as ridiculous and awful.

Impostor Nonvegan

Impostor nonvegans are those who take an ethical-political position against animal abuse or declare loving and respecting animals and yet consume products of animal origin. The dissonance between their discourse and practice makes them incoherent and hypocritical (Wrenn, 2020). As seen in Figure 7, vegetarians perfectly represent this opposition (Rosenfeld, 2019; Wrenn, 2020). Here, the vegetarian ignores the true face of cheese—"secretions from abused and killed animals" (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021f)—and prefers to continue conceptualizing it with the mask on to keep consuming it. Thus, veganism

is presented as the only logical option to be coherent if someone does not want to mistreat or kill animals (Jeffries, 2020).

Translation:
Hey cheese, why do you always wear a mask?
Cheese
Secretions from abused and killed animals.
Better keep the mask on.

Figure 7. Impostor nonvegan example 1 (vegetarian; Memes Veganos Chile, 2021f).

Figure 8 reinforces the impostor attribute of this type of ideal identity by showing a real owl (representing veganism) and a fake owl made of snow (representing vegetarianism). The real owl observes the fake one inquisitively because he perceives vegetarians as false allies who classify themselves as animal advocates but keep abusing them through their practices (Kauria, 2020). Thus, despite the similarities between vegans and vegetarians, a clear distinction is made around their food choice and authenticity.

Figure 8. Impostor nonvegan example 2 (Vegetarian; Memes Veganos Chile, 2021g).

Pet lovers are also seen as impostors because they declare to love and respect animals but keep eating meat. Here, the critique is based on speciesism and how impostor nonvegans make differences between animals. Figure 9 shows the double standard on animal abuse of impostor nonvegans. This meme represents the impostor nonvegan as an undercover villain, referring to the Star Wars scene where Anakin slightly declares his double standard regarding the Republic and the Empire. Anakin was already incubating the dark side of the Force, supporting elements of an authoritarian turn. Based on the analogy, the vegan impostor poses as an ally and declares he does not tolerate animal abuse. However, as the vegan keeps asking if that declaration includes all animals, he shows his speciesist side, implying the nonvegan's hypocrisy.

Translation:
Anakin: I do not tolerate animal abuse
Padme: That includes all animals, right?
Padme: That includes all animals, right?

Figure 9. Impostor nonvegan example 3 (speciesist; Memes Veganos Chile, 2021h).

Impostor Vegan

Next, there is the impostor vegan. This type of vegan is a person who does not consume animal products but does not have an ethical-political position against animal exploitation (Greenebaum, 2012). The analyzed accounts do not publish memes of this type of vegan because the main character of the memes is an authentic vegan. Therefore, impostor vegans are an implicit category based on what literature describes as people who follow a plant-based diet (Greenebaum, 2012; Kauria, 2020).

Authentic Vegan

Authentic vegans do not consume products of animal origin and have an ethical-political position against animal exploitation. Vegan identity in offline contexts is counterhegemonic because it defies carnism through discourse and practices (Joy, 2011). One of the main components of vegan identity is the deidentification from others who follow the hegemonic diet (Kauria, 2020). Most memes delegitimize nonvegans through moral evaluation or rationalization strategies (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Both accounts represent authentic vegans as the opposite positive side.

Authentic vegans differ from authentic nonvegans by being depicted as intelligent, superior, kind, and empathetic with animals, and they distance themselves from the impostor nonvegan by characterizing themselves as coherent, conscious, and sincere. Authentic vegans follow not only a vegan diet but also an ethical and coherent lifestyle, unlike the impostor vegan (Greenebaum, 2012). Thereby, both accounts represent ethical veganism as the only way to be coherent with their discourse and be ethically and morally correct (Jeffries, 2020). It is worth noticing that most of the attributes we have described are implicit categories made as opposition from nonvegans. For example, nonvegans are insensitive because they eat animals; therefore, vegans are sensitive because they do not.

Figure 10. Authentic vegan, example 1 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021i).

Figure 10 clearly shows both evaluation axes represented on their positive side. This meme is an emergent vegan meme (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014) and uses the image of Snow White cooking and being around animal companions as a symbol of harmony. During the film, Snow White is surrounded by animals, talking and singing with them. The image's text notes that the authentic vegan (Snow White) is preparing a dish that does not include animal cruelty and torture, illustrating the ethical-political beliefs around animal abuse. That is why her face is calm. The coherence between the ingredients used and her beliefs makes her at peace with her food choice. The squirrels around her reinforce the peaceful atmosphere, showing her being around animals without guilt.

Both Instagram accounts describe an authentic vegan as someone who tries to thematize veganism whenever possible. Figure 11 shows two emergent memes that represent this well. The first one shows a police officer detaining an authentic vegan, saying the protocol phrase, letting him know that he has the right to remain silent. As a response, the authentic vegan reply that is impossible because he is vegan. The meme represents an authentic vegan as someone who inherently talks about veganism. Based on the scene, we can also argue that even when it is not recommended to talk about veganism, vegans will do it regardless. The second one tells us that even when an authentic vegan is dead, the person keeps talking about veganism, trying to convince other people to go vegan. Therefore, not only is it impossible to not talk about veganism, but it is something one does for the long term.

Figure 11. Authentic vegan, examples 2 and 3 (Los Vegandores, 2021; Memes Veganos Chile, 2021j).

These accounts portray vegans who unexpectedly introduce veganism, surprising nonvegans. Figure 12 shows a meme where an authentic vegan tries to get the vegan discourse across in hidden ways. This meme is from a scene of *The Simpsons* where Moe Syslak advises Homer Simpson to invite a work colleague who hates him to his house for a family dinner and attacks him when he least expects it (Reardon, 1997). This scene has been used as a meme template with the following structure: Invite someone to *X*, and when they least expect it, you show them something (a documentary, the Bible, etc.). This meme is used when people want to teach someone something without their consent, assuming that this unexpected way is the better way to get their ideas across. This meme shows how authentic vegans used surprise factors to promote veganism, knowing the possible resistance of nonvegans.

Translation:
Invite her to watch Netflix
And when she least expects it
Boom
You play a documentary about veganism

Figure 12. Authentic vegan, example 4 (Los Vegandores, 2021).

Another hidden way of showing veganism represented in the analyzed memes is through food. Several memes show authentic vegans giving food to someone without telling them that it is vegan and then laughing at the end for their accomplishment of deceiving the nonvegan by making them eat vegan food, despite the fact they could resist trying.

Interactions and Relational Identity

The joint analysis of the memes helps observe how vegans represent the interaction with nonvegans, deepening the definition of each identity through the proper (re)action that each identity should have. We found that the representation of conflictive interactions prevails. Memes represent two types of interactions; one initiates with an authentic nonvegan mocking a vegan, and another is started by

nonvegans demonstrating their inconsistency with vegan ethics. These interactions are represented through action diagrams. On the top of the diagram, we show the interactions depicted in the memes, while at the bottom, we show the alternative actions, that are implicit in the memes, and therefore, represented between parentheses.

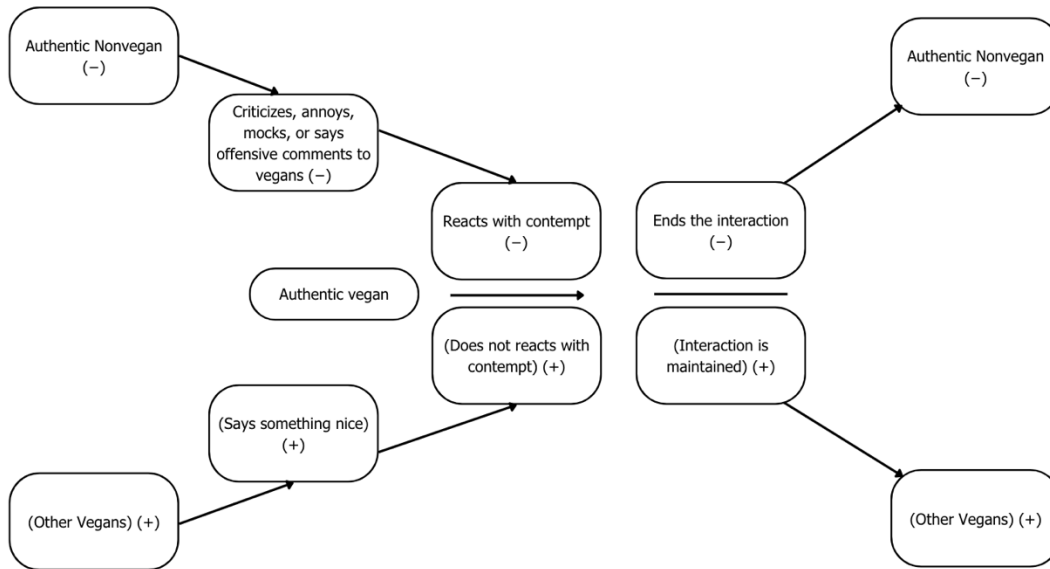*Interactions Initiated by Authentic Nonvegan Mockery*

Figure 13. Action diagram 1—interactions initiated by authentic nonvegan mockery.

The first type of interaction, represented in Figure 13, has as a background an authentic nonvegan who criticizes, annoys, mocks, or says offensive comments to vegans. This kind of treatment of vegans is consistent with what was found by other studies, highlighting the questioning about their diet (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020).

To the comments of the authentic nonvegans, the vegan has two options: they can react with contempt or refrain from doing so. However, memes represent only the first reaction. This representation of relational vegan identity promotes responses like interrupting the mockery, showing the lack of logic in the arguments, and losing patience before the nonvegan even finishes their sentence. This answer is sharp and ends the interaction. Even though this interaction as a whole is negatively valued, both accounts represent these reactions as the right way to answer these nonvegans actions. In contrast, a reply that does not respond to the nonvegan comment will be incorrect due to passivity in the face of omnivorous provocation.

Figure 14. Interaction with authentic nonvegans, example 1 (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021k).

Figure 14 represents this interaction well, using a template of Batman silencing Robin for saying something stupid. Thus, "You know that plants are also living beings" (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021k) is shown as a typical and stupid phrase that authentic nonvegans use, to which vegans are constantly exposed, so much so that the nonvegan does not have to finish the sentence and the vegan shuts him up. The vegan knows how the sentence will end and responds to the nonvegan's lack of logic, beating him and ending the conversation.

Figure 15. Interaction with authentic nonvegans, example 2 (Los Vegandores, 2021).

It is worth noting that these violent reactions always originate from speciesist comments; see Figure 15. This meme is used when someone justifies violence over stupid or unpopular sayings of others. The meme shows three people; two are fighting, and the other, an authentic vegan, preaches that violence is not the answer. Here, the authentic vegan is represented as someone peaceful and that looks godly in appearance. Only when the nonvegan says something speciesist does the authentic vegan endorse violence and react aggressively. This helps us understand that the authentic vegan responds violently, but only when something violent to their worldview is done or said first.

Interaction With Impostor Nonvegan

The second type of interaction represented in Figure 16 has as a background a nonvegan being inconsistent with the vegan identity, specifically seeing a person consuming a product of animal origin (typically meat) or an impostor nonvegan being inconsistent between his speech and practice. Unlike Paxman (2021), the vegan takes the opportunity to talk about veganism and question the ethics of the nonvegan based on their consumption practices or consistency with their ethical-political position. The common theme in this interaction is veganism and speciesism, problematizing how nonvegans tend to ignore the fact that killing and mistreating animals is necessary to eat meat and consume dairy.
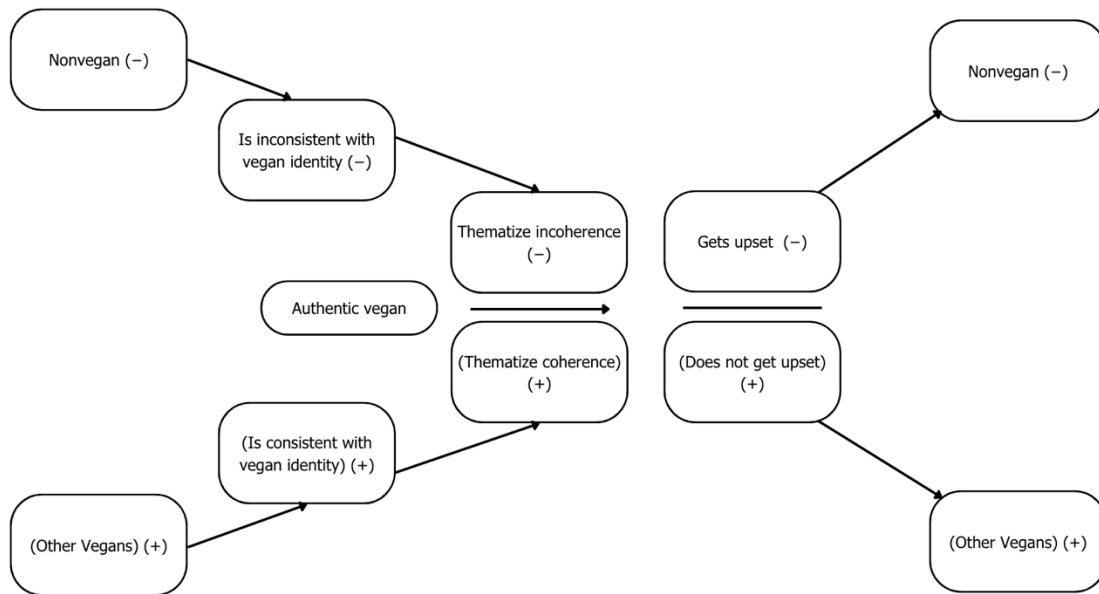

Figure 16. Action diagram 2—interactions initiated by inconsistency with vegan identity.

In addition, the questioning or visibility of incoherence with vegan ethics usually has as a response, in the representation of interaction, that the nonvegan feels offended, attacked, or bored. This nonvegan reaction is consistent with the literature that mentions that omnivores commonly get upset in interactions with vegans because they perceive the vegan lifestyle and its discourse to carry a moral critique toward them (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Greenebaum, 2012; Krogh, 2021; Twine, 2014). Figure

17 depicts this offense by showing Homer Simpson hiding behind the bushes after commenting that his family is eating corpses. This comment is problematic because it uses the word "corpse," which alludes to the dead animal, instead of the word "meat," which refers to food. The character hides in the bushes to avoid the consequences of the family's anger at his comment. Despite knowing the possible friction, the vegan depicted decides to mention it, emphasizing the conflictive element of relational vegan identity.

Figure 17. Authentic vegan thematizing incoherence (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021l).

In contrast, both diagrams show a possible interaction between vegans, which is obtained implicitly only due to opposition. We assume this interaction as pleasant, thanks to the existence of common logical and ethical precepts.

Conflict as a Reality in the Representation of Vegan Identity

Our analysis shows differences between the online representation of vegan and nonvegan interactions compared with literature based on face-to-face encounters. For example, both accounts do not represent strategies to avoid conflicts (Paxman, 2016; Twine, 2016). On the contrary, we found strategies to reaffirm vegan identity, even promoting conflict.

Yo: *le hago cariño a un gato*
El vegano qlo insufrible:

Pero ayer comiste vienesas

Translation:
Me: *petting a cat*
The unbearable vegan:
But you ate sausages yesterday

Figure 18. Authentic vegan as unbearable vegan, for example (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021m).

Confirming the literature, both accounts represent vegans as individuals with moral and intellectual superiority (Kassing, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2011). In the studied memes, vegans show their superior moral status by presenting themselves as the most rational and theming the other's lack of logic on each occasion (Jeffries, 2020). For example, Figure 18 illustrates a vegan exposing the nonvegan incoherence of treating one species (cat) nicely while murdering and eating others (pork or cow). The template of this meme uses a serious Dwayne Johnson that aggressively and directly questions other people's tastes.

Figure 18 shows the label "unbearable vegan," an offensive concept commonly used by nonvegans to reproach their constant need to talk about their worldview (Aguilera-Carnerero & Carretero-González, 2021). However, in Memes Veganos Chile (2021m), "unbearable vegan" acquires a new, positive meaning as an active declaration of their ethical-political position.

Both accounts represent conflict as an essential feature of authentic veganism, where a vegan that eludes confrontation is suspicious. Figure 19 is an example of this idea. This meme presents a situation on the television program *Pawn Stars* (Cobb, 2009), where Corey questions the authenticity of the relic presented, noting it could be fake. Thus, being vegan and respecting other people's food choices is unthinkable because there are significant differences in moral terms between their consumption decisions and those of others.

Figure 19. Contentious vegan identity example (Memes Veganos Chile, 2021n).

Both accounts represent conflict as an essential feature of authentic veganism. As a result, many vegans become adept at debating and developing arguments to support their stance. However, not all vegans have the same level of proficiency in these skills, as shown in Figure 20. This meme is based on a template from a picture of two rappers, showing two types of people: someone who does not know how to do something and another who is an expert in the field and teaches the other how to do it. In this case, the first one is an inexpert vegan paying attention to what the other one is doing. The meme suggests that the inexpert vegan asked for help to debate with his friends and family because he lacked the experience to effectively counter an argument. The second vegan is an expert (level-five vegan) who already has the skills. His expertise is shown by his confidence, posture, and ability to debate with family and speciesist friends. This meme tells us that vegans learn collectively to improve their debate skills, helping each other. This experience also comes from debating with nonvegans many times, improving their argumentation abilities.

Translation:
My fifth-level vegan friend is debating against my 2 aunts, 3 cousins, and 4 speciesist friends simultaneously.
Me in my first vegan debate on Facebook

Figure 20. Authentic vegan evolution in debate example (Los Vegandores, 2021).

Another key element in this meme is the allusion to a level-five vegan. This tells us that there is an evolution in vegan debate skills, but also it references an episode of *The Simpsons*, where Lisa meets a vegan activist who says he is a level-five vegan and does not eat anything that has a shadow (Dean, 2000). This level-five vegan represents a fully developed vegan who has transitioned to veganism in every aspect of his life and frequently advocates for animal rights through radical activism.

As established earlier, previous research shows that vegans in offline contexts must negotiate their identity to adapt to hostile contexts. Therefore, to evade conflict with significant others, they downplay their veganism, relegating it to a personal decision, and avoid criticizing them for their food choices. On the contrary, we have evidence that both accounts reproach the justification of food choices as personal preferences and judge nonvegans for them without avoiding conflict. This shows a difference not in the environment's hostility but in anonymity.

A possible explanation for the positive representation of conflict is that our methodological decisions—both online contexts and using memes as the analysis unit—allow the conflictive hidden side of veganism to emerge. The literature indicates that the Internet is a safe space for vegans (Wrenn, 2016)

because they can share their ideas and experiences with other vegans that understand their struggles (Davis et al., 2019; Erben & Balaban-Sali, 2016; Lawo et al., 2020; Mortara, 2015; Wrenn, 2016). This is mixed with anonymity, which makes it more probable to act uninhibited without considering the possible consequences of expressing their thoughts (Suler, 2004). Therefore, avoiding conflict and negotiating one's identity to adapt is unnecessary for these accounts. For example, there is no need to share a meal or jeopardize relationships by expressing personal beliefs.

The role of memes in representing political issues by polarization exacerbates this hidden conflictive side of vegan identity to amuse this online community (Penney, 2020). Following that idea, because veganism is a contracultural movement that constitutes their identity in opposition to the dominant worldview, we consider that using memes to study vegan identity allows us to evidence this antagonism. Therefore, portraying conflictive attitudes is a crucial and ideal feature of vegan identity.

Concluding Remarks

The results obtained in this research reaffirm the capacity of humor and memes to build imaginaries of identity within social media, where mockery of other groups sets the limits of self (Kassing, 2020; Udupa, 2019). We can reduce analyzed memes into two groups. The first group uses meme templates to get the vegan narrative across. In this group of memes, the text is the primer source of vegan discourse, giving a new meaning to the template. The second group comprises emergent vegan memes, where the image adds a particular vegan meaning. These two types of memes represent underlying discourses around vegan identity and alterity, placing each identity at the intersection of two evaluative axes. As a result, we identify four types of ideal identities, impostor nonvegan, authentic nonvegan, impostor vegan, and authentic vegan. Each identity's position in the practical and ethical-political axis defined them. Combining these two axes introduces the second level of analysis, referring to the coherence between the discourse and practice. Therefore, both accounts judge each identity by its authenticity, a crucial element in vegan identity (Greenebaum, 2012).

Analyzing the representation of identities through memes allows us to understand how these Instagram accounts conceptualized them from the adjectives attached to each meme. From nonvegans's opposition, following authentic veganism is represented as the only logical way to be coherent with discourses supporting animal rights and simultaneously be ethical (Jeffries, 2020). In these descriptions, both accounts use moral evaluation and rationalization strategies to delegitimize nonvegans and legitimize veganism (Ross & Rivers, 2017), drawing identity boundaries through mockery (Udupa, 2019). These strategies show the importance of alterity in representing counterhegemonic identities, such as the vegan identity, characterized by defying common worldviews and practices (Kauria, 2020; Luqiu, 2018; Rosenfeld, 2019; Wrenn, 2020).

Results also show two types of interactions, one that stops interactions in a conflictual way due to unreasonable nonvegan arguments and another that, from theming veganism, offends nonvegans. These interactions deepen into the characterization, describing the representation of the relational component of each identity through the proper (re)actions that authentic vegans should have to keep their authenticity. Here is our most outstanding contribution. The representation of veganism in these accounts does not

avoid conflict and even sometimes promotes it, in contrast to literature that studies of vegan identity in offline contexts (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Greenebaum, 2012; Twine, 2014).

Our methodological decisions help us establish that conflict is an essential characteristic of veganism as a counterhegemonic identity, and memes in online contexts facilitate this emergence. First, the anonymity of the accounts' owners could make them more likely to express their thoughts without inhibition (Suler, 2004). Second, one must consider the polarization in political memes and the delegitimization of others (Ross & Rivers, 2017). We conjecture that conflict is absent in face-to-face interactions not because it is negatively valued but because the interactional consequences are more significant than those in offline contexts. Thus, new dimensions of self-perception of identity arise in online contexts through memes.

It is worth mentioning that these findings show the representation of an ideal type and not the actual identities. For future research, we suggest integrating information obtained in an online and offline environment to understand the variables that lead to different behavior, deepening the layers of identities and their operation on the Internet.

Finally, we highlight the importance of structural discourse analysis in meme analysis, given its potential to identify oppositions, especially in groups that usually build their identity from dichotomous categories (vegan/nonvegan). Although this analysis risks simplifying reality, this becomes an advantage when analyzing memes because its nature lies in the simplified and caricatured communication of complex situations in small, multimodal communicative devices.

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