

**What We Mean When We Talk About Vegan(ism): Polysemy, Identity, and
Stancetaking on YouTube**

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ABSTRACT

The digital media landscape allows content creators to center their identities in their content. On YouTube, creators employ curated representations of self to foster parasocial relationships and position themselves in relation to a particular topic, making identity a salient factor in stancetaking online. This project analyzes the ways that creators on YouTube engage with the polysemy of veganism in their stancetaking strategies and the role of intertextuality and identity in online communication. This topic is explored through three substudies: The first examines how a YouTuber builds epistemic stance using a conversion narrative framework to presuppose an ex-vegan identity and gain membership to the carnivore diet community. The second examines an asynchronous, multimodal debate between two vegan content creators regarding intersectionality and identity politics in the vegan community, who negotiate in-group boundaries and the purview of veganism, while leveraging intertextuality and YouTube's affordances to bolster their epistemic stance. The third looks at how perceptions of veganism are deployed in stancetaking in public conversations with a street activist and the ways in which the comment section responds to those stances. This project shows how the stances taken on *veganism* contribute to its polysemy and argues that stasis theory is a useful tool for unraveling the polysemy of a term. Understanding how people approach conversations about polysemous topics can shed light on how prior text associations inform one's understanding of a topic and, therefore, the stances that they take.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2. VEGANISM: DEFINITIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND MOTIVATIONS	3
1.3. KEY TERMS	11
1.3.1. Stancetaking	12
1.3.2. Polysemy	15
1.3.3. Impression Management	17
1.4. YOUTUBE	21
1.5. CONCLUSION	27
CHAPTER 2: WHAT IT MEANS FOR A CARNIVORE TO BE EX-VEGAN: STANCETAKING, PRESUPPOSED IDENTITY, AND CONVERSION NARRATIVES OF AN ANTI-VEGAN YOUTUBER	33
2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	33
2.2. LITERATURE REVIEW & KEY TERMS	35
2.2.1. Stance & Stancetaking.....	35
2.2.2. Conversion Narratives	37
2.2.3. Veganism and Carnivore Diet	38
2.2.4. YouTube as a Place for Discourse Analysis	41
2.2.5. The Ex-Plant Eater.....	43
2.3. METHODS	46
2.4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION	48

2.4.1. Rejection of Previous Identity	50
2.4.2. Reframing Dietary Choice as Supernatural Practice Using Extraordinary Claims	53
2.4.3. Aligning with and Joining a New Community and Reinforcing Identity	62
2.4.4. The Grift.....	69
2.4.5. What “No Longer Vegan” Presupposes	73
2.5. CONCLUSION	76
CHAPTER 3: THE SCOPE OF ETHICAL VEGANISM: IN-FIGHTING, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND INTERPERSONAL DRAMA AMONG VEGAN YOUTUBERS	81
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	81
3.2. LITERATURE REVIEW & KEY TERMS	83
3.2.1. White Veganism.....	83
3.2.2. Infighting, Ideology, and Social Media	88
3.2.3. Impression Management	92
3.2.4. A Brief Discussion of Stasis Theory	95
3.3. METHODS	96
3.3.1. The YouTubers	98
3.3.2. Data Collection and Coding	99
3.4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	101
3.4.1. Performing YouTube.....	101
3.4.2. YouTube Videos as Collaborative Compositions	106
3.4.3 Collaboration [Audience Participation] Boosts Engagement.....	110
3.4.4 Intertextual Participation in Discourse	112

3.4.5. CONCLUSION	123
CHAPTER 4: STANCETAKING WITH LIKES: TOPICS, THEMES, AND ATTITUDES IN A VEGAN YOUTUBE COMMENT SECTION	127
4.1. INTRODUCTION	127
4.2. BACKGROUND: STANCETAKING, ONLINE CONVERSATIONS, AND DIGITAL PARALINGUISTICS	128
4.2.1. Stancetaking	129
4.2.2. Stancetaking Online	132
4.2.3. Performativity and Activism	134
4.2.4. Online Conversations	135
4.2.5. Paralinguistics	138
4.3. METHODS AND RATIONALE	142
4.3.1. Why YouTube Videos?	143
4.3.2. Why did I select this particular YouTube video?	145
4.3.3. Data Extraction and Cleanup: Netlytic and OpenRefine	148
4.4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS	149
4.4.1. Figure 4.1: Categorizing Comments	150
4.4.2 Figure 4.2: Breakdown of Good Feeling Words	151
4.4.3. Figure 4.3: Good Feelings According to Like Count	154
4.4.4. Figure 4.4: Frequency of Stance Objects	156
4.4.5. Figure 4.5: The Like Count of Stance Objects	157
4.5. DISCUSSION: A CLOSE LOOK AT SELECT COMMENTS	159

4.6. COMPUTER-MEDIATED ACTIVISM FROM THE MEATSPACE.....	167
4.7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK	168
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	171
5.1. INTRODUCTION.....	171
5.2. CHAPTER REVIEW	172
5.3. STASIS THEORY	176
5.3.1. Stasis Theory and Empathy	179
5.4. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK	184
BIBLIOGRAPHY	187
VITA.....	209

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Screenshot of EPE’s Affiliate Links.....	69
Figure 3.1. queerbrownvegan’s Instagram Comment to Soytheist.....	114
Figure 3.2. Post from Global Veganism: Identity Politics is Nonsense.....	115
Figure 3.3. queerbrownvegan’s Definition of White Veganism.....	118
Figure 3.4. The Issue with White Veganism and White Supremacy.....	120
Figure 3.5. Photo of Isaias Hernandez in Soytheist’s video.....	122
Figure 4.1. Breakdown of Categories.....	152
Figure 4.2. Breakdown of “feelings” (Good).....	153
Figure 4.3. Good Feelings According to Like Count.....	155
Figure 4.4. Frequency of Stance Objects.....	157
Figure 4.5. Like Counts of Stance Objects.....	158
Figure 4.6. Top (Most-Liked) Comment.....	161
Figure 4.7. Second Most-Liked Comment and Replies.....	163

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when you hear the word “vegan?” For some this term conjures images of waifish health-conscious individuals, “wheat grass-drinking hippies” (Greenebaum 2012: 321); for others this word brings to mind environmentalists working to stave off the ever-looming effects of climate change; and others may think of radical extremists protesting outside of a local KFC or McDonalds or engaging in direct action that is often labelled as terrorism (Flükiger 2008). It may well be that when you encounter the term “vegan” you imagine a chimeric amalgamation containing elements of various stereotypes based on prior experiences with vegans you’ve met in real life. Regardless of what particular image springs to mind, it’s clear that the word “vegan” elicits a variety of meanings, some overlapping, some discrete. Those different meanings can lead to tension within the vegan community and confusion from without. The impassioned animal-rights activist may prefer to refer to our imagined health-conscious friend or the environmentalist using the term “plant-based,” criticizing them for not centering the nonhuman animals in their discussions, whereas the environmentalist may admonish the militant vegan for failing to consider intersectionality and realpolitik of justice movements.

So, what does it mean to be vegan? What is veganism? And how do people use their understanding of veganism to construct stances regarding veganism? This project looks at how the polysemy of vegan(ism) is leveraged to construct stances in online discourse regarding veganism. Moreover, it interrogates how prior text associations contribute to polysemy (Briggs

and Bauman 1992), and how online discourse results in new prior text associations from which speakers can draw on in constructing their stances about a given topic (Sierra 2021). In particular, I look at how the polysemy of veganism is expressed and negotiated on YouTube, and how it informs users' stancetaking strategies. This project consists of three substudies examining how various framings and understandings of vegan(ism) unfold in four distinct YouTube videos. Although all three substudies are informed by discourse analysis, each one also engages with a different scholarly lens. Chapter 2 draws on scholarship from religious rhetorics, particularly conversion narratives; Chapter 3 pulls from media studies and activist rhetorics; and Chapter 4 engages with digital humanities.

Veganism is a contentious and often politically charged topic (Harper 2010; Freeman 2014; Muller et al. 2024), that is the subject of much debate, in part because vegan practices deviate from social norms and, in doing so, challenge the status quo. Given that a key part of veganism is the advocacy for animal rights, and how mis/disinformation is often levied against veganism, it is essential that interactants have the same understanding of the sense of veganism being used by each interlocutor in order to have productive debate and conversation – regardless of whether they are constructing favorable, antagonistic, or neutral stances about veganism.

The field of topics surrounding veganism offer many opportunities for discourse analysis, particularly surrounding stance and online interactions. Veganism touches on many spheres of life – diet, ethics, social norms – and is often contentious. As such, individuals tend to have strong opinions and present clear stances on veganism and for many reasons. Eating is something everybody does, and food is often a deeply personal topic, so individuals tend to have distinct

opinions about dietary choices. Moreover, veganism challenges dominant social norms (including dominant dietary practices), and, as a result, is often a subject of contention and debate (Freeman 2014; Greenbaum 2012). Additionally, veganism is relatively modern ideology (at least the term *veganism* is relatively modern) and a great deal of discourse surrounding veganism occurs online (Shepard 2020; Sneijder and te Molder 2009). The often strong stances people take about veganism, the fact that those stances are frequently expressed online, and the various affordances of computer-mediated communication can offer unique insights into how stancetaking occurs online, particularly in how individuals understand, frame, and evaluate a stance object (e.g. veganism).

What follows is an exploration of the various definitions of veganism and a classification of different “types” of veganism relevant for understanding the central focus of each chapter.; followed by an overview of key terms relevant to all three substudies – including stancetaking, polysemy, and impression management – as well as a rationale for YouTube as a fieldsite for discourse analysis. This chapter concludes with an overview of the following chapters and explanations of each substudy. This project ultimately concludes with an argument that stasis theory is an effective lens through which polysemy can be negotiated to engender productive conversation.

1.2. VEGANISM: DEFINITIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND MOTIVATIONS

While there are several definitions of veganism, the de-facto official definition from The Vegan Society (1944) describes it as:

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. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.

Prior to the coining of the term *vegan*, early scholarship on animal rights used the term *vegetarian*, which is a term that has a decidedly different meaning from veganism in the current day. Freeman (2014) discusses how early twentieth century pro-vegetarian writings expanded on earlier arguments for leading a moral life as the basis of abstaining from consuming animals, breaking down the human/animal dichotomy and arguing rather that there is no morally relevant difference between all animals, human or nonhuman. This way of thinking continues in the modern era, with Hamilton and Taylor (2012) proposing an approach that deconstructs the socially-constructed and established differences between species, for which only human animals have agency in negotiating. This is not to say that there are not notable differences between species, rather that there is no morally relevant difference between species that justifies inflicting unnecessary harm.

Movements to recognize the shared animality of humans and nonhumans led to an expansion of notions of kinship, sympathy, and virtue to include environmentalism, animal rights, and feminism (Freeman 2014: 43). Henry Salt (1921) asserted that ethics and emphasizing a humane life should be the primary reason for abstaining from animal products, while also noting the health benefits of vegetarianism, and the violence against nature required by animal agriculture, particularly large-scale operations (Freeman 2014). These concerns have been

validated as research consistently shows the negative impacts of environmental agriculture (The Good Food Institute 2017), with the UN's intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC 2022) and Harvard Law School's Brooks McCormick Jr. Animal Law & Policy Program (Harwat 2024) asserting that shifting to a more plant-based diet is key to mitigate climate change, particularly to reach the goals set out by the Paris Climate Agreement.

As such, although the definition provided by The Vegan Society is the “official” definition of veganism, there are variations in peoples’ approaches to, reasons for, and ways of enacting veganism (Kerschke-Risch 2015; Janssen et al. 2016; Braunsberger and Flamm 2019). For some, veganism is chiefly an animal rights movement; for others eating a plant-based diet is primarily motivated by health or the negative impacts of environmental agriculture (Kerschke-Risch 2015); and for others it is motivated by an intersectional ethic of total liberation (Freeman 2014; Andreatta 2023).

These various motivations for adopting plant-based/vegan diets lead to varied interpretations of veganism (Braunsberger and Flamm 2019), and can muddy the waters in vegan-related discourse, which is further exacerbated by the homogenization of vegans in public discourse. For example, the persistent joke “how do you know if someone is a vegan? Don’t worry; they’ll tell you” portrays vegans monolithically while simultaneously identifying veganism as a socially marked identity that challenges the status quo and social norms. It relies on the idea that vegans insist on sharing the fact that they are vegan, ignoring the factors which contribute to vegans *having* to share those identities. When someone offers food containing animal products to a vegan, they must make their identity known.

Veganism is frequently portrayed negatively in popular mass media (Kew 1999; Munro 2012), with vegans presented as extremists who perceive themselves as morally superior to nonvegans. Additionally, as Freeman (2009) notes, “the media usually construct food around the concepts of pleasure, nutrition, or economics, not around concepts of justice, ethics, and sustainability” (In Freeman 2014:23) which further frames meat as a product rather than a body part, distancing consumers from *who* (as opposed to *what*) they consume. While most people do care about the well-being of animals, the environmental damage of large-scale industrialized animal agriculture, and privately endorse the benefits associated with meat-free diets (Bolderdijk and Cornelissen 2022; Freeman 2014), meat consumption is the norm, particularly in Western societies (Leoy and Praet 2015). Although many nonvegans are sympathetic to the animal movement (Munro 2012), the fact that vegans challenge social norms often causes nonvegans to experience cognitive dissonance and feeling guilt-tripped when encountering veganism in practice (Freeman 2014; Joy 2010).

Despite an overall negative portrayal of veganism in the media, veganism is on the rise and public perception of veganism is shifting. In a survey of individual’s differing motivations and approaches to veganism, Kerschke-Risch (2015) found that 90% of respondents (German vegans between the ages of 15 and 77) agreed that being vegan is easier than a few years ago. This change in perception may correspond to the increasing number of vegans. If it is, in fact, easier to be vegan than it used to be, we should expect more people to adopt a vegan lifestyle – or at the very least a plant-based diet. Kerschke-Risch further notes that a vegan lifestyle has received increasing social acceptance, which may contribute to the perceived increasing ease of

following a vegan diet; however, due to the already small percentage of vegans, determining the total number of vegans/plant-based dieters has proven challenging (Hansen 2024). Some estimates suggest around 1% of the U.S. population is vegan (Jones 2023), while others put that number at around 3% (Stahler and Mangels 2022).

Homogeneous perceptions of veganism fail to account for the variations in motivations and practices of veganism and those who use the term to label themselves (Kerschke-Risch 2015). Indeed, Munro (2012) points out varied perceptions of the “animal movement” as by some as a primarily a political movement (Garner 1993; Wolfe 1993) and by others as a movement with social and moral motivations (Jasper & Nelkin 1992: and, even still, others fold the plight of nonhuman animals into environmental movements (Eckersley 1992). These diverse motives and practices of veganism vary between people and even within a culture (Yarbrough 2010). Although I would argue that there is significant overlap between these perceptions of veganism, for example, issues concerning the environment are also political and worth moral concern, it can be beneficial to consider different approaches to veganism as distinct, particularly when considering the polysemy of vegan(ism). Within the context of computer mediated communication, Braunsberger and Flamm (2019) note that vegan communities on social media show a great deal of disparity among members regarding the definition and practices of veganism. Given that calculating the total number of vegans already poses a significant challenge (Hansen 2024), determining the number of vegans who fit the various subtypes described below – and the extent to which they overlap – is naturally even more challenging. As such, I do not concern myself with which “type” of vegan is the most common, especially considering there *is*

overlap in motivations. For the purposes of this project and in following Braunsberger & Flam (2019) and Kerschke-Risch (2015), I differentiate between three distinct categories or types of vegans: *ethical*, *environmental*, and *health*.

Environmental vegans are primarily concerned with addressing how the consumption of animal-derived products contributes to environmental degradation and climate change (Springmann et al. 2016). As discussed above, a plant-based diet has been found to be key to mitigating climate change (Harwatt 2024; The Good Food Institute 2017; IPCC 2022) as well as reducing pollution and habitat loss. Braunsberger and Flamm (2019) point out how environmental motives are fairly broad and, while global warming and climate change are central factors, environmental motives may also include concerns about ecological balance, sustainability, resource depletion and the general health of the planet (Kerschke-Risch 2015; Bogueva and Phau 2016).

Given that environmental vegans and health vegans are both motivated utilitarianism and altruism (and justice), they have more in common than ethical vegans do with health vegans. Whereas health vegans are guided by a philosophy of self-preservation. Baker et al. (2002) show how health is the main factor that drives food choices, and, as such, those who are vegan primarily for health reasons share many commonalities with the wider public. While many view plant-based diets as unhealthy or nutritionally insufficient (Muller et al. 2024), the general consensus among dieticians is that appropriately planned plant-based diets (including vegan diets) are nutritionally adequate for all stages of life, including infancy and during pregnancy (Winston and Mangels 2009; BDA 2024). The majority of plant-based dieters cite health

concerns or environmental concerns as their top reasons for doing so (McCarthy and Dekoster 2020). So, within the already fringe practice of following a plant-based diet, doing so for ethical reasons (i.e. animal rights) deviates even more from the status quo. While there are environmental benefits and potential positive health outcomes of following a plant-based diet, they are tertiary to the concerns of ethical vegans – essentially just bonuses that can be used to further the cause of animal rights (Braunsberger and Flamm 2019; Kerschke-Risch 2015). Given the complexities of ethical veganism, I will spend the remainder of this section primarily explaining the positions of ethical vegans.

Francione (2000) and Freeman (2014) suggest that the most ideologically authentic approach to veganism is ethical veganism, being closely aligned with the Vegan Society's definition, particularly the "all forms of exploitation" and "for any purpose" aspects. While some who follow a plant-based diet may not completely abstain from the use of animals in all aspects of their life (e.g. riding horses, wearing leather/fur, etc.), ethical vegans primarily advocate for the liberation of all animals and total abolition of animal agriculture (Regan 1975). They maintain that it is a morally inconsistent position to accept taking the life of a nonhuman animal when one would not take the life of a human, particularly when doing so is unnecessary (Francione 2000; Freeman 2014). Ethical vegan practice generally centers around dismantling speciesism which refers to the belief that human animals are superior to nonhuman animals. Indeed, scholarship in animal studies suggests that a key difference between ethical vegans and other vegans is their level of speciesism (Braunsberger and Flamm 2019; Francione and Garner 2010; Freeman 2014; Greenbaum 2018). Ethical vegans typically oppose welfarism – cage-free,

free range, “humane” slaughter – arguing that such practices still lead to the exploitation and subsequent killing of nonhuman animals to satisfy human desires, particularly the sensory pleasure one gets from consuming flesh, milk, eggs, etc. (Freeman 2014; Singer 1990).

Ethical vegans often employ rhetoric that deliberately challenges social norms, such as using the term *farmed* animal instead of *farm* animal. The inflectional suffix *-ed* transforms the modifier *farm* into the past participle verb *farmed*, taking the function of a participial adjective and highlighting how farming is something *done* to nonhuman animals (by human animals), rather than the kind of animal they are. Or the term *carnism*, which is the invisible ideology that convinces people to eat some animals but not others (Joy 2011). Even the term speciesism, while generally understandable on its own, has not been given as much consideration by scholars as other oppressive structures like classism, racism, and sexism (Munro 2012). Jepson (2008) notes how people tend to use ambiguous and euphemistic terms for what is done to animals in order to avoid discomfort: terms such as *slaughter* and *harvest* (rather than kill); *bycatch* (which refers to the nontarget marine animals that are caught and discarded in commercial fishing); *artificial insemination* (referring to the forced impregnation of farmed animals); *processing plant* (i.e. slaughterhouse); and words like *livestock* that frame farmed animals as products rather than individuals. Ethical vegans actively push back against these euphemisms. As such, veganism is also an interesting subject for linguistic research.

Munro (2012) acknowledges the varied approaches and strategies people take in the context of the “animal movement” noting that some social scientists perceive the animal movement as a political movement (Garner 1993; Wolfe 1993), whereas others view it as a

moral and social movement (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Richards 1990). Muller et al. (2024) suggest that scholars examining nonhuman animal consumption should view it as a “deeply political activity embedded in questions of power and dominance” (12). Ethical veganism, with its focus on a level of liberation which requires a restructuring or – at the very least – a re-evaluation of the status quo, is a particularly political position (Freeman 2018).

Moreover, although research has previously focused on comparing health and ethical arguments (Hoffman et al. 2013), animal advocates and scholars have increasingly incorporated environmental arguments alongside (or in lieu of) compassion- and justice-based approaches to vegan activism “to reach larger audiences, attract the interest of media, and influence human habits (Almiron 2019: 1102). In doing so, those scholars and activists take a stance on the politically charged topics of climate change and environmentalism. Braunsberger and Flamm (2019) emphasize that the “lack of a commonly accepted definition of the term veganism among consumers can lead to problems when conducting research that focuses on understanding the differences in attitudes, motivations, opinions, beliefs, and behaviors among the different types of vegans” (231). Indeed, the fact that there is debate among scholars, as well as those claiming a vegan identity, about what veganism *is*, veganism is a term, ideology, and practice with varied and ambiguous meanings.

1.3. KEY TERMS

The following subsections discuss three key terms that inform each chapter in this project, namely *stance* and *stancetaking*, *polysemy*, and *impression management*. Section 1.3.1. discusses stance and stancetaking and the various types of stances that interactants can construct,

perform and take up. Section 1.3.2. offers a definition of polysemy and situates it within the context of *vegan(ism)*. Section 1.3.3. reviews Goffman's (1959) work on impression management and how scholars have applied impression management frameworks in researching vegan identity work and discursive strategies.

1.3.1. *Stancetaking*

Stance can be broadly understood as the ways in which interactants establish their position and convey meaning in a given interaction or how they express the ways they know about or are commenting on a given stance object (DuBois 1993; Wu 2004; Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018). Epistemic stance relates to a speaker's knowledge or confidence in a position, whereas affective stance shows a speaker's emotional position (Pavalanathan et al 2017). While some scholars focus on instances of stancetaking in regard to an individual speaker, others emphasize the importance of inter-speaker relationships and the stance focus (Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018). Kiesling (2009) argues that stance is the primary mechanism by which speakers develop their linguistic style, that a speaker's linguistic choices are made to convey whatever interpersonal or epistemic stances they want to take up with their various interlocutors.

Historically, scholars have maintained that individuals are unable to know what the other is feeling, yet this position does not reflect how people live their lives or react to their own experiences (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012: 434). The position that one cannot know how another feels ignores the fact that emotion is relayed in nearly every interaction (Ochs 1993) — even the absence of emotion is still an affective stance. By extension, the absence of an explicit portrayal

of expertise constitutes an epistemic stance. By even engaging in conversation about a given topic, the interactant identifies themselves as someone who *would* make an evaluation, as such they also mark themselves as knowledgeable (or at the very least they *perceive* themselves as knowledgeable), unless, of course, they explicitly note their lack of knowledge (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012).

Du Bois (1993, 2007) triangulates the factors one uses to construct stance into three criteria. Referred to as the stance triangle, DuBois' distillation of stance emphasizes the importance of a speaker's assessment of the various components of discourse: (1) the topic of discussion, (2) the audience/interlocutor, and (3) the discourse (speech, writing, etc.) itself. In other words, stance is about one's relationship to their utterance, the subject of their utterance, and their audience or interlocutors. A speaker can construct a stance that evaluates a stance object (or the main topic of discussion), the individual with whom they are interacting, and the language or utterance itself. DuBois' stance triangle indicates that stance is always about relationships and, as such, is highly recursive, interactive, and fluid.

Building on the work of DuBois, Kärkkäinen (2006) also highlights the significance of relationships in stance, arguing that stance is a public action shaped by the stance(s) of the involved participants. Kiesling et al. define stance as “the discursive creation of a relationship between a language user and some discursive figure, and to other language users in relation to that figure” (2018: 687). This definition synthesizes Kärkkäinen's approach with the stance triangle, providing researchers the opportunity to examine even more aspects of stance, particularly within the realm of digital communication. Within this definition, they identify three

dimensions of stancetaking: *affect, investment, and alignment* (Kiesling et al. 2018: 688). These three dimensions of stancetaking provide a robust framework with which to analyze construction and performance of stance.

Affect refers to the way a stancetaker evaluates a stance object. The same focus of stance might be evaluated positively or negatively. For example, the same request can be conveyed with a negative affect (“Shut up!”) or a positive affect (“Could you please be quieter?”). Investment is the strength of a speaker’s utterance, or how much they care about the subject and the lengths they will go to defend their positions. Alignment is the extent to which a speaker orients themselves to their audience. These three dimensions of stance can be operationalized with different intensity or purpose to construct and perform stance.

The three dimensions of stancetaking provided by Kiesling et al. (2018) add further nuance to Du Bois’ stance triangle and, as such, provide a solid framework by which to analyze the construction and performance of stance. By using the three dimensions of stance in conjunction with the stance triangle, one can more thoroughly explore the ways in which interactants establish stance. Within the context of computer-mediated communications, the repertoire¹ from which communicators can pull from to construct stance is expanded through various multimodal affordances, particularly on YouTube. YouTubers are able to make use of

¹ *Verbal* or *linguistic repertoire* refers to the range of linguistic resources that individuals can draw upon in various situations and interactions, including languages (codes), styles, dialects, and modes (Hymes 1967).

filmmaking techniques (editing, sound design, cinematography, framing, etc.) to add to their stances and the ways they construct and present those stances.

1.3.2. Polysemy

Speakers take for granted the fact that a word's definition is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. Because definitions are descriptive and malleable, interpretations and usage of a term can vary. This variation results in polysemous ambiguity. Despite variations in different senses of a particular word, people tend to arrive at a shared understanding of meaning or senses of meaning (Carston 2020).

The type of linguistic ambiguity that contributes to the varied interpretations and uses of “vegan(ism)” is described as *polysemous*, understood as words (or linguistic expressions) that represent multiple related senses (Carston 2020). In contrast to homonymous ambiguity — where words have distinct expressions and meanings, despite shared phonological realization — polysemy depends on a speakers' cognitive representations and understanding of differences between words and their (dis)similar senses. A speaker's mental representations of a particular word/expression are informed, among other factors, by their prior text associations with that word/expression, including objects, individuals, experiences, and institutions that a word may refer to (Sierra 2020). Polysemy expands the repertoire of stances that can be taken, as the stance object may differ depending on which sense of the word is drawn upon.

The polysemous ambiguity of “vegan” is due to differences in both pragmatic and semantic understandings of the word. Semantic in that a speaker using the word has a mentally stored and directly retrievable sense of “vegan” — in other words their own definition of

“vegan.” The polysemous ambiguity is also pragmatic in that, because there is debate among the *definition* of “vegan” and people who practice different kinds of “veganism” still claim the label, what one means when they say “vegan” must be negotiated in the context of the interaction. For example, what does a beauty product being “vegan” mean to someone whose mentally stored understanding of *veganism* is an ethical stance that aims to avoid and exclude any form of animal exploitation? How can a beauty product maintain an ethical stance? This ambiguity also impacts how vegan communities – and the identities of those within the community – develop and cohere.

Kelly and Halverson (2004) discuss how determining what constitutes a community, particularly in CMC, can be challenging. This is due, in part, because of the various definitions of community and how those definitions often differ depending on the type of community being defined. Kelly and Halverson settle on Bell and Newby’s (1974) definition of community as “a cohesive group to which all people have a clear consciousness of who belongs” (5). I posit that this drives the polysemy of vegan(ism), because, even though it is an identity marker – and thus a way of building community with people who share that identity – there is a lack of cohesion and agreement on what that identity *is*; and (as discussed in Chapter 3), the practices of the vegan community and, therefore agreement on and who belongs in that community, are continuously (re)negotiated. As discussed above, even among vegans, motivations and practices of veganism vary among persons (Andreatta 2023; Harper 2010), as such practices of veganism are heterogenous and can not be predefined (González and Ávila Gaitán 2014).

Semantic variation of any word is expected and normal, as increasingly more people are adopting a vegan lifestyle or plant-based diet — or, as we see in Chapter 2, quitting a plant-based diet in favor of exclusively animal-based diets — ambiguity in what a speaker means when they use the word “vegan” influences their stancetaking strategies. Indeed, discrepancy in different speakers’ use of the term may further impact their interlocutor’s understanding of “veganism” and create an additional prior text association that further contributes to the polysemous ambiguity of the term. For ethical vegans with inclinations toward activism, who are often derided in the public sphere and who face an uphill battle in their activism, they must cut through this ambiguity for their stances to be understood. For example, someone’s mentally stored understanding of *veganism* as a health-foods movement allowing for only raw fruits and vegetables might be unreceptive to the vegan activist whose focus on nonhuman animals over dietary orthodoxy allows them to happily eat OreosTM and Beyond BurgersTM. On the flip-side, health-focused vegans might view the consumption of junk food as antithetical to their understanding of *veganism*. Thus, even among vegans, polysemous ambiguity can lead to misunderstanding at best, and division and conflict at worst.

1.3.3. Impression Management

As all of the creators analyzed in this project are presenting a curated version of themselves to a particular audience, Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management serves as a useful concept for understanding how those presentations of self and constructions of a digital persona both shape and are shaped by the stancetaking strategies used. Impression management refers to the rituals and strategies individuals employ to intentionally foster a

desired self-presentation which is maintained through consistent performance with complimentary behaviors (Chen 2014). Bolino and Turnley (2003) identify five impression management strategies typically used: self-promotion; ingratiation; supplication; intimidation; and exemplification. While impression management is contextual and based in particular settings and interactions (Goffman 1959), individuals online are able to construct and present a persona – an impression – that extends past a regional setting (Chen 2014). These impressions are managed by internet users in the ways in which they use “the equipment available in particular settings, especially equipment for displaying information” (Hafner 2015: 98). In other words, internet users are able to leverage the affordances of computer-mediated communication and the tools of the internet to present a persona that is managed beyond a particular setting. Moreover, the methods in which subjects of this project present their digital selves – namely YouTube videos – become texts that are able to exist outside of a specific setting or active interaction. Those texts may then be used as reference points guiding future interactions (both on- and offline), self-presentations, and impressions. As such impression management strategies, and how the tools available for managing impression online, guide how YouTubers present themselves.

Of particular relevance to this project, impression management has been used as a framework for analyzing interactions surrounding veganism. Building off of Goffman’s (1959) work on impression management and face work, Greenebaum (2012) notes how the identities of vegans “can become ‘discreditable’ if they discuss veganism as a politic and ethic within the context of animal rights rather than merely a diet or lifestyle” (Greenebaum 2012: 312), and are tasked with saving face, and maintaining social conventions, all while their existence actively

challenges social norms (Sneijder & te Molder 2009; Neuman 2020). Because vegans often feel alienated from “mainstream society” (Greenbaum 2012), they may hesitate to share their identity and dietary preferences for fear of standing out or facing rejection. (Bolderdijk and Cornelissen 2022). As a result, vegans tend to avoid interpersonal conflict and have successful interactions with non-vegan friends and family by carefully managing impressions of themselves as disciplined and self-controlled. Often this is done by presenting veganism positively and avoiding contention along moral boundaries and leading by example.

Social conventions guide how we move through and interact with the world and others and are continuously negotiated in conversation as it unfolds. Gilbert (2014) describes social conventions as the rules that stem from two (or more) actors’ commitment, such that violating those rules yields negative consequences and constitutes an offense of the other parties’ commitment to upholding those norms (Neuman 2020). Vegans operate outside of established social norms such that their very presence is seen as a remark on those social conventions, particularly the social construction of consuming animals (Adams 2008; Joy 2010). Indeed, because meat eaters seldom think about their choice to consume meat unless interacting with veganism (through face-to-face conversation, vegan content online, plant-based products in stores), meat eating is an unmarked social convention. The result of meat-eating as an unmarked social convention that interactions between vegans and non-vegans are effectively negotiations of that social convention. Since violations of social conventions result in the violating party being reprimanded (Gilbert 2014), how then do vegans — for whom a violation of a social convention is a core part of their identity and practices — save face among non-vegans?

In an analysis of the ways in which 26 vegetarians and vegans discuss their diet with non-vegans, Greenebaum (2012) found that, to increase the likelihood that a non-vegan audience will listen to their position, vegans defer to presenting veganism in a positive light, avoiding interactions that would lead to friction between moral boundaries. Greenebaum highlights four ways that vegans maintain their front stage personas – the presentation of a self that behaves in ways that meet social norms, maintained while others are watching – and save face: avoiding confrontation, appropriate timing, focusing on health benefits, and leading by example. While the list of strategies vegan (and vegetarian) participants in Greenebaum’s study use to save face is by no means exhaustive, they stand in contrast to strategies employed in inter-vegan discourse. Vegans don’t need to worry about how their presence violates social conventions; as such, they don’t need to consistently paint veganism in a positive light or avoid confrontation — the unmarked social conventions of their audience aren’t suddenly marked by virtue of their interlocutor’s identity. The preventative facework strategies discussed by Greenebaum (2012) and an awareness of the most effective (i.e. well-received) approaches to activism (Freeman 2014) are key for vegans saving face with non-vegans; however, they are less necessary in discourse *among* vegans. If the point of vegans engaging in front stage behavior (Goffman 1959) is to get a potentially hostile audience to simply listen to a vegan, then vegans do not necessarily have to present veganism in an exclusively positive light when conversing with other vegans. Thus, it is among vegans that the nuances, and negatives, of veganism and vegan activism are discussed in good faith; whereas the stancetaking and impression management strategies used in

interactions among non-vegans differ greatly and depend on previous experiences and interactions.

Overall, the subjects of each chapter in this project are presenting a deliberately performed front stage persona in their videos, and are further curating that front stage persona as they build an overall digital persona. In doing so, they are all engaging in the work of impression management. The stancetaking strategies employed by each creator serve to give their audience a particular impression of themselves as YouTubers – how they want to present themselves in that space – as well as an impression of veganism that leverages and perpetuates the polysemy of *vegan(ism)*. How they present veganism, what aspects they focus on, and what stances they take in regard to that presentation of veganism become new prior-text associations for interactants to draw from in their own discourse about veganism.

1.4. YOUTUBE

First launched on February 12, 2005, YouTube is a video sharing platform featuring content from original content creators, companies, and advertisers. YouTube’s mission statement is “to give everyone a voice and show them the world” informed by the belief that “everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories” (YouTube 2025). YouTube channels serve as an archive of videos uploaded by individual accounts and then YouTube categorizes those channels across broad genre categories, providing an index for user search and algorithmic discovery (Thomson 2019).

Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has grown into one of the world's most used video-sharing platforms. Indeed, with more than 2.7 billion monthly active users (Global Media Insight 2025), YouTube is not just widely used, but has become an essential place for the formation, curation, and performance of identity (Bhatia 2023) and building social relationships (Lange 2007). Chen (2014) suggests that the presentation of a digital self on YouTube involves an awareness of cultural values with symbolic meanings that individuals use to construct and present desirable digital self-images which engender parasocial relationships which reinforce those digital identities. The identities that are presented on YouTube by content creators, viewers, and commenters engender the formation of communities that are shaped by content on the site and, in turn, inform what kinds of content gets made. As these online communities develop, they also construct "standards of normative behavior, levels of prestige, and perceptions of competence" (Bhatia 2023: 15). The normative behaviors of a community that form from the practices of a community themselves, contribute to an interdiscursive presentation of expertise.

In her analysis of YouTube beauty vloggers, Bhatia (2023) emphasizes the importance of the interdiscursive performance as an essential aspect of constructing an expert identity: the combinations of speech, bodily performance and gesture, writing, music, location, and other various semiotic and linguistic resources allow YouTubers to display expertise as "an understanding of the practice and conventions of YouTube as well as expertise in terms of conveying specialized knowledge" (17). This expertise is reinforced by subscriber comments accompanying the videos (Bhatia 2023) or even challenged within those same comment threads or criticized through reaction videos (a similarly community-informed generic format).

Essentially, YouTubers draw on various modes of discourse across different contexts to construct, express, and curate various identities. A single video on the platform engages with not just the intended (cultivated) audience and their practices, but the broader discourses of society.

The texts that populate the sphere of online computer-mediated communication are, like spoken interactions, products of social interaction, informed by the values, practices, and norms of the communities from which they emerge (Chen 2016). Indeed, YouTube pages (among other websites) are both a form of social media as well as products of mediated social interactions. Benson (2015) argues that YouTube content — the videos, comments, pages, etc. — as products of social interaction can therefore be analyzed using the same tools of discourse analysis that examine the “structures of spoken interaction” (82). YouTube’s multimodal and interdiscursive format provides ample points of analysis: the purely linguistic aspects of a video, interactions within comment sections, the editorial and cinematographic elements of a video, the sequential environment of the YouTube website itself, and the communities that develop on the platform. As Androutsopoulos (2013) notes, the textual units of YouTube, particularly the videos themselves and the comments, co-occur in patterned ways that are interrelated in how they contribute to meaning making. As such, texts on YouTube cannot be divorced from their multimodal contexts. Given that stance is expressed through the cooperation of multiple resources — lexico-grammatical, bodily-visual, environment and material context — stance is necessarily expressed multimodally (Jensen 2014; Andries et al. 2023). Moreover, stances are intensified by drawing on multiple semiotic resources (Kärkkäinen 2012).

Being both *products* and *places* of social interaction, YouTube pages can be analyzed through a framework of discourse analysis. Benson (2015) argues that even though there are key differences from spoken conversations, YouTube content – pages, videos, comments – can be analyzed with the same tools used for analyzing spoken interaction. Nevertheless, YouTube pages are “social interaction and network that is mediated through uploading media and commenting on that media. (Zourou and Lamy 2013; Benson 2015: 84). The affordances of social media that contribute to the mediated experiences of interactants enable users to engage in more open digital self-expression (Chen 2014; White 2024). Lange (2007) and Pace (2008) note that YouTube is a fruitful setting for presenting the digital self as it gives amateur content creators plentiful sources of mediating experiences to display their lifestyles. Through CMC people are able to share more of their lives with a greater number of people than ever before, beyond regional limitations. Indeed, with YouTube being one of the most-visited sites in the world (Alexa 2016; Thomson 2019) the potential for the world to see your digital self is larger than other social media sites that require a level of consent to make content available (e.g. friend/follower requests).

At the same time, users may also wish to hide parts of themselves and showcase a curated version of their lives and experiences (Chen 2014; Potter 2012). This gives users more control over their self-expression than they may otherwise experience in face-to-face interactions, making identity a salient feature when analyzing CMC. The identities people express online and what claiming that identity does for them – what they can gain, what communities they are members of, what identities they reject – allow for digital self-expression and identity to be

leveraged as tools for stancetaking. Digital self-identity and how it's expressed show a person's thoughts, feelings, and knowledge of that identity and the communities it provides access to. Considering how stance involves interactants establishing a position and indicate their knowledge and feelings about a topic (DuBois 1993; Wu 2004; Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018), one's digital self becomes a powerful and useful tool for stancetaking and for building relationships (Chen 2014).

The digital self as a stancetaking tool is particularly apparent in the context of YouTube, as the curated (i.e. edited) aspects of a digital persona are explicit in the primary content of the site: videos. From brainstorming to script writing, revising, filming, and editing the video, the process that culminates in posting a video on YouTube gives creators multiple opportunities to consider what aspects of their life they want to show. Creators that want to present a professional identity may spend a great deal of time on the script and editing, perhaps incorporating more advanced filmmaking techniques (e.g. lighting, shot composition, sound design, visual effects). Creators that may want to present themselves as more casual and approachable may film themselves in their living rooms or similar intimate locations. They may forgo a script entirely to express themselves as knowledgeable. At every level of the process, decisions are made about how and who you are showcasing in your videos. As such YouTube functions as a sort of fantasy-driven space (Chen 2014), that provides users with freedom to express their views and present whatever or whoever they want others to think they are (Lange 2007; Bergen 2022).

The interactions that are mediated on YouTube also exist as their own texts that can stand on their own outside of, and well after, an interaction. As an independent text, these interactions

allow for people to develop prior text associations which then influence their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings on a given topic, thus affecting what stances they take (Sierra 2021). A unique aspect of social media interactions is that, despite existing as independent texts, they also give “the impression of ongoing activity” (White 2024: 45) This impression of ongoing activity is particularly useful for activism, as it keeps awareness of the cause within active discourse. If the activity happening online is ongoing, then so is the activism. Even though the texts exist independently, and the interactions end, the videos/posts/comments keep that conversation going. Just like all prior text associations, YouTube videos are not constrained by the time and the ephemerality of conversation.

In the case of a polysemous term such as *vegan(ism)*, which is outside of the status quo, often contentions, associated with various identities – which are expressed through the stances one takes (Kiesling 2009) – prior text associations have a significant impact on how one interfaces with vegans and veganism. For example, engaging primarily with texts that frame veganism as a health-food movement may lead to confusion when one sees an ethical vegan consuming “junk” food. The variations in understandings of veganism then lead to misunderstandings of what veganism is as a diet, as a lifestyle, and for what one’s motivations are for adopting and claiming a vegan identity (Kerschke-Risch 2015; Braunsberger and Flam 2019; Harper 2010).

By contextualizing YouTube as a data site with a wealth of semiotic resources, we can see how various modes influence stancetaking strategies, especially considering that similar stances are often expressed through (combinations of) different modes within a single YouTube

page. Emphasizing YouTube’s multimodality helps further illustrate how stancetaking itself is a multimodal act (Andries et al. 2023; Barton 2015)

As such, YouTube stands as a particularly fruitful location for analyzing the discursive practices that are used to construct stance. Analysis of YouTube content (and social media content more broadly) can reveal the linguistic practices that users — both as producers and consumers — employ to sustain communities that encourage collaborative production and consumption and knowledge sharing (McLoughlin and Lee 2008). In fact the unique affordances of YouTube and the ability to post videos and respond to videos (both as comments and videos) enable a new class of amateur experts emerge, for example beauty vloggers offering makeup and style tutorials, hybridizing colloquial speech “as well as jargon-based, formal, instructional talk,” thus indexing expertise and blurring the distinction between learner and teacher (Bhatia 2023: 30). It is through the construction of expertise within a particular community — by engaging with and reinforcing the norms of that community — that a YouTuber becomes a source of information to which a community can turn.

1.5. CONCLUSION

In this project, I assert that a key driver of polysemy is prior text associations. Labels associated with identities, behaviors, or beliefs, particularly those that exist outside of – or seek to challenge – the status quo (such as veganism) are often not fully understood by outgroups (Ghaziani & Fine 2008). As such those labels tend to have wide variations in meaning or senses of meaning. I explore the polysemy of veganism in three distinct studies. Each chapter of this project focuses on different ways in which people understand *veganism* and *vegans* and how

varied (mis)understandings of veganism influence what stances a speaker takes, how they establish those stances relative to their sense(s) of veganism. Chapter 2 examines the stancetaking strategies employed by an ostensibly former vegan as they explain their shift away from a plant-based diet and towards anti-veganism. Chapter 3 focuses on intertextual, multimodal discourse between two vegans as they contend with the ethical purview of veganism. Chapter 4 explores the stancetaking strategies employed by a vegan in impromptu street interviews, focusing additionally on the stances that are taken up by viewers in the comment section and how they change as an interaction unfolds. I present a more detailed explanation of the following chapters below.

Chapter 2 looks at how an ex-vegan YouTuber, The Ex-Plant Eater (EPE), employs a conversion narrative framework to position herself as a full and committed member of the carnivore diet community. I synthesize rhetorical theories on conversion narratives to present a four-step conversion process following the rejection of a previous identity to describe the rhetorical moves The Ex-Plant Eater makes: (1) rationalizing the rejection of a previous identity; (2) use of extraordinary claims to reframe that rejection/shift in identity as supernaturally motivated; (3) aligning with a newfound community and reinforcing that community's identity markers; (4) becoming a full member and claiming the identity of the new community. I suggest that the digital persona curated (Snyder 2015) by EPE is one that was *not* vegan, as there is no evidence of prior veganism on the channel (i.e. digital self) The Ex-Plant Eater. I argue that the effectiveness of EPE's conversion narrative hinges on the presupposition that she actually *was* vegan and her audience's acceptance of that presupposition. The validity of her arguments

against veganism depends on the extent to which one accepts that presupposition. Additionally, I show how The Ex-Plant Eater's health-related motivations for going vegan contribute to the sense of meaning that positions veganism as primarily concerned with health and diet. In contrasting their supposed negative health outcomes as a vegan with her positive health outcomes on the carnivore diet, EPE perpetuates the negative portrayal of veganism in the media while also contributing to the polysemy of vegan(ism).

Chapter 3 is about negotiating the meaning of ethical veganism, and, in doing so, establishing *how* someone does veganism, which informs what it means to *be* vegan as an identifier and an ethical position. It examines an asynchronous, cross-platform debate between two ethical vegans about the concept of *white veganism* and the extent to which intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) should be considered within the scope of veganism; they debate whether veganism should be a movement solely focused on nonhuman animals or if, in advocating for animal liberation, it should consider the struggles and issues affecting human animals. The two subjects of this chapter leverage the multimodal and intertextual affordances of YouTube, referencing and contextualizing conversations across different social media platforms to perform the role of YouTuber. In participating in this infighting, these two YouTubers and ethical vegans interrogate group identity as well as the practices of ethical veganism, while maintaining the meaning of veganism as an ethical stance. The differences in approaches to veganism, and debates about its ethical purview shows how, even among interactants who view veganism similarly, there is polysemous variation in what veganism means.

Chapter 4 explores the overall stances of the comment section of a vegan street epistemology YouTube video. This chapter takes a big-picture approach, drawing on practices from digital humanities, to examine how commenters who may or may not be vegan (but aren't necessarily hostile toward veganism) interpret the debates about veganism shown in the video, and how those interpretations affect epistemological conversations and the stances viewers take in response to those conversations. I identify the most frequent words used in the comments, as well as the most frequent stance objects, and use *likes* as the primary paralinguistic feature that indicates the general stance of the comment section. Additionally, I use close-reading analysis to illustrate how the general stance of the comment section is expressed in select comments. I argue that the content of the video, and the creator's use of the tools that YouTube's comment section offers, impacts the general stance and attitudes expressed in the comment section.

I conclude by suggesting that an effective way of negotiating polysemy is through an understanding of stasis theory. Stasis theory describes a systematic way of asking questions about and identifying the movement of arguments at different levels of understanding, serving as a heuristic for pointing to the key issues in a debate (Hoppman 2014). While there are many interpretations of stasis theory, dating from its roots in classical Greek rhetorical tradition (Katos 2007; Marsh 2018) to current interpretations and reworkings (Crowley and Hawhee 2011), I confine my stasis levels to four: conjecture, definition, quality, and policy. Each level deals with distinct fundamental questions. Put simply, questions of conjecture ask if a thing exists; questions of definition ask what *kind* of thing it is; questions of quality are concerned with if that thing is good and/or "right" or "wrong;" and questions of policy ask what should be done about

the thing. This is the framework that I employ in my argument and discuss in greater detail in chapter 5.

Because definitions are descriptive and malleable, interpretations and usage of a term can vary. This variation results in polysemous ambiguity. Despite variations in different senses of a particular word, people tend to arrive at a shared understanding of meaning or senses of meaning (Carston 2020). Figuring out how to resolve polysemous ambiguities pragmatically, effectively ensuring that two interactants are on the same page regarding a word's usage(s), is key to ensuring productive conversation. When two people are on the same page about a term's meaning, they are less likely to talk past each other. This is not to say that this project sets out to establish a concrete definition of *veganism* or eradicate the ambiguity. However, when aspects of veganism (particularly the oft over-emphasized dietary restrictions) concern many spheres of life — ethics, environment, health, sustainability — understanding differences in the senses of *veganism* can shed light on the stancetaking strategies employed by advocates and critics of veganism.

Though I move through the world with my own definition (much like the subjects of each study), the goal of this project is not to prescribe a single definition of veganism, nor to make a case for veganism. Instead, because veganism is a debated topic – one I believe warrants productive discourse – interactants need to know (1) that people have different interpretations of veganism and (2) their prior text associations are not the final arbiter nor the only “version” of veganism. This is important because veganism is a political topic, not just a personal topic.

Understanding what someone means when discussing veganism is essential for wrestling with the political implications of vegan discourse.

Chapter 2: What it Means for a Carnivore to be Ex-Vegan: Stancetaking, Presupposed Identity, and Conversion Narratives of an Anti-Vegan YouTuber

2.1. INTRODUCTION

As digital content creators engage in the process of content creation — composition, editing, publishing — they naturally share mediated and curated versions of their experiences (Potter 2012). These curated versions of their experience enable rhetorical persuasion that can produce particular responses and interpretations among users and other content creators (Snyder 2015). The content a user chooses to curate, that is, the content they produce themselves and other content they choose to display or point to, is instrumental in constructing and presenting their digital selves. On YouTube in particular, power is placed “in the hands of users in their pursuit of self-representation and social interaction, allowing for greater room for strategic displays of oneself and beliefs” (Bhatia 2023: 28). This content can be further curated by others as they appropriate, borrow, and remix existing content (Rosenbaum 2011; Snyder 2015). This content that is created by and for the creation of a digital persona then functions as an interdiscursive resource (Fairclough 1992) that can, in turn, be used to construct and perform stance (Kiesling et al. 2018).

This study looks at YouTuber The Ex-Plant Eater’s (EPE) video “I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story)”² and explores the

² “I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story)”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MprLRv-IHs&list=PLq6uM5qVio9CE7yvnU9T1qzHrjwqD8Akh&index=3>

construction of stance and curation of identity within the intertextual setting of YouTube. I argue that EPE uses a conversion narrative framing in her stancetaking strategies regarding anti-veganism, and how the effectiveness of those stances relies on a presupposition of a prior vegan identity and her audience's acceptance of that presupposition.

I pair close reading with discourse analysis to examine the stancetaking strategies and rhetorical moves employed by EPE as they eschew one identity in the construction of another. Namely how, in her rejection of a vegan identity, they lay claim to an identity as a carnivore diet influencer. I argue that EPE's no-longer-vegan (NLV) video functions as a conversion narrative that relies on a presupposed vegan identity; that she uses that presupposed vegan identity to strengthen her epistemic stance on diet and, in doing so, simultaneously constructs an identity as a carnivore dieter in that particular YouTube space; and how that conversion narrative framing allows her to claim ingroup identity. I further argue that these stancetaking strategies are leveraged in what is essentially a gift that is common across the carnivore diet YouTube space (thus further cementing EPE as a member of the in-group), giving her the legitimacy that sponsorship indexes. Ultimately, EPE is able to construct a stance that showcases commitment to an authentic self, alignment with a particular community, and a new understanding of healthful eating. The strategies employed by EPE illustrate how an individual's speaking style is informed by the stances they take up (Kiesling 2009). Within the current online ecosystem, particularly on YouTube a speaker's unique style is curated to build a unique identity which is leveraged to form parasocial relationships with her viewers, which is then further leveraged to sell products or

build a personal brand. Essentially, a YouTuber uses their stances to create a personal style that appeals to a target audience who, in turn, supports that creator.

In the following sections I review the literature, explain key terms, and describe the utility of YouTube as a place for discourse analysis; I also provide background information on the Ex-Plant Eater and an explanation of the No-Longer-Vegan genre. I then go over the methods and rationale used in this study. Next, I describe conversion narratives broadly and distill various descriptions of conversion narratives into a new process that I use to explain EPE's strategies. Following that I explain how these strategies benefit EPE, looking particularly at what claiming to be "no longer vegan" presupposes, as well as how audience acceptance of that presupposition potentially offers financial benefits to EPE. I conclude that EPE claims the epistemic authority of a (former) vegan without engaging with, reaching out to, or showing membership to the vegan community, thus illustrating the ways in which online identities are curated for a particular audience.

2.2. LITERATURE REVIEW & KEY TERMS

2.2.1. Stance & Stancetaking

Stance can be broadly understood as the ways in which interactants establish their position and convey meaning in a given interaction or how they express the ways they know about or are commenting on a given stance object (DuBois 1993; Wu 2004; Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018). While some scholars focus on instances of stancetaking in regard to an individual speaker, others emphasize the importance of inter-speaker relationships and the stance focus (Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018). Kiesling (2009) argues that stance is the primary

mechanism by which speakers develop their linguistic style, that a speaker's linguistic choices are made to convey whatever interpersonal or epistemic stances they want to take up with their various interlocutors.

Du Bois (1993, 2007) triangulates the factors one uses to construct stance into three criteria. Referred to as the stance triangle, DuBois' distillation of stance emphasizes the importance of a speaker's assessment of the various components of discourse, namely (1) the topic of discussion, (2) the audience/interlocutor, and (3) the discourse (speech, writing, etc.) itself. In other words, stance is about one's relationship to their utterance, the subject of their utterance, and their audience or interlocutors. A speaker can construct a stance that evaluates a stance object (or the main topic of discussion), the individual with whom they are interacting, and the language or utterance itself. DuBois' stance triangle indicates that stance is always about relationships and, as such, is highly recursive, interactive, and fluid.

Building on the work of DuBois, Kärkkäinen (2006) also highlights the significance of relationships in stance, arguing that stance is a public action shaped by the stance(s) of the involved participants. Kiesling et al. define stance as “the discursive creation of a relationship between a language user and some discursive figure, and to other language users in relation to that figure” (2018: 687). This definition synthesizes Kärkkäinen's approach with the stance triangle, providing researchers the opportunity to examine even more aspects of stance, particularly within the realm of digital communication. Within this definition, they identify three dimensions of stancetaking: *affect*, *investment*, and *alignment* (Kiesling et al. 2018: 688). These

three dimensions of stancetaking provide a robust framework with which to analyze construction and performance of stance.

2.2.2. *Conversion Narratives*

Broadly speaking, conversion narratives refer to an individual's retelling of changing a fundamental belief (Burke 1970) while simultaneously maintaining an authentic perception of the self (Johnstone 2013). This change in belief results in a convert gaining membership to a new community and claiming a new identity (Ayometzi 2013; Mishler 1995). Burke (1970) argues that doing the work of conversion (i.e. undergoing the process of conversion) is what allows someone to become a convert. Part of the work of conversion is recounting the conversion process. Burke's idea that *doing* is *being* describes how doing the work of conversion is what enables one to convert. Mishler (1995) notes that sharing conversion stories is a part of the conversion process and a vehicle for creating and sustaining identities, effectively a way of signaling community membership. From Burke (1970) and Mishler (1995) we can describe conversion stories following a typified structure: (1) acknowledging past behavior/wrongdoings; (2) addressing a desire to change behavior; (3) encountering a potential solution; (4) accepting that solution; (5) joining in a like-minded community of other converts.

Johnston (2013) takes a slightly different approach to conversion narratives, employing rhetorics of continuity theory to explain how a convert's conversion narratives reinforce their (1) perspective on their authentic self; (2) their claims to social acceptance and the legitimacy of their beliefs; and (3) their understanding of the nature of religious truth. Ayometzi (2007) examines how immigrants lacking personal membership to any particular group appropriated and

maintained a Christian identity by participating in the Spanish Southern Baptist Mission, describing how conversion narratives are used to reorganize one's personal experience as a tool of maintaining a group identity. While Johnston and Ayometzi focus primarily on religious conversion, Misher (1995) shows how conversion narratives don't necessarily have to pertain to religious conversion by looking at the function of conversion narratives in the context of Alcoholics Anonymous, arguing that they are used to establish group membership and build collective identity.

In an effort to synthesize Burke (1970), Johnston (2013), Ayometzi (2007), and Mishler (1995) and provide a unique framework for mapping conversion narratives, I've outlined four key steps that emphasize the sequence of events as they unfold in the conversion process, particularly within the context of this study. The process starts with the rejection of a previous identity and continues thus: (1) rationalizing and justifying the rejection of a previous identity; (2) framing the rejection of that identity as a spiritual/supernatural practice that is reinforced through extraordinary claims; (3) aligning with a new community to reinforce a new identity and further rationalize the rejection of a previous identity; (4) becoming a member and actively claiming full membership to the new community. Section 2.4. maps The Ex-Plant Eater's story and stancetaking strategies according to this framework.

2.2.3. Veganism and Carnivore Diet

This chapter is part of a larger project exploring polysemy and how the polysemy of vegan affects the stasis of conversations about veganism. While there are several definitions of veganism, the de-facto official definition from The Vegan Society (1944) describes it as

“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. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.”

Prior to the coining of the term *vegan*, early scholarship on animal rights used the term *vegetarian*, which is a term that has a decidedly different meaning from *veganism* in the current day. Freeman (2014) discusses how early twentieth century pro-vegetarian writings expanded on earlier arguments for leading a moral life as the basis of abstaining from consuming animals, breaking down the human/animal dichotomy and arguing rather that there is not a morally relevant difference between all animals, human or nonhuman. This led to an expansion of notions of kinship, sympathy, and virtue to include environmentalism, animal rights, and feminism (43). Henry Salt (1851-1939) asserted that ethics and emphasizing a humane life should be the primary reason for abstaining from animal products, while also noting the health benefits of vegetarianism, and the violence against nature required by animal agriculture, particularly large-scale operations (Freeman 2014). These concerns have been validated as research consistently shows the negative impacts of environmental agriculture (The Good Food Institute 2017). As such, although the definition provided by The Vegan Society is the “official” definition of veganism, there are variations in peoples’ approaches to, reasons for, and ways of enacting veganism (Kerschke-Risch 2015; Janssen et al. 2016; Braunsberger and Flamm 2019). For some, veganism is chiefly an animal rights movement; for others eating a plant-based diet is primarily motivated by health or the negative impacts of environmental agriculture (Kerschke-

Risch 2015); and for others it is motivated by an intersectional ethic of total liberation (Freeman 2014; Andreatta 2023).

These various motivations for adopting plant-based/vegan diets lead to varied interpretations of veganism (Braunsberger and Flamm 2019), and can muddy the waters in vegan-related discourse. While this larger project examines how peoples' prior text associations with the term influence their perception and use of it, this chapter focuses on a subject who frames veganism primarily through the lens of diet and health. The subject of this chapter, YouTuber The Ex-Plant Eater (EPE), contrasts veganism with the carnivore diet.

Within the scope of this chapter, the carnivore diet refers to a way of eating that removes plant foods to the extent that most, if not all, food consumed is of animal origin. O'Hearn (2022) describes the carnivore diet as "form of ketogenic diet in which plant foods are eliminated such that all, or almost all, nutrition derives from animal sourced foods" O'Hearn further explains that ketogenic (keto) diets are nutritionally controversial because of the near total absence of carbohydrates and high fat content, clarifying that most keto diet advocates do encourage the inclusion of some plant foods. The carnivore diet is not only controversial because of what foods are (or aren't) consumed, but it has also been associated with far right or alt-right movements (Gregson et al. 2020; Muller et al. 2024; Gambert and Linné 2018).

Though I do touch on the political tension between the carnivore and vegan diets, that is not the scope of this chapter. As the video in question does not incorporate overtly political messaging. However, it is worth noting the political associations of the carnivore diet. Additionally, as I am not a nutritionist, nor remotely qualified to speak with expertise on the

health effects of either diet, this chapter does not interrogate the extent to which EPE's health claims are scientifically backed. This chapter examines EPE's stances regarding vegan and carnivore diets within the context of her video and channel; I am not engaging in a debate regarding the scientific accuracy of the health claims made in her video, nor contending with her representations and framing of veganism with my own.

2.2.4. YouTube as a Place for Discourse Analysis

The texts that populate the sphere of online computer-mediated communication are, like spoken interactions, products of social interaction, informed by the values, practices, and norms of the communities from which they emerge (Chen 2016). Indeed, YouTube pages (among other websites) are both a form of social media as well as products of mediated social interactions. Benson (2015) argues that YouTube content — the videos, comments, pages, etc. — as products of social interaction can therefore be analyzed using the same tools of discourse analysis that examine the “structures of spoken interaction” (82). YouTube's multimodal and interdiscursive format provides ample points of analysis: the purely linguistic aspects of a video, interactions within comment sections, the editorial and cinematographic elements of a video, the sequential environment of the YouTube website itself, and the communities that develop on the platform. As Androutsopoulos (2013) notes, the textual units of YouTube, particularly the videos themselves and the comments, co-occur in patterned ways that are interrelated in how they contribute to meaning making. As such, texts on YouTube cannot be divorced from their multimodal contexts. Given that stance is expressed through the cooperation of multiple resources — lexico-grammatical, bodily-visual, environment and material context — stance is

necessarily expressed multimodally (Jensen 2014; Andries et al. 2023). Moreover, stances are intensified by drawing on multiple semiotic resources (Kärkkäinen 2012).

By contextualizing YouTube as a data site with a wealth of semiotic resources, we can see how various modes influence stancetaking strategies, especially considering that similar stances are often expressed through (combinations of) different modes within a single YouTube page. Emphasizing YouTube's multimodality helps further illustrate how stancetaking itself is a multimodal act.

As such, YouTube stands as a particularly fruitful location for analyzing the discursive practices that are used to construct stance. Analysis of YouTube content (and social media content more broadly) can reveal the linguistic practices that users — both as producers and consumers — employ to sustain communities that encourage collaborative production and consumption and knowledge sharing (McLoughlin and Lee 2008). In fact the unique affordances of YouTube and the ability to post videos and respond to videos (both as comments and videos) enable a new class of amateur experts emerge, for example beauty vloggers offering makeup and style tutorials, hybridizing colloquial speech “as well as jargon-based, formal, instructional talk,” thus indexing expertise and blurring the distinction between learner and teacher (Bhatia 2023: 30). It is through the construction of expertise within a particular community — by engaging with and reinforcing the norms of that community — that a YouTuber becomes a source of information that a community turns to and is, in part, why the video analyzed in this chapter is of particular interest.

2.2.5. *The Ex-Plant Eater*

The Ex-Plant Eater is a lifestyle and diet YouTuber and Instagram influencer who describes her content as “sharing my healing journey on an animal-based diet after 14 years of veganism that damaged my health.” Compared to other YouTubers in the carnivore diet space, for example, Ken Berry and Sv3rige (both of whom are mentioned by EPE) whose boast follower counts of 3.5 million and 99 thousand (respectively), her channel is relatively small, with a subscriber count of 4.6 thousand. Her content is focused primarily on pro-carnivore diet/anti-vegan content with vlogs, chats with other carnivore dieters, promotions of carnivore and keto products, and what I eat in a day videos. At the time of writing, there are 51 videos on her YouTube channel, including full-length and short-form videos. While this study takes into consideration the context of her channel, it’s focused specifically on the first video posted to her channel entitled “I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story).”

For her first posted video, EPE adopts the format of a video common to former vegan lifestyle vloggers. “No Longer Vegan” (NLV) videos are typically uploaded to accounts with a history of vegan content. It is through that history of vegan content that these creators develop expertise within their community and, consequently, mark their NLV videos as a significant shift in content. To give a few examples: In 2024, Amanda Castillo published a video called “Why

I'm No Longer Vegan (After 9 Years),”³ and a quick glance at her channel shows vegan lifestyle videos going back nine years, such as taste tests, what I eat in a day, and beauty product review videos. Bonny Rebecca, another lifestyle blogger and popular vegan influencer also published a video explaining why she is no longer vegan. Her video generated much discourse on vegan YouTube; however, she has since deleted her NLV video, along with any other content mentioning veganism aside from her very first video whose only mention of veganism is #vegan in the title of a video.

Both of these content creators were apologetic in their NLV videos and have (at the time of writing) not produced any explicitly anti-vegan videos. And some other creators who have made NLV videos have peppered in pro-carnivore/meat-based diet videos, without being overtly anti-vegan. One notable example is Alyse Parker, who, since leaving a plant-based diet, has continued producing similar lifestyle content. Of the 136 videos published on her channel since the NLV video, only 4 explicitly mention the carnivore diet or animal-based diets. A common thread in all of these NLV videos is framing veganism primarily in terms of health and diet, describing initial health benefits of veganism, trying more extreme versions of veganism (e.g. raw diet, fruit-only diets), experiencing health detriments, and then quitting veganism (Ferguson 2019), a pattern which the Ex-Plant Eater follows in her narrative.

³ Amanda Castillo “Why I’m No Longer Vegan (After 9 Years)”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a11slWqFL0A&t=31s>

Because The Ex-Plant Eater's first video is of the NLV variety, the stancetaking moves and rhetorical strategies employed adopt the expertise that typical NLV creators worked to curate without having built up that community. As such, her channel begins from a place of supposed expertise — were the video to show up organically on a user's home page, they would assume the expertise that informs most NLV videos. Notably because EPE didn't build a vegan following, her video is not apologetic and is able to fully criticize veganism without having to maintain an existing subscriber count or worry about alienating existing subscribers.

A quick glance at The Ex-Plant Eater's YouTube channel reveals a selection of videos focused on her diet and emphasizing an animal-based diet⁴. The Ex-Plant Eater's videos specifically mention the carnivore diet, using #carnivore and #exvegan in the titles of some videos. With a total of 29 videos on the main channel (at the time of writing), and several other videos categorized as "shorts" (YouTube's answer to TikTok)⁵, why then decide to focus my analysis on "I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story)?" As the first video uploaded and posted to her YouTube Channel, EPE's "Ex-Vegan Story" introduces herself to the YouTube audience — in fact, I could not find any additional or previous accounts managed by the creator — and also informs interpretations of the

⁴ The titles of such videos include "I Only Eat Meat, Eggs, and Dairy? Carnivore Full Day of Eating #carnivore #exvegan" and "Reversing Aging on a Hyper-Carnivore Diet."

⁵ TikTok is a short-form video hosting service owned by ByteDance that allows users to post videos that range from three seconds to 10 minutes. With YouTube shorts, users can upload content that would have otherwise or also been posted to TikTok, allowing for cross-platform reach. Short-form video content like TikTok and YouTube Shorts algorithmically provide users with content they find interesting without the need for additional search (Podosokorsky 2022).

rest of the content on their channel. Placing her ex-vegan story first in the channel allows viewers to understand that her channel is not one that simply advocates for the carnivore diet, but that that carnivore diet advocacy stands in opposition to and transformed from EPE's experiences eating a plant-based diet, allowing her to position herself as an epistemic authority on the carnivore diet.

2.3. METHODS

This chapter primarily examines the stance and discursive strategies of YouTuber The Ex-Plant Eater, particularly her video entitled "I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story)." The 25-minute video, uploaded to her page on February 21, 2022, is an example of a style of video that is not uncommon among (former) vegan lifestyle/health and wellness YouTubers⁶. Her video follows a typical "No Longer Vegan" structure: welcoming viewers, roadmapping the video, explaining when and why they went vegan, talking about their diet as a vegan – foreshadowing health problems, discussing health problems experienced on a plant-based diet, researching those health problems, reconsidering veganism, introducing one small animal product (in EPE's case that was bone broth), gradually introducing more animal products, feeling better or "healed," comparing health as a vegan to current health, quitting veganism, and thanking subscribers. Many NLV videos, such as those

⁶ See: Alyse Parker "I am not vegan." <https://youtu.be/gpQSOL-4jvY?si=kOZjwDJW1IxqHLdO>
 Amanda Castillo "Why I'm No Longer Vegan (After 9 Years)"
<https://youtu.be/a11slWqFL0A?si=rHo3zOJ2BV83nFd4>
 Wioletta Tuschnio "Why I'm ACTUALLY no longer vegan... (and eat meat again)"
<https://youtu.be/R7LRub7gt58?si=z11L4qGB1vP0hEVf>

discussed in section 2.2.5. stop there; however, EPE also discusses how her research led her to adopting a carnivore diet and foregoing all plant products, and then establishes her channel as an anti-vegan channel.

I transcribed the video using ELAN – an open-source software tool used for annotating and analyzing audio and video content. I then examined the specific rhetorical strategies and stancetaking moves present in her video, as well as the function of her video in regard to her channel and overall social media presence. In coding the individual and discrete discursive strategies used to construct stance — namely, what does taking a stance as someone who is no longer vegan entail — a broader, overarching discursive strategy emerged as I began coding the data: that of the conversion narrative. As such, this chapter primarily explores the stancetaking moves of The Ex-Plant Eater and how they fit within the context of stories of conversion. As discussed in section 2.2.2. I synthesized the descriptions of conversion narratives from Burke (1970), Johnston (2013), Ayometzi (2017), and Mishler (1995) into four key steps that apply to NLV videos: (1) rationalizing and justifying the rejection of a previous identity; (2) framing that rejection/shift as a supernatural or spiritual practice supported with extraordinary claims; (3) aligning with new community and reinforcing that identity; (4) becoming full member and claiming membership to that community. Below I use close reading analysis to describe how EPE's video goes through this process and, ultimately, how the framing of her story as a conversion narrative and claiming an ex-vegan identity benefits her.

2.4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

EPE's choice to have this video as the first one published on her channel reflects the expected experience of online content, that when users make, edit, and present media texts, they are sharing curated versions of their experiences (Potter 2012). Indeed, the curation of digital assets of all varieties act as a form of "rhetorical persuasion aimed at producing a particular set of responses and interpretations among users" (Snyder 2015: 220). Curation as persuasion to produce responses and interpretations is a useful tool for building and reinforcing communities. For example, curation leads to community development by guiding one's peers or network to interesting content (or at least content deemed interesting within your network), retaining visitors on a site, synchronizing a community to discuss the same thing at the same time and in the same ways, and developing new social practices. Beyond curation as an action to assist people in finding something they need/want, Snyder further notes that curation, when used as a social practice, is complicated by the fact that it is always ideological, rhetorical, and political. The overall content on EPE's channel is curated in such a way as to advocate for an animal-based diet and against plant-based diets and veganism, a curation that is actively ideological, rhetorical and political.

The ideological stance of anti-veganism often takes on other social and political ideologies. In their analysis of anti-vegan content, Gregson et al. (2022) note how anti-vegan communities tend to be intertwined with alt-right discourses and ideology. They give the example of how the term "soy boy," which originated from alt-right conversations on the forum website 4 Chan (Gambert & Linné 2018), is used pejoratively to describe men who are perceived

as possessing “traditionally” masculine attributes. “Soy boy” – in referencing a food commonly associated with veganism and foods perceived as being exclusively for vegans (tofu, tempeh, soy milk, etc.) – associates veganism with femininity, further contributing to right-wing patriarchal ideologies that paint femininity as inferior to masculinity, and thus, veganism as undesirable within a patriarchal system that upholds exploitation, particularly of nonhuman animals (Freeman 2014). Notably, many well-known anti-vegan/pro-carnivore figures are also prominent figures in alt-right spaces, such as Jordan Peterson, Brian Johnson (Liver King), Sean Baker, Raw Egg Nationalist, and Andrew Tate, among others (Muller et al. 2024; Paulsson & Chaput forthcoming). As such, EPE’s video (as well as the project of her channel as a whole) upholds right-wing ideology, contributing to discourses that frame veganism as an unacceptable deviation from the status quo, effectively becoming a new prior-text association impacting the polysemy of vegan(ism). For EPE, it’s not just that veganism is *unhealthy*, veganism is incompatible with patriarchal structures. Thus, although primarily discussed in dietary terms, veganism is imbued with an ideology that opposes right-wing patriarchal structures receiving an added layer of meaning that her audience is receptive to.

In this section, I examine the various stancetaking strategies that The Ex-Plant Eater employs in her “ex-vegan story” and within the overall context of her YouTube channel. In particular EPE’s video presupposes a former vegan identity that allows her to claim the epistemic authority of a former vegan. She then uses that authority to reassure her audience of her current position and shared identity with non-vegans. She uses her assumed epistemic authority as an ex-vegan to give additional credence to the claimed benefits of a meat-based diet by emphasizing

personal agency and by framing diet as either a cause or a cure for physical and mental ailments. Additionally, she constructs a new identity as a carnivore dieter that develops from a diametric opposition to veganism and that is reinforced by the content of her channel and reinforced through YouTube's interdiscursive resources. EPE is able to leverage that new identity to enter into a new community and, in turn, encourage that community to positively engage with her content and financially benefit her, particularly through affiliate links and building a following.

In the following subsections I show the ways in which EPE's video follows the conversion narrative process outlined above. Next, I explore how this conversion narrative framing, and the extent to which her audience accepts her stancetaking strategies, benefits EPE in what I argue is fundamentally a gift. I conclude by discussing the presuppositions of claiming to be "no longer vegan" and how that informs the content of her channel.

2.4.1. Rejection of Previous Identity

The Ex-Plant Eater's story of leaving veganism has to both convince her audience that she *was* a vegan (despite no evidence of that online), and also introduce herself to YouTube as more than just a former vegan, but rather as a member of the anti-vegan and carnivore diet. Community. While the content of the video and the channel as a whole solidify EPE as an advocate for meat-based diets, her identity as a former vegan is conveyed through explicit appeals to authenticity that simultaneously enhance and rely on the presuppositions of an "ex-vegan story." As discussed above, EPE's ex-vegan story utilizes the elements of a conversion narrative, with the first step being the rejection of a previous identity and the justification thereof. EPE first talks about why she was ostensibly vegan and the struggles of veganism in

order to contrast the benefits of her new identity, all while upholding a consistent sense of self as someone who values health and well-being. In this way, her conversion frames veganism, not as an ideological movement, but as a health movement.

Cain (1991) and Ayometzi (2007) note how simply acknowledging a problem/sin/illness acts as the first step in overcoming that problem. EPE explicitly addressing the struggles they experienced with veganism serves as that proverbial first step. As such, if one does not understand the negative effects of veganism then they can't appreciate the benefits of carnivorism. Given that the purpose of EPE's video (and her channel overall) is to advocate for the carnivore diet and its purported benefits, her "ex-vegan story" and its position as the first video on her channel serves the purpose of explaining the detriments of veganism and justifying her rejecting that identity.

As discussed above, the rhetorical weight of NLV videos is increased when a creator has a history of vegan content and, subsequently, an audience of people who followed them in part because of their vegan content. If content curation is a way of synchronizing a community (Shirky 2010), then producing something that a community might negatively respond to can potentially make the community out of sync. Given that her first video is an ex-vegan story, EPE doesn't have to worry about throwing a previously curated community out of sync and can instead begin synchronizing a community of non-vegans. To share an ex-vegan story to an audience of non-vegans is to begin on the same page as that audience; to share an ex-vegan story to an audience of vegans is to risk causing a rift in that community. EPE doesn't have an existing community to risk alienating. Because she lacks an existing community/following, EPE's vegan

identity is conveyed through appeals to authenticity that rely on the presuppositions of an “ex-vegan story.”

One of the more overt appeals to authenticity is when EPE describes the purpose of her video:

“I just wanted to make this video as like an introductory type thing. So, you know, people coming to my channel could see where I came from, what I do now, and like, you know, my reasonings behind everything” (0:24:29-0:24:41).

Here, EPE explains *why* she made the video, explicitly noting how the purpose of the video overall is to explain her “reasonings behind everything.” In serving as an introduction to not just her channel, but her curated online persona, EPE indicates that a key point of the video is rationalizing her rejection of one identity in favor of another. While introductions are often imbued with formality and typically precede any other content, this statement of introduction occurs toward the end of the video. EPE’s video holds little significance to an audience of vegans, as they would have no stake in nor relationship to EPE’s content. Given that the primary audience of anti-vegan content tends to be those who are already predisposed to anti-vegan sentiment (Gregson et al. 2022), we can assume that viewers who stick around to the end of the video – let alone watch it at all – or “people coming to [her] channel” are more likely to be sympathetic to anti-vegan content. As such, this statement functions less as an introduction and more as a summation of the video. In mentioning “where I came from” and “what I do know,” within the context of a video whose key purpose is rationalizing the rejection of one identity in favor of another, EPE enacts a key process of conversion: that is, the telling of a conversion story is part of the *doing* of conversion (Burke 1970).

The past tense emphasizes the fact that, to whatever extent they were *actually* vegan, that identity is in the past and doesn't represent who EPE is. We see similar usage of past tense to reinforce identity rejection and contrast it with acceptance of current identity throughout the video:

“Mental clarity and focus *was* one of my biggest things that I *had* an issue with *when* I was vegan, and now it's like so effortless.” (0:23:51-0:23:58, emphasis added)

“*When* I was vegan I *was* also lethargic all the time.” (0:17:48-0:17:53, emphasis added)

In this video, The Ex-Plant Eaters contrasts her current mindset with her past ways of thinking to bolster her current epistemic stance. She constructs an epistemic stance by deconstructing and discussing her prior epistemic stances. What she used to think was wrong and abnormal; what they currently think is correct and normal.

“when I was vegan I thought that these [problems experienced while vegan] were just normal to experience during everyday life and now I know that that's not true” (0:23:21-0:23:28)

The inclusion of animal products and subsequent removal of non-animal products from her diet gives EPE the mental clarity to claim what is definitively true. In doing so, EPE rejects her previous identity and lack of knowledge to take on the epistemic stance of someone who is capable of making truth claims, while aligning with the carnivore community.

2.4.2. Reframing Dietary Choice as Supernatural Practice Using Extraordinary Claims

EPE consistently portrays her dietary choices in terms of their healing potential, invoking an illness model to justify her dietary choices as she seeks cures for various ailments. In the context of AA groups (Mishler 1995; Peterson 1988) and Spanish Baptist Missions (Ayometzi

2007), retellings of conversion often employ an illness model to help explain the function of their group as a place where members/believers can be cured. Further, EPE invokes the linguistic structures of testimony. Keller (2024) notes how the default speech act informing the epistemic weight of testimony is assertion, a technique that EPE consistently incorporates. EPE asserts the curative potential of dietary choice throughout her video and, in so doing, sets up a meat-based diet and the carnivore community as a “place” of healing. She discusses diet as either the cause or solution to a variety of problems, both physical and mental, framing diet as supernaturally healing. In particular, she remarks how she thought a plant-based diet alone would keep her thin, that a single diet could heal her colitis, and even that her newfound carnivore diet is like a miracle diet. This reframing of diet as a spiritual/supernatural practice is further reinforced through her use of testimony and emphasis on personal beliefs.

She explicitly uses extraordinary claims to support the correctness of leaving veganism, by describing it as “a miracle diet.”

“I swear like I feel like this is a miracle diet when I talk about it, and people probably don’t believe me, but again, like you don’t have to. I’m the one experiencing these things so it really only matters to me at the end of the day” (0:19:30-0:19:42)

Here EPE makes an authoritative claim to the superiority of an animal-based diet while simultaneously recognizing her experience as anecdotal and personal. We see this in the repeated use of the personal pronoun *I*, and constructions that recognize the personal experience (e.g. *I swear, I feel, I’m the one experiencing*, matters to me). It is in her anecdotal experience that EPE constructs her epistemic authority. If it really “only matters to [her] at the end of the day,” then her experience is the source of truth. EPE’s stance is strongly aligned to her own experiences,

and since they are *her* own experiences, she is undoubtedly invested in the claims of those experiences. As the epistemic authority on the healing power of a carnivore diet, if it is true to EPE it is true. She makes it clear that it is her experiences that matter most and, in doing so, establishes an epistemic stance that gives authority to herself.

Further, EPE pairs the claim that a carnivore diet is miraculous with a testimony of her belief in its healing properties. Testimony is a critical aspect of conversion narratives, especially for the giving converts agency in their (re)construction of identities (Sremac & Ganzevoort 2013). She emphasizes that her personal experience is the ultimate criterion in her decision to follow the carnivore diet. The use of the *swear* here indicates that EPE is strongly invested in her belief that the diet is miraculous and, therefore, the correct choice. This emphatic commitment to her beliefs enables EPE to get ahead of potential criticism or push-back to her decision. She acknowledges that some “people probably don’t believe me,” responding immediately by directly letting potential critics know they “don’t have to [believe me].” This rejection of potential criticism further demonstrates EPE’s commitment to her belief that the carnivore diet is “a miracle diet.” When we consider that the audience of her video is likely to be others sympathetic to the carnivore diet (or at least anti-vegan sentiment), these statements indicate to that audience that she doesn’t care if people criticize or doubt her claims, thus signaling a commitment to her new identity. She continuously emphasizes that her choice was the correct one.

“I knew that I was doing something right” (0:11:39-0:11:43)

“So personally for me I know it was the right decision to transition to this way of eating” (0:23:58-0:24:04).

She frames veganism as something that changes one’s mindset such that they mistakenly attribute healing properties to a plant-based diet. EPE portrays her mental state while vegan as a contributing factor to her feelings about her health problems and the reason for why she didn’t appropriately address her health concerns. When talking about her struggles with ulcerative colitis:

“Having, you know, the vegan mindset I thought it would get better on its own” (0:4:55-0:5:02)

And when discussing perceived hair-thinning:

“It just didn’t process in my head that my hair was starting to fall out” (0:22:38-0:22:41).

EPE makes it known that veganism didn’t just cause health problems, but it contributed to a state of mind that caused her to neglect those health concerns. To downplay them. She reinforces this perspective:

“Like previously when I was vegan I thought that these were just normal to experience during everyday life” (0:22:20-0:22:36)

This is further reinforced by her discussion of previous beliefs about a plant-based diet:

“I was convinced that [a plant-based diet] was the healthiest. I was convinced that it would keep me thin without really having to worry about it.” (0:03:08-0:03:15)

“I thought my diet would heal my colitis” (0:05:02-0:05:05)

Veganism’s inability to passively improve ailments, heal her colitis or keep her effortlessly thin is used as evidence that it was the wrong choice – the wrong identity to maintain.

Throughout her story, EPE frames the detriments she ostensibly experienced while vegan as something that happened as a result of choosing to go vegan. In particular she notes that people who accused her of “getting colitis for being vegan [...] were kind of right” (0:08:58-0:09:04). Not only was it other people pointing out the relationship between colitis and veganism to her, but her development of colitis is not something *caused* by veganism, but something that she got *for* being vegan, alluding to a sense of punishment.

Sremac and Ganzevoort (2013) note how a convert experiencing their “rock bottom” is a key crisis in the conversion process that leads potential converts to question their identities, and that turning point experiences are crucial to testimonies of conversion. EPE’s rock bottom came in two waves. The first wave is her initial experience with ulcerative colitis:

“I got ulcerative colitis in, I wanna say, 2017” (0:04:13-0:04:17)

“...but essentially in 2017 I was hospitalized twice because of my colitis” (0:05:33-0:05:40)

The second wave of her rock bottom is dependent on the experience of getting diagnosed with ulcerative colitis and that diagnosis and hospitalization being a significant and traumatic event for her. The second wave involves an additional traumatic event:

“everything kind of came to a breaking point I guess I could say last May um, I had a very bad death in the family, it's somebody very close to me” (0:06:26-0:06:40)

“...when this death happened my colitis, like, came back in full force and I could see it getting worse. And I didn’t want to end up in the hospital again, obviously” (0:07:19-0:07:24)

In this second wave, the initial trauma of getting colitis and the subsequent hospitalization compounds with the trauma of losing a close loved one. Not only is the recurrence of the colitis itself framed as one of the most negative parts of EPE's experience as a vegan, but in claiming to "see it getting worse," EPE suggests that the already negative experience of colitis will be even more challenging. These two breaking points lead EPE to reconsider veganism.

"So I was looking for something else. I was looking for a concrete answer" (0:07:28-0:07:33)

The turning point for EPE, and her climb back up from her rock bottom, occurred when she began introducing animal products:

"It was very scary for me to initially make that decision to stop [being vegan] and have just bone broth again. That's it: just bone broth. I didn't you know go from being vegan to eating a steak — I eat steak now — but I didn't do that" (0:09:09-0:09:26)

In this section of her narrative, EPE stresses that she didn't go from eating no animal products to a very specific animal product (i.e. steak). By contrasting steak with bone broth, EPE hierarchizes animal products and their perceived objectionability to her previous vegan self, or perhaps to an imagined vegan audience. EPE reinforces this hierarchy when discussing her continued consumption of animal products. EPE describes eating salmon as "I guess, you know, like the closest thing to meat that I had again" (0:10:30-0:10:39). Constructing a hierarchy of acceptable animal products as a way of coping with the fear of trying animal products again shares similarities the baby-steps approach to veganism that is often used in vegan activism (Freeman 2014); the idea that one might slowly cut out animal products (often starting with red meats, then chicken, then seafood), then try vegetarianism (with dairy and eggs), before

transitioning to veganism. EPE presents the inverse of this approach, but both framings set up some animal products (and the nonhuman animals they're sourced from), as having varying levels of severity. Just as cutting out red meat might be the first step towards veganism, introducing bone broth is the first step towards ostensibly leaving veganism – of easing into or out of a different lifestyle and identity. This incremental approach allows something that might appear daunting at first to seem more accessible or doable. EPE thus provides not just a retelling of her story, but instructions on how one might also begin transitioning to a meat-based diet. Though she notes how even though she was scared to stop being vegan, it was still a decision that she made. Indeed, making that decision despite the fear she felt gives that decision even more significance. Moreover, once she made the initial decision to consume bone broth she is empowered to learn more to look into eating animal products for herself.

One such animal product that EPE found especially healing is beef tallow. In the following passage, EPE explains how bone broth helped cure her procrastination.

“I always would lack the motivation to organize and clean and like get things done that I knew I needed to do. I was like a chronic procrastinator. Um, and all of a sudden, especially since I started having beef tallow, I those things that I found, like those tasks that I found to be so daunting are so effortless to me now. Like, I just do them I don't even think about it. I just do them and get them done. If I know that there's cleaning that has to get done or organizing. Nine times out of ten I just do it unless there's something else that's more important that needs to get done at that moment. I used to put things off like my apartment — my fiancé's very meticulous with cleaning — so it's always been like fairly clean, but there were just certain things that just sat there. And really should've been organized and clean and what not, but they just didn't, because I wasn't making the effort to do it myself. And now like our apartment is meticulously organized and clean like compared to the way it was. So that's also been a very positive benefit that I've experienced because a- an organized environment around you and a clean environment reflects like a clean and organized mental state. In my opinion” (0:20:56-0:22:10).

EPE notes that she struggled with procrastination as a vegan. And while she doesn't outright say that she was a procrastinator *because* she was vegan, she does claim that the inclusion of animal products, particularly beef tallow (a product she has an affiliate link to in the video's description, which is discussed in a later section), have removed her procrastinatory tendencies. If she ostensibly struggled with procrastination as a vegan and it went away with the introduction of animal products, the implication is that a lack of animal products contributed to these issues. Eating animals gives EPE the mental clarity to get things done, which lets her clean her living space, giving (and reflecting) a clean and organized mental state that was prevented by veganism. The claim that giving up veganism cured her procrastination is extraordinary indeed and further highlights the ways in which EPE reframes diet as almost supernaturally healing.

All of the claims made or implied in this story — veganism contributes to procrastination, animal products (i.e. beef tallow) cure procrastination, clean surroundings reflect a clear mental state — are concluded by EPE saying “in my opinion” (0:22:08-0:22:10). To indicate that these benefits are simply her opinion may function as a way of softening the claim(s) that meat eating cures procrastination. Indeed, EPE is showing how she's not making absolute claims — it's just her opinion. So, while saying “in my opinion” may call into question the credibility of the preceding claims. In the context of this video and the ways in which EPE's personal experience have been used to construct her epistemic stances, the appeal to her opinion strengthens those claims. Because the video relies almost exclusively on EPE's personal experience, her opinion (as it is formed from those experiences) carries an authoritative epistemic weight. Although EPE gestures toward outside sources, the main source of authority in

this video is EPE's experiences, so "in my opinion" makes clear who is making the claim, allowing EPE to explicitly claim epistemic authority.

EPE emphasizes the healthfulness of her post-vegan way of eating by framing foods that she doesn't consume as necessarily bad for health and those that she *does* eat as necessarily good:

"I just eat what I know is good for me at this point ... I do not eat gluten; I do not eat soy; and I do not eat vegetable oils" (0:14:00-0:14:14).

"I don't include things that I know are 100 percent not good for my health, so just needed to clarify that" (0:14:35-0:14:42)

In constructing epistemic authority and confidence in her decision to follow a carnivore diet, EPE oscillates between statements of belief and statements of knowledge, giving supernatural and empirical reasons for her decision and further justifying her rejection of veganism. In this narrative, particularly as she frames food as healing, she exclusively portrays veganism negatively and meat-based diets positively. As EPE expresses positive feelings about this decision, she further stresses the correctness of that decision when discussing the specific harms she experienced with a plant-based diet and the benefits she reports on a meat-based diet. Throughout her narratives EPE uses testimony to tout the benefits of a carnivore diet and the detriments of a plant-based diet. This use of testimony is impactful as she pairs the significance of personal experience and *belief*, particularly when it comes to the benefits of the carnivore diet. In using extraordinary and supernatural claims, EPE frames diet as extraordinary or supernaturally healing.

2.4.3. *Aligning with and Joining a New Community and Reinforcing Identity*

Since this is the first video on her channel – a channel that seeks to promote the carnivore diet – aligning with that community in her premiere video is essential for entering that community. EPE's YouTube channel exclusively features content about the carnivore diet, with an emphasis on content that places the carnivore diet in opposition to veganism. While all of her videos discuss the carnivore diet in some way, of 29 published to her main channel, 15 of them explicitly mention vegan(ism) in their titles. The content curated on EPE's YouTube channel doesn't exist simply (or even primarily) to discuss and advocate for the carnivore diet, but rather to argue *against* plant-based diets and veganism. The content on her channel positions plant-based diets and animal-based diets as diametrically opposed, such that any advocacy of animal-based diets must necessarily challenge plant-based diets and, indeed, the general consumption of plants. By positioning the carnivore diet and plant-based diets in opposition, EPE engages in the anti-vegan sentiment that is prevalent within the carnivore community (Gregson et al. 2022) as well as far-right communities (Paulsson forthcoming). In doing so, she signals awareness of the expected behaviors and beliefs of the carnivore community and an alignment with that community.

Beyond just this video, The Ex-Plant Eater uses her channel and the affordances of YouTube to mark a new identity as a carnivore dieter and, as a result, work towards defining a community of carnivore dieters. Her identity as a carnivore dieter is constructed through consistent opposition to veganism. This diametric opposition of animal-based and plant-based diets is established not just through the videos present on the channel, but in the channel name

itself. While The Ex-Plant Eater’s channel is a carnivore diet channel, the focus of the content consistently comes back to how they aren’t vegan anymore. It’s not enough that they eschew plants in favor of meat, or that they are an advocate for the carnivore diet. The Ex-Plant Eater is a channel about moving away from plant consumption (vegan or otherwise) toward animal-based diets. Using ex-plant eater in her channel name presupposes prior experience as a vegan (see section 2.4.5.); however, that is not necessarily the case.

Within the carnivore diet community — a community that promotes exclusive consumption of animal products — the label of “ex-plant eater” can apply not to just anyone who eschews a vegan lifestyle, but to anyone who transitions toward a carnivore diet. To shift one’s eating habits to a diet consisting exclusively of animal products is to necessarily be a former eater of plants. So in using The Ex-Plant Eater as a channel name, she reinforces something true of all carnivore dieters: having eaten plants at one point, but no longer; a shared experience that connects her channel to all carnivore dieters, thus establishing connective tissue for all carnivore dieters and, as such, constructing a community upon which The Ex-Plant Eater can use to bolster her epistemic authority on the subject. When she discusses how a plant-based diet harmed her health and how she cured ulcerative colitis with a carnivore diet, it’s not only The Ex-Plant Eater, but an entire community of ex-plant eaters arguing against veganism (plant-based diets). The channel name situates EPE within this community “if, you know, you can call it that” (0:12:39-0:12:42).

Although The Ex-Plant Eater voices a level of uncertainty about if carnivore dieters are a community or not, they nevertheless point to two notable carnivore dieters as additional sources

of authority, thereby giving additional credence to her overall epistemic stance.

“I naturally started looking into it more myself. So I found physicians like Ken Berry [...] I found, I’m gonna butcher his name, but Sv3rige” (0:12:24-0:12:45).

Here, EPE, explains that once they began to seek out more information about an animal-based diet, they found useful information from these two figures: Ken Berry (a physician, carnivore diet advocate, and YouTuber) and Sv3rige (a carnivore diet YouTuber). Both Ken Berry and Sv3rige are fairly well-known within the carnivore diet community and produce content focused on meat-based diets. Ken Berry has a subscriber count of 3.52 million with 1.7 thousand videos; prior to his ban from YouTube, Sv3rige had 99 thousand subscribers and 33 million views. By invoking these two figures, EPE is able to adopt their epistemic stance and signal to her audience that she knows what she’s talking about — that she’s done her research. In doing so, she also imbues those two with all of the epistemic authority that she has built up so far in the video. Notably, these are the only outside figures EPE mentions, and her mention of Ken Berry consists of this one brief utterance. Just as the mention of these two individuals elevates EPE’s authority, Ken Berry’s status as a physician elevates the authority that EPE gives to Sv3rige as they continue discussing his content.

Moreover, the inclusion of Sv3rige as an outside source of authority allows EPE to demonstrate an awareness of the carnivore community’s norms, even as she expresses doubts about the existence of that community:

“One of the biggest eye openers which, I’m — I would imagine he’s like a controversial figure kind of, in this community if, you know, you can call it that — but I found, I’m gonna butcher his name but [*sverige*] or sver-i-ya [Sv3rige]. Again I’m gonna butcher it,

but Sv3rige and Goatis,⁷ those are his two channels. I found his vegan: vegans the epitome of malnourishment videos and that was probably the biggest eye opener for me that I was doing the right thing” (0:12:30-0:13:01)

By invoking and also second-guessing the existence of a carnivore diet community, EPE frames a fellow carnivore former-YouTuber as a potentially controversial figure. Because many of Sv3rige’s views, actions, and content are considered controversial, EPE has to explicitly note the fact that he’s a potentially controversial figure. In doing so, she preemptively accounts for potential criticisms of him and, by extension, herself. If everyone in the carnivore community agreed with Sv3rige’s actions, then he wouldn’t be considered controversial (at least not to that community), and so that controversy wouldn’t be marked. Yet EPE is aware of the fact that not everyone agrees and, as such, has to comment on his controversy. By explicitly noting the controversy, EPE shows that she is aware of potential norms within the carnivore community (and that Sv3rige’s content might be outside of those norms), and in knowing those norms, she shows that she belongs to that community. She demonstrates that not only is she aware of other public carnivore figures, but she also knows enough about the community’s values to mark Sv3rige as controversial. By aligning with more controversial figures in the carnivore diet

⁷ Gatis Lagzdins’ (known as Sv3rige and Goatis on YouTube) controversies include (counter)protesting vegan events and markets by eating raw meat, notably a pig’s decapitated head and squirrels. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-49084466>. Additionally, he hired a hitman to attack his ex-girlfriend and son in which the ex-girlfriend suffered acid burns. <https://www.msn.com/en-au/crime/general/goatis-exposed-youtuber-hired-hitman-to-murder-ex-girlfriend-and-son/vi-BB1rhNx4> Sv3rige’s controversies were not unique to his views on veganism and much of his content can be considered part of the alt-right “manosphere.” Active on YouTube since 2012, he was banned from the website in 2022.

community, EPE demonstrates a high level of investment with that community and a strong commitment to the diet.

Further, during her discussion of Sv3rige, EPE directs her viewers to her video's description and the links it contains. One of the affordances of YouTube is the ability to include hyperlinks in the description of a video. These may include links to other videos/channels on YouTube, links to references used in the video or additional materials to refer to, and sponsored links where the YouTuber receives compensation for products purchased using that link. These hyperlinks act as interdiscursive resources that allow creators to reference/incorporate/point to content outside of YouTube and demonstrate their awareness of YouTube's unique affordances (Benson 2015; Bhatia 2023). Any website can be linked to in a YouTube video description; therefore, the choice of links included in the description is salient.

It is notable then, that among the many carnivore/meat-based diet YouTubers, EPE includes only one link to one YouTube video by one creator whose controversy is known among the community. Before briefly detailing Sv3rige's videos where he compares photos of vegans at the start of her veganism to more recent photos in an effort to demonstrate how plant-based diets are malnourishing, EPE states

“if you haven't watched these videos you should definitely go check them out. I'll link, like, one of them in the description” (0:13:03-0:13:12).

Beyond a simple recommendation, including a link to a video in the description eases the process for a viewer to find additional content (cf. citations). Like a citation, including hyperlinks in a description allows a YouTuber to reference, take on, or endorse the authority of the linked

source. EPE borrows Sv3rige's authority — controversial as it may be — on the subject by not just linking to his channel, but by mentioning the content of the video and its role in her decision:

“He'll show a person right at the beginning of their journey with veganism and then a few years later. And just the aging that they go through, the premature aging, and like the mental deterioration that happens to them is so shocking and so disturbing. So obviously I saw that, things like that as well, and I did not want any part of it. And that was all. All of those things convinced me that I was doing the right thing” (0:13:12-0:13:40)

While EPE recognizes that Sv3rige's content may be controversial she also notes how, despite this controversy, the video that EPE links was a significant (arguably most significant) factor in convincing her to stop being vegan — “and that was all.” The content produced by Sv3rige is, in EPE's estimation, sufficient for convincing one of the “so shocking” and “so disturbing” detriments of veganism. The risk of invoking controversial figures is worth the potential for her viewers to be similarly wholly convinced that veganism is not “the right thing.”

It is through being an ex-vegan that EPE is able to better claim identity and authority as a carnivore dieter. We can see this identity formation in the overall content of her YouTube channel, the other carnivore dieters EPE finds notable, and the ways in which she directs her audience to content outside of the video, particularly content linked in the description, thus further participating in the community.

In utilizing a conversion narrative to carve out a space in the carnivore community, EPE shows how community identities are reinforced by discussing the benefits of following that community's practices as well as the detriments of eschewing those practices. In her discussion of conversion stories and the way they help reinforce identities, Ayometzi (2007) notes how

members of a Spanish Baptist Mission in Texas share in an understanding of the harms of alcohol and the ways in which overcoming alcoholism is used as a tool to construct a cohesive identity as a community. The significance of this theme is illustrated when one of her interviewees, in order to help Ayometzi understand their community's views on alcohol, relates an imagined situation in which Ayometzi has family members — father, brothers — who struggle with alcohol (63). For the sake of understanding a community's values, practices, what they partake in or abstain from, it's important to understand not just the benefits of that community's practices, but the negatives that result from *not* following the community.

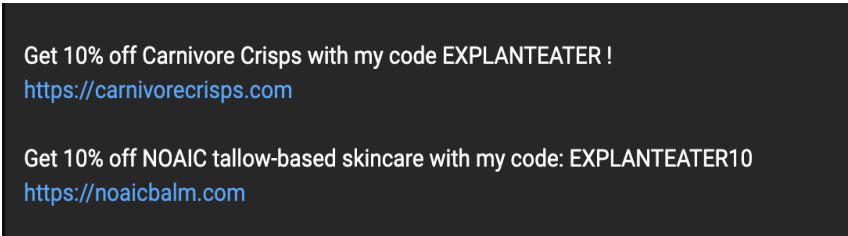
Interaction among members of an online community affects the impact of group influence within that community. Through interaction, group identification is strengthened and as a group identity is formed, members become more likely to be influenced by the group as a whole, contributing to discrimination and stereotyping of those outside of the group (Postmes et al. 1998; Gregson et al. 2022). Within the online community of carnivore dieters, emphasizing and opposing the outgroup of vegans and plant-based dieters is key in shaping that group identity as opposition to veganism gives something around which the group can coalesce (Muller et al. 2024; Gregson et al. 2022). The coalescing around the juxtaposition of an outgroup of veganism is informed by group influence and, by participating in that juxtaposition, EPE becomes a member of that group; she participates in the process of group influence, effectively inviting her viewers to participate in the interaction(s) with that online community that strengthen group-identification.

2.4.4. The Grift

The space that EPE carves out for herself within the carnivore community is legitimized by the presence of affiliate links in the description. As EPE directs viewers to her description to find out more about Sv3rige’s content, she also directs them to these links. If someone wanted to learn more about the content creator who was so eye-opening for EPE — who convinced her that shifting from a plant-based diet to a meat-based diet was “the right thing” — then they would seek out the description of the video as directed. In that description they will also find affiliate links (see **Figure 2.1**) to products that, if purchased using EPE’s link or discount codes, would provide EPE compensation. Two products — Carnivore Crisps and beef tallow-based skincare — are advertised thus:

“Get 10% off Carnivore Crisps with my code EXPLANTEATER!
<https://carnivorecrisps.com>”
 “Get 10% off NOAIC tallow-based skincare with my code: EXPLANTEATER10
<https://noaicbalm.com>”

These affiliate links function somewhat like sponsorships and show that EPE has legitimacy (at least to those brands) as a carnivore dieter, and allows her to benefit financially from existing within the carnivore diet space. Specifically, the commission rates for every



Get 10% off Carnivore Crisps with my code EXPLANTEATER !
<https://carnivorecrisps.com>

Get 10% off NOAIC tallow-based skincare with my code: EXPLANTEATER10
<https://noaicbalm.com>

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of EPE’s Affiliate Links

purchase made using the affiliate's discount code are 10% for Carnivore Crisps⁸ and 15% for Noaic Balm⁹. Her position and stance is endorsed and funded in part by Carnivore Crisps and Noaic Balm, as well as anyone who would then use her links/codes to purchase those products. The inclusion of those affiliate links not only shows the endorsement of those companies, but also allows the community to reinforce EPE's epistemic stance. Their financial support enables EPE to continue making content that is, in part, affected by the types of products and endorsements EPE can receive.

Since these links are not brought up in her video, and the only link mentioned is to Sv3rige's controversial content, one can assume that a viewer who is most willing to seek out the link to Sv3rige's video and thus learn more about the carnivore diet would be the most willing to use her affiliate links. Interestingly, while EPE doesn't mention the affiliate links, they do explicitly mention beef tallow twice in the video. The first instance occurs as EPE shifts from talking about what she eats to what has changed as a result of that eating. She notes how the recent inclusion of beef products has made a notable difference in her life.

“Since last June, and especially since I’ve started including things like beef tallow, uh beef anything in that realm. Those have made a huge difference in my health, my energy levels, my skin” (0:16:57-0:17:08).

The second mention of beef tallow occurs as EPE begins talking about positive changes to her mental health and behavior, particularly procrastination.

⁸ <https://affiliate.carnivorecrisps.com/create-account>

⁹ <https://noaicbalm.goaffpro.com/>

“All of a sudden, especially since I started having beef tallow, I- those things that I found, like those tasks that I found to be so daunting are so effortless to me now” (0:21:03-0:21:17).

In both of these instances beef tallow is mentioned, not just as an animal product that EPE now consumes, but as a special product that's made noticeable differences in her life. Explicitly mentioning beef tallow gives it unique power beyond animal products in general. So, it's not enough to just eat animal products, you have to consume beef tallow. By mentioning a specific product twice in her video, but not the links to that product, EPE primes those viewers that would be most likely to seek out her description to purchase those products; potentially facilitating further support from the community and further establishing her identity as a carnivore dieter on YouTube. By including links to products and other creators, EPE is not just pointing to what a viewer might deem worthwhile, but also evaluating that content as worthwhile herself. She's indicating to her viewer that she likes those products and that creator and that her audience can further align with her by following those links.

The Ex-Plant Eater's channel offers a selection of content that is curated by EPE herself. Each video published on the channel results from the decisions of a creator/curator. The videos EPE chooses to display on her channel reflect the content/ideas/messages that EPE finds significant. As Snyder (2015) notes, “content curators offer internet users help to locate what's worthwhile.” So, with each video that EPE records, edits, and publishes (a curative process itself), she shows her viewers the content she believes worthwhile; as the viewers engage with

her content, they show that they agree that the content is worthwhile – or at least worth their time.

Rather than simply reiterating content, curation represents a “personalised retelling of a story. The human element of content curation is what makes curated content compelling” (Gunelius 2012). Because the links are selected by EPE, the viewer gets a sense of what she values beyond what’s explicitly expressed in the video. The inclusion of affiliate links illustrate what Jenkins (2006) notes is a shift from individual content consumption toward consumption as a networked practice. This networked practice functions as group interactions that reinforce group identity and behavior (Postmes et al. 1998; Muller et al. 2024; Gregson et al. 2022).

Furthermore, If the videos themselves are curated such that they are displays of potentially worthwhile content, the supplemental materials to the video (i.e. the description) are even deeper curations and, as such, just as worthwhile as the content of the video and the channel. Curation acts as a signal to others with similar interests (Rheingold 2011). It’s not just about providing information, but it’s a way of synchronizing a community, of getting people on the same page (Shirky 2010). Insofar as EPE’s description links are a form of curation, they enable her community of viewers to understand the content she directly references and points that community toward other locations, effectively expanding the reach of that community, while simultaneously providing financial benefit for herself. This video, and her channel overall, are effectively a sales pitch for the products that EPE sells. The success of that sales pitch relies on the viewer buying into the narrative and accepting EPE’s epistemic authority. This sheds light on

why EPE is not worried about alienating a previous community (since she had not built that community), and instead she can focus on aligning with a new community of carnivore dieters.

2.4.5. *What “No Longer Vegan” Presupposes*

Keller (2024) argues that testimony involves not just individual assertions, but also presuppositions, noting that the same “features which make assertions paradigmatic testimony are also features of semantic presupposition” (2150), concluding that if assertions are testimony then presuppositions are also testimony. Thus, as EPE’s video relies on the overall presupposition that she was, indeed, a vegan, then that presupposition functions as a testimony to the correctness of her current diet and lifestyle.

Typical NLV videos are published on channels with a history of vegan content. That history of content is proof of a previous vegan lifestyle. As the first video on her channel EPE’s no-longer-vegan story then presupposes a previous vegan lifestyle, yet there is no evidence of such a lifestyle. This isn’t to say that she was never vegan, but rather that EPE has chosen not to display — or curate — content of this style. Since EPE has no published history of vegan content, there are no particular set of responses and interpretations (Synder 2015) that a viewer can make in regard to EPE’s life as a vegan – viewers can’t comment, interact with, or otherwise engage with EPE as a vegan, because, the digital persona that is The Ex-Plant Eater does not exist as a vegan. As such, EPE (the digital self) was *never* vegan, yet the title of the video — I Stopped Being Vegan After 14 Years and Feel Better Than I Ever Have (My Ex-Vegan Story) — and the channel name itself (The Ex-Plant Eater) presuppose a prior vegan lifestyle. The viewer’s acceptance of this presupposed identity is essential for whether or not EPE’s epistemic

stance carries any rhetorical weight. Indeed, just within the title of this video alone are several presuppositions:

First, to claim to have “stopped being vegan” is to imply that one once was vegan. “Stopped” assumes that something had previously started, triggering the preposition upon which the entire video (and channel) rests.

Second, to “feel better than I ever have” presupposes a change in physical and emotional well-being. To feel better now implies that one felt worse before; however, while feeling worse as a vegan than as an ex-vegan (current carnivore) does not necessarily suggest that EPE felt *bad* as a vegan, the use of “ever have” indicates that even her best-feeling times as a vegan were not as good as her current feelings as a carnivore. Moreover, given how discourse within the carnivore diet and among ex-vegans center health claims (Ferguson 2019; Gregson et al. 2022; Muller et al. 2024), the viewer, based on prior text associations with ex-vegan/carnivore discourse can assume that “feeling better” relates particularly to health and wellness. This implies that veganism is a suboptimal or unhealthy way of living, allowing viewers who may already be anti-vegan or sympathetic to carnivore diet discourse to reinforce existing biases against an outgroup (i.e. vegans).

Additionally, the inclusion of the duration of her supposed time spent as a vegan stands in for the lack of previous vegan content. There is a lot of experience to be gained in 14 years and explicitly mentioning the duration of her veganism in the title of the video allows EPE to claim all of that experience, regardless of whether or not she was *actually* vegan. The credibility of EPE’s epistemic claims relies on the viewers’ acceptance of her experience.

Further, by describing the video as “My ex-vegan story,” EPE takes ownership of the narrative. However, this ownership of the story — the story itself — is contained within a parenthetical. This parenthetical may indicate that the story is less important than the fact that they (1) stopped being vegan and (2) feel better than ever. What matters is not her journey away from being vegan, but the destination she’s arrived at. With the use of “my ex-vegan story,” EPE simultaneously takes ownership of a vegan identity and an ex-vegan identity. A story, as something that is recounted after the fact, of EPE becoming ex-vegan implies that they were at one point vegan. As such, the content on her channel, including the video in question, exists outside of the context of previous vegan content.

Simply put, the presuppositions just within the title can be generally represented as:

- (1) I stopped being vegan = I was vegan; I am no longer vegan
- (2) after 14 years = I have the epistemic authority of a long-term vegan
- (3) feel better than I ever have = I felt bad as a vegan; non-veganism feels good
- (4) My ex-vegan story = the video is a narrative of leaving veganism

Indeed, the only evidence of her previous vegan experience is within the presuppositions of the title, the assertions made within the video, and the channel name. As such, the viewer must take it on faith that EPE was vegan. Regardless, when considering the role of the online persona, the EPE channel/brand has never been vegan, despite claims to the contrary. EPE has not curated any content that presents a prior vegan identity; that identity exists within the presuppositions.

2.5. CONCLUSION

The Ex-Plant Eater is able to use her presupposed authority as a (former)vegan to give additional credence to her claims of both the negatives of a plant-based diet and the positives of an animal-based diet. In doing so, she constructs an authoritative epistemic stance as a carnivore dieter. Her claims to the benefits of a carnivore diet are strengthened by her experiences as on a plant-based diet and, as such, her epistemic authority regarding the carnivore diet is constructed and her praises of it are to be trusted. She uses this established trust to frame animal-based diets positively and plant-based diets negatively. She uses several key strategies to maintain her epistemic stance, such as representing veganism and carnivorism as diametrically opposed, utilizing conversion narrative and testimony. This in turn, allows her to *become* not just an ex-vegan, but a member of the carnivore diet community.

Through the use of these stancetaking strategies, EPE's recounting of her journey from vegan to advocate of the carnivore diet fits within the framework of a conversion story. The Ex-Plant Eater doesn't have a pre-existing vegan audience. This video is not about explaining to an audience of fellow vegans why she's left veganism, but is rather for introducing herself to the carnivore diet community. By claiming the identity of a vegan, and the subsequent move away from that identifier, EPE is able to discuss the benefits of a meat-based diet in constant contrast to plant-based diets. The channel becomes an interdiscursive resource for advocates of meat-based diets in their opposition to veganism. It provides a singular resource for carnivore dieters to claim "not only is a meat-based diet best for you, but plant-based diets are the worst for you," furthering a diametric opposition of the two ways of eating. By claiming prior veganism, EPE's

overarching epistemic stance is one of having been on the proverbial “other side,” giving greater weight to her conviction that meat-based diets are “the answer.”

Linguistic and social practices that deviate from established cultural norms are considered *marked*, that is, they stand out from idealized and prescriptive social standards (Bucholtz 2001). Meyers-Scotton (1998) notes how a key factor of markedness is a social actor’s *choice* to present marked behaviors to achieve interactional goals (Gross 2006). As such, we can understand veganism, in both dietary and ideological terms, as a marked practice. Additionally, although the carnivore diet may also be considered marked, it is worth noting that the act of eating meat itself is generally unmarked. Indeed, as Adams (2008: 44) points out, eating meat is not even viewed as an active choice, at least until confronted by someone who doesn’t eat meat:

Meat eating is not perceived as one of two choices: meat eating or vegetarianism. Since it is not seen as one of two choices, meat eaters rarely have to define themselves as meat eaters or acknowledge that they make a choice in their diet. The result is that the meat eating is unmarked. A meat eater usually does not see himself or herself as a meat eater until a vegetarian makes an appearance.

So, when EPE acknowledges her choice to eat meat, they are then setting up meat-eating and veganism as equally valid responses to an ethical quandary. Yet they nevertheless focus, not on the various ethical and moral dilemmas addressed by veganism, but rather the health outcomes of the two choices. Marking her decision to eat an exclusively meat-based diet frames her dietary preferences as an ethical choice, allowing her to argue against the ethics of veganism without having to engage with the ethics. The negative health outcomes she attributes to veganism become arguments against veganism as an ethical position.

Taken on their own, outside of the context of preceding or following content, the NLV genre shares many similarities with conversion narratives. They acknowledge past behavior and wrongdoings; address a desire to improve or change a behavior; encounter a potential solution; and then accept that solution and, as a result, join in a community of like-minded individuals who are similarly converted. It is through the telling of a conversion story that one becomes converted (Burke 1970). For EPE, telling the story of being no-longer vegan is to become a former vegan.

Although the goal of this video is to seemingly become a member of a new community of ex-vegans, throughout her video, EPE doesn't identify a specific audience; she doesn't call out vegans, nor does she call *in* fellow carnivore dieters. In fact, EPE only directly mentions two carnivore diet advocates. Instead, EPE's video engages with what Warner (1993) calls a superaddressee – someone “who is never addressed but haunts the interaction as a virtual spectator” (242). These virtual spectators' prior associations with veganism, health and wellness, carnivore diets, are unknowable; therefore, it would be less rhetorically effective for EPE to assume that the viewer is on the same page as them. As style is informed by a speaker's response to their audience (Bell 1884), EPE is preemptively responding to her audience in how she constructs her ex-vegan story. Much like Ayometzi's interviewee accounted for their interviewer's potential lack of understanding of alcoholism by explaining the detriments of alcohol, EPE's focus on and recognition of the negative effects of veganism in this first video allows the superaddressee to understand the reasons and the process whereby she claims a new group identity.

Ayometzi (2007) shows how, within religious contexts, conversion stories function as a recurrent resource for the creation and sustaining of group membership, helping those who appropriate such narratives to sustain a collective identity. The use of conversion stories to create a collective identity is not limited to religious contexts and identities. Mishler (1995) shows how personal conversion stories function as a vehicle for individuals to transform their identities in the process of addiction recovery in the context of Alcoholics Anonymous. In whatever context in which conversion narratives operate and the structures they might take, they enable members of the group to take the structure and content of a standard conversion narrative, adapt it, and make it their own. In a way, the conversion narrative provides a template which current or prospective members can use to construct a joint stance that aligns with the collective identity of their group, and evaluates what it means to be outside of that group. Thus, while there are similarities in conversion stories across identities — arguably a standard format which is taken up and adapted by collectives as much as it is by individuals within those collectives — they are nevertheless an evaluative tool to delineate differences in identity. Conversion stories are used to establish one not just as a member of a particular group, but as a *non*-member of another group.

As The Ex-Plant Eater recounts her journey out of veganism and into a carnivore lifestyle, she claims the identity of an ex-vegan just as strongly as she positively claims the identity of a carnivore dieter. When taking a step back and examining the video as a whole, and as it fits into the broader context of her channel, EPE's ex-vegan story is less about why they are *not* vegan anymore and more about why they *are* doing the carnivore diet, allowing her to easily enter into a community and claim that community's identity. If doing is becoming, it is in the

perpetual rejection of veganism that EPE *becomes* a carnivore and in this process acquire a community, an audience, and financial gain.

Chapter 3: The Scope of Ethical Veganism: In-fighting, Intertextuality, and Interpersonal Drama Among Vegan YouTubers

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Ideology and social movements are useful places for the construction of a shared group identity that, in turn, informs an individual identity. Adherence or membership to a social movement or ideology then becomes a short-hand for identity itself. Indeed, social identities themselves are expressed and established through stancetaking acts (Ochs 1993). In claiming membership to a social movement or adherence to an ideology, an individual makes claims about what kind of person they are and/or how they want others to perceive them — what values they have and what values they want others to know they have. Parallel to the concept of indexicality (Eckert 2008; Silverstein 2003), membership to an ideologized group stands in for the complexities and nuances that inform identity. A group identity indexes its members' values, experiences, and preferences, and informs behavior (Ghaziani & Fine 2008). This allows group identities and ideologized social movements to serve as useful discursive resources. However, as a group grows and the members of that group increase, they bring with them their unique ideas, identities, experiences and relationships to that group.

As such, boundaries of the group and its utility as a discursive tool are continuously (re)negotiated. Often this boundary-work occurs through infighting, wherein differences of opinion and discrepant views among individuals or subgroups are expressed in an effort to reinforce or challenge the goals of the group (Ghaziani 2008). Infighting is not necessarily a bad thing, and is an integral part of determining the boundaries of group identity. Ghaziani and Fine

(2008) contend that infighting allows members of a group to strategically use and enact political ideologies that are otherwise not emphasized or considered as part of the group identity.

This chapter looks at infighting within the vegan community online. In particular I examine the stancetaking strategies employed by two YouTubers — Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan — as they discuss issues pertaining to ethical veganism, namely intersectionality and white veganism. I describe the ways in which Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan leverage the affordances of YouTube and multimodal computer-mediated communication, collaboration and intertextuality, and framing as discursive resources for stancetaking. I argue that these internal debates among ethical vegans that interrogate the purview of veganism and the praxis of animal rights activism are an essential and necessary practice for clarifying what it means to *be* an ethical vegan, and that they are a key part of negotiating the polysemy of “veganism.”

The ways in which individuals perform stance can become associated with their individual linguistic style. Johnstone (2009) demonstrates how the repeated use of stancetaking moves enables interactants to construct an individual and replicable style. By using stance to construct a replicable style, interactants are able to signal a personal identity. As stances are negotiated among interactants with a shared social identity (i.e. vegans), the personal identity signaled by a unique and replicable style becomes a salient factor in stancetaking research, providing a lens through which we can analyze the effects of shared and personal identity on stancetaking strategies.

In the following section I provide an overview of key terms and general issues in a prolonged, asynchronous debate between Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan. Section 3.3

provides details about Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan as individuals and the methods and rationale used to analyze their videos. Section 3.4 discusses the various strategies each creator uses to construct their stance and establish their individual and group identity as vegans. I conclude that by negotiating the polysemic status of vegan, Soytheist and Queer Brown vegan attempt to determine what veganism *is* and, from there, address the implications of that definition. Through their methods of participating in the infighting necessary for establishing ideological boundaries, their videos become new prior text associations, artifacts of similar yet distinct interpretations of veganism, which further contribute to its polysemic status.

3.2. LITERATURE REVIEW & KEY TERMS

The following subsections review key terms which provide context for understanding the interaction between Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan. Section 3.2.1. reviews the central topic of the debate between the two, namely *white veganism*. Section 3.2.2. discusses infighting as a means of negotiating ideological boundaries and the ways in which social media affects ideological infighting. Section 3.2.3. calls back to section 1.3.3. to provide an overview of impression management. This section concludes with a brief primer on stasis theory. The key terms discussed in this section guide the analytical focus of this chapter.

3.2.1. White Veganism

White veganism is a term that closely parallels the concept of *white feminism*. What follows is a brief overview of both *white feminism* and *white veganism* to provide context for the comparisons and contrasts that this chapter makes between the two terms.

White feminism is a term borne from third wave feminism and refers to a feminist ethic that overlooks or ignores the intersectional struggles of marginalized individuals. White feminism offers a critique simply of the ways that women — typically white, cisgender, and heterosexual women — are systematically oppressed but doesn't consider racism, socioeconomic status, and other forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). As a historical example, women's rights advocates in the United States, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton both argued for women's suffrage, but not for the voting rights of Black Americans, thus excluding Black women from their advocacy. White feminists advocate for reproductive rights, wage equality, and sexual freedom while women of color have to fight for those things and face institutional racism, disabled women have to fight for those things and also for accessibility. All women face various intersecting forms of systemic oppression, which a white feminist perspective often ignores. This flattens the scope of feminism while also homogenizing feminists, effectively centering a single perspective and identity (Beck 2021). The core of this being that white feminism focuses on a single particular type of marginalization (i.e. the struggles that all women face), but doesn't address how additional forms of marginalization affect other groups and how that would impact their ability to participate in the white feminist's form of feminism (i.e. feminism singularly focused on women). This effectively elevates the status of white cis-het women above women who don't fit that mold, and contributes to the othering of those women (Liska 2015).

Similarly, *white veganism* is used to describe vegans who view the ethics of veganism through a single axis: the oppression of nonhuman animals. White veganism would be a vegan

ethic that only considers one form of marginalization (i.e. the oppression of nonhuman animals), but not how intersecting forms of marginalization affect other groups and their ability to participate in a veganism that is singularly focused. For example, how food desserts or socioeconomic status might inhibit access to popular vegan products and meat analogues (the purchase of which is notably *not* a requirement for veganism, particularly ethical veganism).

White veganism as a critique of vegan ethics is reinforced by the fact that previous academic studies on veganism have been limited by focusing primarily on white, heterosexual, and middle-class populations. This, as Greenbaum points out, “assumes a race-neutral experience of veganism, meaning that the motivations, opportunities, and experience of adopting a vegan lifestyle will be similar without regard to race, class, and gender” (2018: 682). More than just a critique of singular consideration of nonhuman animals, white veganism also refers to the issue of broader discourse about veganism centering a homogeneous experience that is effectively apolitical. Harper’s *Sistah Vegan* anthology argues that for people of color, veganism can be “a political statement, another weapon in our fight for economic, social, and political empowerment” (Harper 2010: 41). This frames veganism as a form of resistance to a colonial industrial food complex that tends to disproportionately disenfranchise poor people of color.

We can see the parallels between white feminism and white veganism in how both consolidate their respective ideologies around a singular focus – *just* women; *just* nonhuman animals – while disregarding intersectionality. In doing so, they both assume a homogeneity of experience(s) and rationale for their practitioners. Both terms, primarily used pejoratively (or at

the very least in criticism) seek to point out limitations in a member's practice of and understanding of the scope of their respective ideology.

However, where the concept of white feminism is generally accepted among scholars, white veganism is a contested term; that is, the extent to which it is an accurate, applicable, or relevant critique of some vegans' ethics is debated among the community. Vegans, particularly the two subjects of this chapter, negotiate the applicability of the term, the validity of white veganism as a critique of nonhuman animal-centric veganism, which human rights issues and intersectionality ought to be addressed by veganism.

It's worth noting that progress in the animal rights movement – steps toward nonhuman animal liberation – do have positive impacts on human animals, such as reduced pollution, carbon footprint and other environmental benefits, improved working conditions and mental health for slaughterhouse workers, and so on. Similarly, white feminism would also ostensibly yield benefits for women of color. The tension is about what the purview of each movement should be: *just* women or *just* nonhuman animals. I should also note that neither subject of this chapter argues that intersectionality and human rights issues should *not* be part of one's ethical framework or that they are not important nor in need of addressing, but rather they are debating whether intersectionality is, or ought to be, a component of veganism. They are dealing with the central question of whether or not veganism should focus solely on nonhuman animals.

Moreover, there is a marked difference between non-vegans criticizing white veganism and vegans criticizing white veganism. When vegans critique white veganism, it is done in order to negotiate ideological boundaries and, ideally, strengthen and define community boundaries.

Vegans, when discussing the extent to which veganism can or should focus exclusively on nonhuman animals, are able to explore the similarities between certain approaches to veganism and non-intersectional feminism, without throwing out the concept of veganism altogether. This infighting allows vegans to tackle not the question of “is veganism ethical?” but the question of “what are the ethical, and thus ideological boundaries of veganism?” particularly within the oft-levied criticism of veganism as a privileged position. These critiques of privilege amongst vegans, especially ethical vegans, are propelled by a desire to interrogate how to expand compassion, justice, and equality beyond nonhuman animals.

However, when non-vegans focus on “vegan privilege” it’s often done with the goal of discrediting ethical arguments for veganism and to justify continued animal consumption. Non-vegans use white veganism, and its parallels to white feminism (i.e. bad/not real feminism) to undermine veganism as a concept or ideology. The criticism from non-vegans frames *all* ethical veganism as white veganism, leveraging comparisons to white feminism so as to argue for the dismissal of veganism as a legitimate ethical position.

When vegans engage in in-fighting about privilege and the purview of ethical veganism, they are negotiating the boundaries of their ideology/identity; whereas non-vegans’ framing of veganism as a privileged position serve to reinforce the (somewhat, that is to say: less discussed) invisible ideologies of carnism (Joy 2009) and speciesism and function to maintain the status quo.

So, these debates about white veganism/single-issue vegans/etc. are important to have within the community as the community can discuss these issues without having to defend

veganism as an ideology. This in-fighting exists within a larger context wherein discussions of white veganism and privilege are used to detract from and discredit the primary ethical claims of veganism. Having these debates within the community may help to prevent critiques of veganism from being leveraged into critiques against veganism as a whole and similarly provide single-issue vegans with additional nuance to carry into their activism. Two ethical vegans are able to discuss white veganism without fear that the term (or even accusations of *being* a “white vegan”) will be weaponized against the animal rights movement. Additionally, debates within the vegan community, especially pertaining to veganism as an ethical stance, avoid diving into topics of health and nutrition (though they still come up occasionally). Exaggeration and potential misinformation about veganism, particularly as it relates to health, nutrition, and disease, can potentially have the opposite effect and reinforce negative views of vegans (Messina 2018), but in-group discussions that don’t even *need* to touch on those topics avoid reinforcing negative perceptions.

3.2.2. *Infighting, Ideology, and Social Media*

In their research on culture and conflict, Ghaziani and Fine (2008) emphasize how “ideologies are demonstrated in group interaction” and are therefore linked to the group as a collective, the relationships between members of a group, and their relationships with other groups they are members of (54). Their analysis of the Chicago Dyke March – an annual lesbian political demonstration formed in response to underrepresentation of lesbians and women-identified persons in Gay Pride parades – showed how, while infighting is necessary for negotiating group boundaries and ideological perspectives, compromise is also essential for

maintaining the group, particularly when organizing a public-facing event (i.e. activism).

Consensus on what constituted participating in the event (subsequently, the group) was inhibited in large part *because* it mattered so deeply to the organizers. Yet, because the event (i.e. a representation of the movement) needed to occur, the organizers of the Chicago Dyke March recognized that the disagreements were worth compromising on in service of the overall message. They argue that, in the process of constructing a shared meaning, ideologies are presented in ways that shape the public impression of the presenter and adherents to that ideology. Ongoing developments in computer-mediated communication provide communicators with a wide range of interactional environments wherein shared meanings are constructed and where ideologies — and thus adherents to those ideologies — can be expressed.

Social media is an avenue where ideologies and identity are made explicit. People show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement by including #BLM on their bios and participating in Blackout Tuesday¹⁰. Critics of the Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza¹¹ (UN Body 2024; Amnesty International 2024) show support for the Palestinian people by

¹⁰Blackout Tuesday was a digital protest that occurred primarily on Instagram on June 2, 2020, where users protesting police brutality and racism posted solid black squares to their Instagram profiles with hashtags #blackouttuesday #blacklivesmatter and #blm. The initiative was started by music executives Brianna Agyemang and Jamila Thomas in response to the murder of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and the Killing of Breonna Taylor. During the event businesses were encouraged to halt operations and stop releasing music. For example, MTV went silent for eight minutes and forty-six seconds (the amount of time that police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck, resulting in Floyd's death (Savage 2020; Griffin 2020).

¹¹ On October 7, 2023, Hamas – a militant offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that has governed the Gaza strip in Palestine since 2007 – launched an attack against Israel, reportedly killing nearly 1,200 people and abducting 240 people as hostages. In response, Israel tightened the apartheid conditions of the Gaza strip (Amnesty International 2024) and increased offensive military actions, resulting in the confirmed deaths of 61,700 Palestinians and wounding of 115,981 Palestinians as of April 11, 2025 (McCreedy 2025).

adding the Palestinian flag — PS — to their bios, or, more subtly, incorporating the watermelon emoji — 🍉 — which is used to stand in for the Palestinian Flag due its similar color scheme. Vegans on X (fka Twitter), use the symbol of a circled V in their handles or on their bios. These shorthands, symbols, and trends allow people with shared ideologies to identify one another and grow an online community. These new group interactions then further allow those ideologies to be demonstrated and their meanings negotiated.

Social media has become a place of learning and teaching, particularly for vegans of color (Greenbaum 2018). As an ideological movement grows and diversifies, smaller communities within that ideology carve out space based on the needs of those members, and the nuances of an ideology are negotiated (Ghaziani and Fine 2008). Of particular relevance to the discussion of white veganism, Greenbaum notes that vegans of color “are using social media to educate and empower agency and choice among people of color who may feel deterred by the constraints of veganism” (2018: 687). A particularly noteworthy site of social media education and empowerment is YouTube, a popular online video-sharing social media platform which hosts the largest collection of videos online. It’s also one of the most widely used social media sites worldwide, with over 2.7 billion active users per month (Ghosh & Tripathi 2025). YouTube enables social justice movements, including the animal rights movement, to reach a massive audience and effect change, and has thus been widely used by activists.

This chapter is part of a larger project exploring polysemic variations in the term *vegan(ism)*, and the extent to and the ways in which interactants make clear their understanding

of veganism and how that occurs on YouTube in particular. What do people know about veganism, what prior text associations inform that knowledge, and how does their understanding of veganism play out in the stances expressed about veganism? Vegans go to social media to learn about issues surrounding veganism and some may even start their own YouTube channels to spread awareness and demonstrate what veganism looks like and/or means to them. This has the potential to normalize veganism within broader discourse, making it seem more attainable (Sneijder and te Molder 2005). Indeed, the primarily visual nature of social media, and YouTube in particular, give content creators the potential to bolster their stances with impactful affecting images. Andreatta points out how “visual methods involving photographs and film provide important support for exposing oppression, abuse, and exploitation of nonhuman animals” (2023: 52)

The often primarily visual methods used on social media sites have created not just new ways to support exposing animal cruelty, but the visuals also provide additional channels for intertextual and multimodal discourse. For example, creators on YouTube (a visual medium in itself) can include visuals in the form of stock footage, captured footage, or screenshots of posts from other sites in order to enhance the various stances taken within their content. Taking the time to find a visual to support your position indicates a higher level of investment with that position and may elicit a stronger response from the audience.

Both of the creators examined in this chapter embody the ways that social media, and especially YouTube, are places of learning, with videos that straddle the line between response/drama video and video essays. Not only are they responses to each other, and to

conversations occurring outside of YouTube, but they are also in response to the tension within the vegan community about the purview of ethical veganism. The videos then aren't just a conversation, they also function as artifacts that exist independent of the conversation – something someone seeking to learn more about veganism, and what it means to be an ethical vegan can use to learn more. As such they reinforce YouTube as a place of learning.

3.2.3. Impression Management

Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management refers to the rituals and strategies individuals employ to intentionally foster a desired self-presentation which is maintained through consistent performance with complimentary behaviors (Chen 2014). Bolino and Turnley (2003) identify five impression management strategies typically used: self-promotion; ingratiation; supplication; intimidation; and exemplification. Impression management is a key factor in maintaining face, which is the "public self-image that every member [in an interaction] wants to claim for [themselves]" (Brown & Levinson 2009: 311) and is the condition, not the objective, of an interaction (Goffman 2009). In synchronous face-to-face conversations facework and impression management are contextual and limited by the setting and ephemeral nature of in-person interactions. However, computer-mediated communication, particularly on YouTube, allows for more careful and deliberate methods of saving face and managing impressions. Impressions are managed by internet users in the ways in which they use "the equipment available in particular settings, especially equipment for displaying information" (Hafner 2015: 98). As such impression management strategies, and how the tools available for managing impression online, inform how YouTubers present themselves.

Building off of Goffman's (1959) work on impression management and face work, Greenebaum (2012) notes how the identities of vegans "can become 'discreditable' if they discuss veganism as a politic and ethic within the context of animal rights rather than merely a diet or lifestyle" (Greenebaum 2012: 312), and are tasked with saving face, and maintaining social conventions, all while their existence actively challenges social norms (Sneijder & te Molder 2009; Neuman 2020). Because of this, vegans tend to avoid interpersonal conflict and have successful interactions with non-vegan friends and family by carefully managing impressions of themselves as disciplined and self-controlled. Often this is done by presenting veganism positively and avoiding contention along moral boundaries.

Social conventions guide how we move through and interact with the world and others. They are continuously negotiated in conversation as it unfolds. Gilbert (2014) describes social conventions as the rules that stem from two (or more) actors' commitment, such that violating those rules yields negative consequences and constitutes an offense of the other parties' commitment to upholding those norms (Neuman 2020). Vegans operate outside of established social norms such that their very presence is seen as a remark on those social conventions, particularly the social construction of consuming animals (Adams 2008; Joy 2010). Indeed, because meat eaters seldom think about their choice to consume meat unless interacting with veganism (through face-to-face conversation, vegan content online, plant-based products in stores), meat eating is an unmarked social convention. The result of the unmarkedness of eating meat means that interactions between vegans and non-vegans are necessarily negotiations of that social convention. Since violations of social conventions result in the violating party being

reprimanded (Gilbert 2014), how then do vegans — for whom a violation of a social convention is a core part of their identity — save face among non-vegans?

In an analysis of the ways in which 26 vegetarians and vegans discuss their diet with non-vegans, Greenebaum (2012) found that, to increase the likelihood that a non-vegan audience will listen to their position, vegans defer to presenting veganism in a positive light, avoiding interactions that would lead to friction between moral boundaries. Greenebaum highlights four ways that vegans maintain their front stage personas and save face: avoiding confrontation, appropriate timing, focusing on health benefits, and leading by example. While the list of strategies vegan (and vegetarian) participants in Greenebaum's study use to save face is by no means exhaustive, stand in contrast to strategies employed in inter-vegan discourse.

In inter-vegan discourse, vegans don't need to worry about how their presence violates social conventions; as such, they don't need to consistently paint veganism in a positive light or avoid confrontation — the unmarked social conventions of their audience aren't suddenly marked by virtue of their interlocutor's identity. The preventative facework strategies discussed by Greenebaum (2012) and an awareness of the most effective (i.e. well-received) approaches to activism (Freeman 2014) are key for vegans saving face with non-vegans; however, they are less necessary in discourse *among* vegans (Shepard 2020).

Indeed, Shepard (2020) compared the linguistic choices of users on Reddit and Facebook to show how inter-vegan discourse, particularly in online, (ideally) vegan-exclusive communities, interactants are able to discuss, evaluate, and critique vegan activists without having to justify veganism as an ideology or practice. Interactants are able to be more direct, and

draw on personal experiences, often shared among vegans, as they construct their epistemic stance. As conversations unfold, participants are then able to accept the epistemic authority of their interlocutor, thereby taking up their epistemic stance, while still disagreeing. This allows for interactants to position themselves around a clear and identifiable stance-object (i.e. veganism and vegan activism) while simultaneously co-constructing a joint stance that positively evaluates veganism overall, despite differences in opinion and perspective. As such conversations within vegan communities allow interactants to take opposing stances – even engage in debate and express disagreement – without violating face. Thus, it is among vegans that the nuances, and negatives, of veganism and vegan activism are discussed in good faith. And it is toward those inter-vegan interactions that this chapter lends its attention.

3.2.4. A Brief Discussion of Stasis Theory

Stasis theory describes a framework for approaching debates whereby different kinds of arguments are made at varying “levels” of stasis: conjecture, definition, quality, and policy. Stasis helps to identify where different interactants might disagree and what key issues lie at the heart of a debate (Hoppmann 2014). Ostensibly, generative conversations and debates where interlocutors are speaking *to* and *with* each other rather than *at* each other occur when interlocutors are making arguments at the same level of stasis, provided they agree or are at least on the same page at the preceding levels of stasis. Basically, stasis describes the level where a debate takes place and where points of contention are clear (Marsh 2018; Dieter 1994).

At their most basic, conjectural arguments typically deal with questions of the *existence* of the topic of debate; arguments at the level of definition tend to focus on describing the

characteristics and clarifying the topic at hand; arguments at the level of quality center around whether the topic of debate is “good” or “bad;” and policy arguments deal with what ought to be done about the topic of debate. While somewhat discrete and procedural, the stasis levels often require a degree of recursivity. For example, while interlocutors might be debating the existence of a topic (at the level of conjecture), whether or not the topic at hand *exists* in the same way for both interlocutors might very well depend on what they think the topic *is* (definition). Rarely will an argument be put forward that is only concerned with one level of stasis.

Stasis theory provides a useful framework for analyzing the debate at hand between Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan. But it’s also a useful tool for analyzing broader discourse surrounding vegan(ism). Stasis theory can allow us to disambiguate polysemy of veganism by providing a method of determining what someone means when discussing veganism, what their position is relative to veganism and how they express that position (i.e. stance), and what potential actions that position entails. Approaching vegan discourse through the lens of stasis theory may hopefully engender more productive discourse.

3.3. METHODS

This chapter examines the stancetaking strategies of two vegan YouTubers engaged in discourse on the topic of white veganism. The primary data comes from two different videos by two different creators: Queer Brown Vegan (Isaias Hernandez) and Soytheist (Aditya Prakash). Queer Brown Vegan’s (QBV) video “What is White Veganism and Why is it a Thing?”¹² and

¹² “What is White Veganism and Why is it a Thing?” <https://youtu.be/bbs-XHnwHdU?si=NkKX-TsvOVT4iVpH>

Soytheist's video "White Veganism is Not The Problem, THESE Are"¹³ discuss the topic of white veganism, intersectionality, and the oppressive nature of colonialism. Uploaded to YouTube on March 18, 2022, QBV's nine-minute video aims to address the historical exclusion of BIPOC voices from the animal rights movement. Per the video's description on YouTube, QBV's video "is about some of the dangers of the [vegan] movement, including white veganism" (Hernandez 2022) and aims to examine the role white supremacy plays in constructing oppressive hierarchies.

Soytheist's 26-minute video, uploaded on June 19, 2021, similarly discusses the concept of white veganism but focuses less on primarily explaining the concept of white veganism and more on responding to the ways in which "some vegans who *claim* to practice Intersectional Veganism" (Soytheist 2021) attempt to promote diversity in the animal rights movement and the extent to which those attempts help or hinder the animal rights movement. Soytheist's video references other vegan creators and intersectional animal rights activists, including a response to an Instagram post made by Queer Brown Vegan. As such, both videos provide rich locations for exploring not only how creators construct and perform (and record and edit) stance, but also how intertextuality, multimodality, and an ever-evolving digital landscape shape stancetaking and activist discourse.

In this chapter I utilize close-reading strategies, intertextual analysis to examine f how Queer Brown Vegan and Soytheist *perform* the role of YouTuber and how that performance

¹³ "White Veganism is Not The Problem, THESE Are" https://youtu.be/_ekJa9Lc4Tk?si=wOIMiOSL3x8KtZ1w

influences the stancetaking strategies they employ and how they relate to broader discourse surrounding veganism. Further, this chapter explores the ways that QBV and Soytheist engage with intersectionality and identity as resources for constructing and performing stance. I also examine the role of framing as a discursive resource — the ways in which both creators frame (white) veganism, intersectionality, and identity and how that framing interacts with the polysemy of the word “vegan.”

3.3.1. The YouTubers

Isaias Hernandez (@queerbrownvegan [Queer Brown Vegan]) describes himself as “an environmentalist and creative devoted to improving environmental literacy through content creation, storytelling, and public engagements.” They use the moniker Queer Brown Vegan as an independent media platform to provide intersectional environmental education in relation to veganism. Hernandez is a full-time content creator and public speaker who is active on various social media platforms, particularly YouTube and Instagram. He also runs a website/blog focused and his work has been featured in publications such as Vogue, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and Yale Climate Communications. His content on YouTube generally consists of educational videos that explore topics related to veganism, environmentalism, and intersectionality.

Aditya Prakash (@Soytheist [Soytheist]) describes himself as an “animal liberation advocate” and publishes content on social media under the name Soytheist. While also active on Instagram and X, he primarily publishes content on YouTube where his channel is dedicated “to

providing a rational and straightforward approach *for* Animal Rights, in an easy-to-access form.”

3.3.2. Data Collection and Coding

The videos were transcribed in ELAN and then exported into a spreadsheet for analysis. I used initial coding to identify the key themes or topics of their statements, with up to one subordinate theme explaining what they’re doing with that overall theme, and then I coded for what type of stance – epistemic, affective, or both – was expressed in that statement. For example, instances of “I think” received the initial code *knowledge* (to indicate an explicit expression of the speakers’ knowledge) and the stance code *epistemic*; explicit mentions of other scholars or creators to whom a point was attributed received a *citation* code and a stance code of *epistemic*; direct mentions of rhetorical purpose, when paired with emphatic appeals to that message received initial codes such as *message* or *manifesto* and the stance code *affective*. The types of themes/topics and stances of both creators were considered when describing the utterances in order to better compare the two videos.

Given that effective and epistemic stance often work in tandem, such that affective stances that indicate one’s personal stake in an issue may also bolster their epistemic stance moves (Shepard 2020), the stance codes were determined based on their role in the overall argument, with a few utterances receiving both *epistemic* and *affective* stance codes. For an illustrative example of my coding process, let’s look at some of QBV’s statements:

1. “For example, Black vegans have existed beyond these developments of veganism, such as Rastafarians” (01:39.00-01:45.70).

2. “And their veganism is part of the broader belief in Black sovereignty, health, and ecological harmony” (01:53:00-01:57:90).
3. “Being rooted in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color cultural practices” (00:20:00-00:24:00).

All three of these utterances received the initial code of *identity politics*, as that is the core appeal within the argument being made by QBV (and also because identity politics is a primary concern in Soytheist’s response). The first statement also received a secondary code of *history*, because the purpose of that statement was to explain the history of veganism as rooted in a particular identity (i.e. Black Rastafarians); it received the stance code *epistemic*, as the utterance is meant to explain a topic and, thereby demonstrate QBV’s knowledge of it. The second statement received a stance code of *affective* because it points to beliefs (i.e. what one feels about a topic). The third statement received a stance code of both *epistemic* and *affective* because it demonstrates a knowledge of where vegan practices have roots, but also appeals to the deeply personal act of cultural practice, noting that those cultural roots are ignored with the implication that QBV feels negatively about that.

Additionally, I included additional notes explaining the reasoning for why a line received a code label, but not for every utterance; those notes were mostly for my own purpose and for lines where I thought the initial and stance codes were not self-evident or easily understood. I also tallied the number of multimodal and intertextual elements used by each creator, such as Instagram posts, excerpts from books (presented as screenshots), photos, logos, and videos and screen recordings. Moreover, although I coded the data somewhat systematically, the aim of this

project is not to provide a systematic analysis of the types of stance moves that each creator makes, but rather to focus on the intertextual, multimodal, and asynchronous debate between the two creators. The data was coded in order to help me better organize and make sense of their interactions and to provide me with a quick way of identifying relevant utterances.

3.4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections examine the particularly stancetaking strategies used by Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan and their implications for online vegan discourse. Section 3.4.1. focuses on the ways in which both Soytheist and QBV perform the role of YouTuber and how successfully enacting that role bolsters their epistemic stance as both competent YouTubers and knowledgeable vegans. Section 3.4.2. discusses the ways in which both YouTubers are able to leverage their epistemic authority in order to encourage audience participation and collaboration (e.g. *liking*, commenting, subscribing) and how YouTube videos operate as collaborative compositions. Section 3.4.3. examines how, by encouraging collaboration and, as a result of collaboration, both YouTubers are able to boost engagement with their videos, channels, and other social media platforms. Section 3.4.4. discusses how QBV and Soytheist demonstrate their digital fluency through intertextual references and cross-platform engagement, further situating their epistemic authority in the online vegan space.

3.4.1. Performing YouTube

One of the foundational methods in which QBV and Soytheist establish epistemic stance is by performing or enacting the role of YouTuber — a role that impacts every other stance move made in their videos. Performing YouTuber typically involves explicitly addressing the

viewers/subscribers, speaking directly into the camera, requests to “like, comment, and subscribe,” incorporating multimodal elements such as images or videos. YouTubers often refer to the video description and comments/the act of commenting and the comment section as a location (e.g. “I’ll be in the comment section”), paralleling deictic behaviors used in the meatspace¹⁴; creators will often refer to “the comment section below” and/or point downward within the frame of the video as if to signal the location of the comment section (Manley 2023). Finally, YouTubers will typically encourage viewers to watch additional videos on their channel, often by incorporating embedded cards showing the thumbnail of another video that viewers can click on to go to those videos (Adami 2014; Thomson 2019; Bergen 2022).

This method of epistemic stancetaking colors the credibility of the points made within their video and helps establish QBV’s and Soytheist’s identities as YouTubers. It’s separate from their arguments and other stancetaking moves within the text of the video in that there are no explicit claims being made or topics addressed, yet is nevertheless a key factor in their stancetaking strategies as it impacts credibility. In a sense, the ways they perform YouTuber determine their positionality. By performing YouTuber in the ways an audience might expect, QBV and Soytheist situate themselves as experienced, comfortable, and trustworthy YouTubers. Further, this allows them to claim and reinforce their identity as YouTubers. Displaying and attempting to be perceived as having an identity (Gee 2014; Jensen 2024) is key to claiming

¹⁴ The term “meatspace” is used here to refer to the corporeal world, the setting where interactions happen offline, in contrast to online settings or “cyberspace.”

membership of a group (Lange 2014). As such, actively performing YouTuber is essential for establishing their credibility and situating their identity *as* YouTubers as they make their points. The success of their attempts to claim YouTuber identity is not only the foundational epistemic stancetaking move of their content, but also depends on how much their audiences accept the legitimacy of their performance as Youtubers.

Soytheist and QBV show that they are legitimate YouTubers through enacting formatting and generic conventions typical of YouTube videos, particularly video responses and video essays. QBV and Soytheist are both visible for the duration of their videos in a talking-head style (i.e. speaking directly to the camera, *at* the audience, usually with only the head and shoulders visible) that ties their individual selves to the content of the video, and arguably strengthens the parasocial relationships a content creator has with their subscribers. Though they use a talking-head style that echoes mainstream media sources like news, unscripted television, or documentaries, the speech/content is linked to their individual selves and not a script writer, production company, or news group. Regardless of how scripted or unscripted the content may be, both creators are the ones writing the script. It is *their* words, positions, and arguments — not the positions of a depersonalized organization. Beyond any particular video format (and each creators' ability to successfully compose in that format), QBV and Soytheist perform *YouTuber* by participating in expected generic conventions of YouTube: calling for viewers to like, subscribe, and comment. These directives are typical of videos on YouTube and serve to drive engagement and build one's channel and audience.

QBV explicitly calls attention to the generic conventions of YouTube twice in his video:

“Before we get into this deep dive of white veganism, make sure you’re already subscribed to receive more updates on eco-educational videos” (0:00:08-0:00:14)

The “like and subscribe” directive is typical for any YouTube channel and is expected to occur in YouTube videos across the platform, particularly videos published by “YouTubers” whose channel is a personal brand (Bergen 2022). While QBV does encourage his viewers to like and subscribe, he breaks from the typical formula of ending a video with the directive and, instead, states it toward the beginning of the video. Additionally, by encouraging viewers to subscribe “before we get into this deep dive,” a subscription to the channel is framed as the first step to engaging with and receiving the information he provides. In exchange for a subscription, not only will the viewer get to hear QBV’s deep dive, but they will also receive more content. QBV echoes this later in the video:

“If you want to have more vegan videos like this, make sure to like, comment and subscribe of what you think about white veganism, and please let me know what other vegan videos would you like for me to cover, because I love talking about veganism” (0:08:50-0:09:02)

Both of these statements point to QBV’s awareness of the fact that his video is being intentionally posted on YouTube for the explicit purpose of being a YouTube video. These statements occur toward the beginning and at the very end of the video, respectively. QBV bookends their video by directing their viewers to engage with their content outside of simply viewing the video. In doing so, he acts out the generic conventions of YouTube, inviting his viewers to also participate in the interaction. A viewer can assume that when a creator encourages them to subscribe, that that creator has more content planned. QBV confirms any assumptions of future content that comes with a subscription by explicitly indicating that

subscribers will “receive more updates on eco-educational videos.” In the second call to subscribe, QBV reiterates the promise of more content while also setting it up as transactional — that by subscribing, a viewer enables the creation of more content: “if you want to have more vegan videos like this, [then] make sure to like, comment, and subscribe” (0:08:50-0:08:54). The use of a conditional formulation clarifies the relationship between subscriber and content, and suggests that creation of new content is contingent upon the viewer subscribing to the channel. By using this conditional formulation, QBV is able to also invite the viewer to share (in a small way) in the creation of new content. If the content is contingent upon subscribers, then new subscribers *create* more content.

This participatory aspect in the relationship between subscriber and YouTuber is further illustrated when QBV goes beyond asking users to simply subscribe and asks them to share ideas for future videos. By surrounding this request to leave ideas for other vegan videos with “please” and a comment on how he “love[s] talking about veganism” (0:08:57-0:09:02). QBV assures the viewers that this type of content is something he enjoys creating. This establishes a new layer of meaning to the subscription. A subscriber doesn’t just allow QBV to simply make videos about veganism; they allow QBV to do something enjoys. Thus, the act of subscribing becomes a show of support for the things QBV enjoys and the arguments made in his videos. Viewers get to play a role in the creation of new content: (1) subscribing so that videos can even get made; (2) commenting on the video, furthering the discussion at hand; and (3) suggesting ideas for future videos.

The effectiveness of a creator's position or performance as YouTuber depends on their audience's previous experience with content creators on YouTube (as well as prior text associations outside of YouTube). Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan reinforce the generic conventions of YouTube — especially the video essay genre — by enacting the typified responses seen in videos from other creators across the platform. By reinforcing these typified responses and scripts, which are taken from prior experiences making and watching YouTube videos, Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan's videos illustrate the collaboration inherent to all composition. That is, every composed text is informed, influenced by, and in response to another composition.

3.4.2. YouTube Videos as Collaborative Compositions

As a site that is exclusively built from content that is produced, consumed, and responded to by users, meaning is constructed on YouTube by the participants on the platform (Adami 2014). As such, we can consider YouTube as a place of meaning-making. The New London Group (NLG) identifies how the act of making meaning, of composing and communicating, happens across five different modes: linguistic, aural, visual, gestural, and spatial (New London Group 1996). While there exists a tendency to view writing — the act of composing a text — as utilizing one mode (i.e. linguistic), a composed text necessarily incorporates several modes. To read the words written on a page, one must engage not just with the linguistic mode, but also with visual and spatial modes. To even distill the act of writing and composition to its ancient roots and engage with a “text” as a story told aloud around a campfire, one must still navigate

several modes — the linguistic, the aural, and the gestural. As such, all writing is multimodal¹⁵.

Thus, we can examine YouTube videos as a form of writing, as a text that incorporates various modes and whose creation involves active choices by the composer.

Moreover, the choices a writer makes when composing texts are informed by their experiences with and understanding of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land 2006). Adler-Kassner & Wardle (2016) identify threshold concepts as ways of seeing and ways of understanding that change how a writer makes connections across sites and ideas. Threshold concepts, once understood, are impossible to unlearn. The idea that writing is a performative, social activity, and that meaning is constructed intertextually (Roozen 2015; Lunsford 2015; Sierra 2021) is one such threshold concept; one that emphasizes how writing is an inherently collaborative activity.

The collaborative nature of writing is enacted by both QBV and Soytheist in several ways. First, in how the videos themselves are responses to texts that exist outside of the video, thus requiring a form of collaboration with the content and creators of those texts. And second, in how they invite their audience to participate in the creation of new videos (i.e. new texts). QBV encourages his audience to leave suggestions for other videos in the comment section:

“...please let me know what other vegan videos would you like for me to cover”
(00:08:57-0:09:01)

¹⁵ Throughout this chapter I will use the term “writing” and “text” rather loosely. Following the conventions set out by Adler-Kassner & Wardle (2015), Benson (2015), Bolter and Grusin (1999), and The New London Group (1996), writing here refers to the act of composing and constructing a piece of communication that exists outside of oneself (Bazerman and Tinberg 2015).

Soytheist similarly encourages viewers to participate in the creation of new videos, but does so by directing them to fund the creation of those videos through his Patreon¹⁶ account:

“I’d like to specially thank my patrons on Patreon who make these videos possible — right? — and who voted for the topic of this video. If you’d like to do that too, be sure to check out my Patreon. It’s the first link in the description” (00:24:55-00:25:08).

Where QBV encourages audience participation by directing viewers to comment with suggested ideas, Soytheist’s viewers have more direct control in what kinds of videos are made, as they get to vote on the topics; however, it’s worth noting that the opportunity to vote on video topics is behind a paywall, as it requires a paid subscription to his Patreon account. In this way, Soytheist establishes themselves as a YouTuber whose content is worth paying for, and participates in an increasingly common way of making money as a YouTuber in the form of Patreon. Compared to YouTube’s Partner Program, Patreon allows content creators to maintain a consistent revenue stream and, ostensibly, enables the consistent creation of content. While QBV doesn’t direct viewers to a Patreon account, instead opting for commented suggestions, they are both leveraging their role as content creators to encourage active audience participation in the production of their videos. Notably, Soytheist also makes it clear that they will engage with the comment section:

“Leave a comment letting me know what your thoughts are — right? — about my analysis of this video [...] I will be in the comment section for a while after posting this video — right? — so be sure to let me know what your thoughts are” (00:26:20-00:26:36).

¹⁶ Patreon is a subscription-based monetization platform that allows content creators to sell digital products and receive funding directly from their fans (i.e. patrons).

While both creators invite engagement with and comments on their content, emphasizing positive engagement and conversation, Soytheist encourages openly negative engagement as well:

“Leave a like if you liked the video, leave a dislike if you disliked it.” (00:26:16-00:26:20)

As their communities grow and continue to engage with their content, every like, comment, subscriber, and patron becomes an additional endorsement of that creator’s position. Even disliking the video is a form of audience participation that allows the creators to determine the direction of their content. Rather than the typical “like and subscribe” often used by YouTubers (Bergen 2022), Soytheist’s use of a conditional formulation directing viewers to (dis)like his video gives his viewers agency. Sneijder & te Molder (2005) note how conditional formulations are particularly relevant in online discussion of veganism. When Soytheist uses a conditional formulation he is not commanding his viewers to engage with the content but instead makes explicit the purpose of a like or a dislike (i.e. as a response to content), indicating that he is aware of *why* people may (dis)like a video, imbuing the (dis)likes with a higher level of investment.

When considering that YouTube dislikes are not freely and publicly visible on videos, and are primarily only available to the content creator, Soytheist’s directions to “leave a like if you liked the video; leave a dislike if you disliked the video” (00:26:15-00:26:20), incentivizes audience participation and allows him to gauge the extent to which viewers agree with his positions.

3.4.3 Collaboration [Audience Participation] Boosts Engagement

Key to the effectiveness of both Queer Brown Vegan's and Soytheist's strategies when it comes to performing YouTuber is how such performance — particularly aspects of it that encourage collaboration — also boost engagement with their videos. The more people who *like* (or *dislike*) the videos, who write comments suggesting topics for future videos, or otherwise participate in the comment section, the better those videos perform in the algorithm. This process fits Modolo's (2018) description of the two algorithmic elements of social media: that is, the authors — either individuals or collectives — and the connections as they appear through interaction.

When QBV and Soytheist evoke the norms of YouTube, not only are they embodying the collaborative nature inherent to writing, but they are also ostensibly receiving a material benefit for that collaboration. And, as such, when a viewer does overtly participate with the YouTube process they are, whether expressing agreement or disagreement, increasing the reach of the stances expressed in those videos. That is to say, by engaging with the content in some active way, audience members increase the likelihood that the video will appear on other users' feeds. If those users watch or otherwise engage with the video, the process perpetuates. As the number of people who watch the video increases so does the potential impact of the stances taken in that video. Indeed, this incentivizes the creators to maintain the (often harmful) primary function of social media, which, as Lanier (2018) notes is to keep the individual increasingly and consistently connected. That connection not only ensures that more of a particular channel's

content will continue to appear on the viewer's page, but — depending on their relationship to the creator — may reinforce existing parasocial relationships.

It's not just that writing is inherently collaborative (or that YouTube is a form of writing), and it's not just that the comments/likes/etc. are explicitly collaborative, but rather that the explicit encouragement of collaboration is of material benefit to the creators. So, YouTube videos are a piece of writing but the success of that "writing" depends on engagement. The creators are financially incentivized, whether through YouTube's existing monetization processes or through Patreon memberships, to encourage collaboration and engagement with their audiences. Thus, the stance moves of encouraging audiences to like, subscribe, comment, and join serve myriad purposes. In these calls for collaboration the stance object at hand is the video. Not just the video as a text, but also the *content* of the video and the various stances expressed within. In asking viewers to "leave a like if you liked the video" (Soytheist: 00:26:16-00:26:18) and "make sure to like, comment, and subscribe" (Queer Brown Vegan: 08:53:00-08:55), both creators demonstrate a high level of investment and alignment with the stance object (i.e. their videos) as well as a high level of investment and positive evaluation of collaborative processes of YouTube. Moreover, the audience – the "you" either explicit or implied – is being asked to make their stances known through how they choose to engage with the content in response to the creators' requests. A *like* signals agreement with the content, and thus an alignment with the creators' epistemic stances on the topic of white veganism; a *dislike* signals the opposite and suggests misalignment with the video and the stances expressed. While there are many reasons why a viewer may *like* or *dislike* a video, the act of clicking the respective

buttons rather than simply scrolling away, watching another video, or closing the website/application indicates investment with the video and the collaboration that such engagement provides. Commenting requires the viewer to further engage with the content – to go out of their way to indicate their perspective – and expands the collaborative potential of a *like* or *dislike*. Commenting on the video thus indicates a higher level of investment than a *like* or *dislike* and allows the viewer to respond, take-up, challenge, or extend the various stances expressed in the video. Notably, YouTube comments have similar *like* and *dislike* functions and users can interact back and forth in threaded replies which allow for additional stance constructions to develop in interaction (Shepard 2020; Andries et al. 2023).

3.4.4 *Intertextual Participation in Discourse*

Beyond establishing themselves as creators who are *doing* YouTube — as creators who are fluent in that particular digital modality — QBV and Soytheist further demonstrate their digital fluency (and thus their credibility as netizens and YouTubers) through intertextual references and cross-platform engagement. These intertextual references are primarily incorporated as screenshots and other images displayed on screen, which also demonstrates competency in basic video editing and lends legitimacy to their content. Queer Brown Vegan's nine-minute video includes 13 instances of images that appear on screen as he speaks (1.44/minute); Soytheist's 26-and-a-half-minute video includes 31 instances of accompanying additional images (1.15/minute). Below I examine ways that each creator incorporates these intertextual images, paying particular attention to the meaning of the images themselves as well as how they are talked about and the ways in which they add to the accompanying utterances.

Even with the variety of multimodal and intertextual images, the ones that bear on and enhance the positions expressed in the videos are rooted in a cross-platform conversation that occurred on Instagram in comments and distinct posts between Soytheist and Queer Brown vegan, thus providing a clear exigence for both videos. Soytheist, in particular, leverages the multimodal affordances of YouTube, video content, and the intertextual environment in which online discussions take place, by incorporating screenshots of the Instagram posts and comments to further contextualize his argument.

In **Figure 3.1** Soytheist displays a comment left on his post on Instagram by Queer Brown Vegan. The screenshot shows the comment in full with sections highlighted, Soytheist remarks on the screenshot:

“He left a very long comment on my post in which he ignores every single point I made, right? And he says that I should not use my identity” (00:12:33-00:12:42)

QBV commented in response to an Instagram post where Soytheist argues that “comparing human and animal suffering is okay” (00:12:19-0:12:22). As he mentions the post, a screenshot (shown in **Figure 3.2**) with the title of the post and the first page of written content appears on screen, accompanied by the following commentary:

“within that very post, I had clarified that the validity of my points does not depend on my identity — regardless of how marginalized I might be, I could still be wrong” (00:12:42-00:12:55)

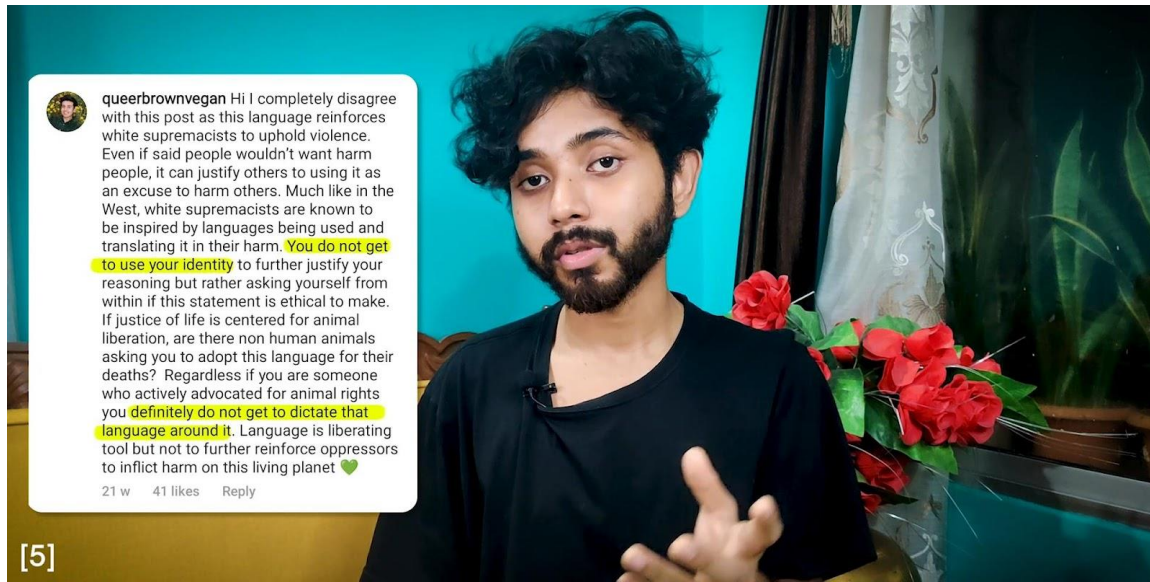


Figure 3.1. *queerbrownvegan's Instagram comment to Soytheist*

In the screenshot shown in **Figure 3.2**, we can see that it's posted from an account called Global Veganism (@globalveganism), and not from Soytheist's personal Instagram account; however, Soytheist runs the account and links to his personal account from the Global Veganism bio. Beyond demonstrating Soytheist's fluency in multimodal communication, incorporating a screenshot from a non-personal account lends authority to Soytheist's position. Global Veganism is a registered trademark and, as such, appears as an official platform sanctioning Soytheist's position.

These screenshots provide additional, fuller context to Soytheist's position and show that he is not taking QBV's words out of context. This may bolster his epistemic stance as someone who is engaging in a good faith – a position that is maintained throughout the video. Soytheist, despite his disagreements with QBV, seeks to debate on the same terms.

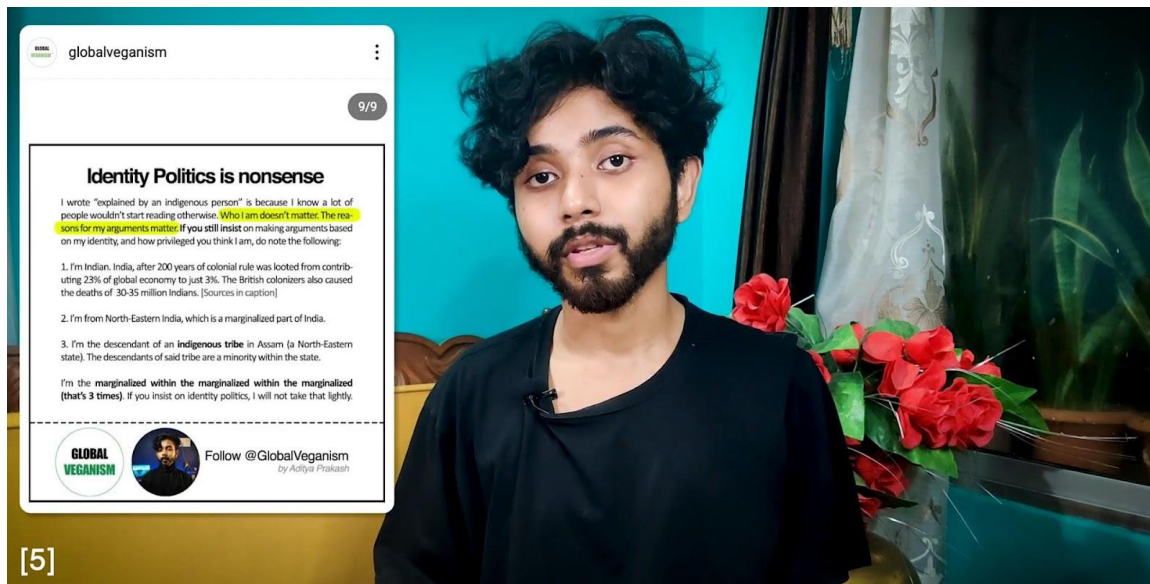


Figure 3.2. Post from Global Veganism – Identity Politics is Nonsense

Indeed, Soytheist uses QBV’s definition of white veganism to inform his argument and provides a rationale for using QBV’s definition. Taken from a post by Queer Brown Vegan entitled “The issue with White Supremacy and White Veganism,” wherein QBV engages with issues of intersectionality and veganism, Soytheist explains:

“The reason I have selected this post from Queer Brown Vegan is twofold: number one, it is the most liked post that I could find on Instagram which talks about White Veganism, right? And number two: I have had a very negative experience with Queer Brown Vegan. And I’ll talk about that at the end of the video, so make sure to watch til the end” (00:05:06-00:05:30).

Here Soytheist makes several stancetaking moves. By using the “most liked” post talking about White Veganism, he indicates that he’s engaging with a definition that is likely to be seen by the most people, thus demonstrating an awareness of the current state of discourse on White Veganism — he’s not incorporating an obscure definition that may better support his argument,

but rather meeting the community on the same page. However, the selection of this definition is also emotionally motivated by previous drama between the two. Soytheist's comments indicate a high level of investment in the debate, both intellectually and interpersonally. As such the video is about more than just discussing the topics of white veganism and intersectionality, but also about engaging in drama between content creators. As noted in section 3.2.2. interpersonal conflict and infighting are not necessarily bad things (Ghaziani and Fine 2008). Indeed, drama content on YouTube (i.e. commentary on a conflict, news story, debate, etc.) often operates as interpretive normative work wherein content creators make sense of events or conflict, offer their opinions, and point out perceived moral violations (Lewis and Christin 2022). However, as Lewis and Christin (2022) point out, drama often drives engagement and pushes content onto larger audiences, thus expanding the reach (and potential financial gains) of a creator. This has led some content creators, particularly channels solely focused on drama to seek out and even artificially create drama, a practice known as drama-farming

This type of drama-farming where interpersonal conflict is the inspiration for content creation and primary topic of the video is common among YouTubers, particularly among vloggers and streamers. There are even channels completely devoted to drama, which Lewis and Christin (2022) identify as “a hybrid genre that combines coverage of celebrity scandals, conflicts, and broader commentary on digital media communities” (1638), but note that drama content on YouTube doesn't need to incorporate *all* of them. Although not a channel that is dedicated to drama, we can see how Soytheist leans into the convention of drama farming as a way of driving engagement on YouTube when he tells his viewers that he'll discuss the drama

later, “so make sure to watch ‘til the end.” Additionally, this interpersonal drama informs Soytheist’s presentation of the video outside of the *text*, as the thumbnail shows several different people, a choice which Soytheist seems to be aware drives engagement:

“Also, every person whose face is on the thumbnail, right? They’re not there for just random reasons. Every single one of those people I’ve had very negative experiences with, and I’ll discuss those too, so stick around til the end.” (00:05:30-00:05:45)

Later he explicitly comments on how viewers may be watching his video *because* of the drama surrounding this conversation:

“Many of you watching will be watching this video because these prominent figures within the vegan movement — they shared my posts, right. They platformed me sort of. Some of you will be watching because these figures within the vegan movement invited me to do live streams with them.” (00:23:46-00:24:06)

After directly commenting on how drama within the vegan community across different platforms and modalities potentially drives viewership, Soytheist shifts the focus away from drama before ending the video, while simultaneously aligning himself with other members of the community and alluding to the potential of future drama — potential future drama that occurs because of the interconnectedness of the community:

“[...] these figures within the vegan movement invited me to do live streams with them, right. Now, I am not naming them because I don’t want to drag them into a fight that they did not sign up for. But I’m just giving examples because many of you will know who I am talking about, about which people I am talking about.” (00:24:00-00:24:20).

Here Soytheist acknowledges how simply naming the names of people with whom he’s interacted will bring them “into a fight,” showing a familiarity with the ways in which drama

spreads on YouTube and the internet. Mentioning that some viewers will already know who he is talking about, even without naming them, shows how connected the online vegan community is, particularly on YouTube. This move hints to his viewers that he knows who's involved in the drama connects those viewers to the community, rewarding dedicated viewership with insider knowledge, effectively contributing to the parasocial relationship often shared between content creators and their followers. The viewers who do know who is involved in the drama can feel closer to the drama, and thus, closer to this particular portion of the online vegan community. Soytheist uses the promise of airing drama as a hook to keep viewers engaged. This shows an understanding of conventions of content generation on YouTube and bolsters his stance as someone who knows how to *do* YouTube. Nevertheless, he lays bare the terms that he accepted and the definition upon which the debate rests, by reading out QBV's definition of *white veganism* (shown in **Figure 3.3**) with an accompanying screenshot of the Instagram post:

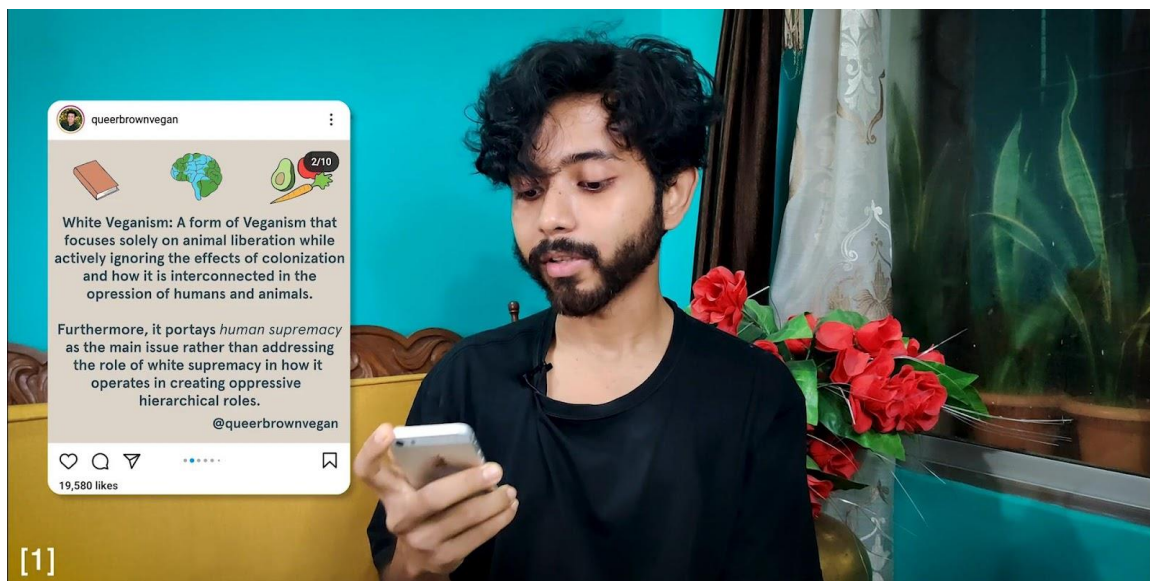


Figure 3.3. *queerbrownvegan's definition of white veganism*

“The post defines white veganism as “a form of veganism that focuses solely on animal liberation while actively ignoring the effects of colonization and how it is interconnected in the oppression of humans and animals.” (00:05:45-00:06:00)

Both Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan foreground their videos with the definition of White Veganism and screenshots from Instagram. Where Soytheist’s screenshot includes the photo from the post that included the definition, QBV’s screenshot (shown in **Figure 3.4**) is of the first photo from the Instagram post and is paired with him reciting the definition:

“In an infamous post I made back in January I described white veganism as a form of veganism that focuses solely on animal liberation while actively ignoring the effects of colonization and how it is interconnected to the oppressions of humans and animals furthermore white veganism portrays human supremacy as the main issue rather than addressing the role of white supremacy and how it operates in creating hierarchical roles.” (02:51:53-03:14:88)

Here, QBV doesn’t just provide the definition of White Veganism; he also comments on the post being “infamous,” recognizing the discourse and drama that resulted from the post. The infamy of the post was due to the attention it garnered and the debates that it sparked among vegans. In noting the infamy of the post while claiming ownership of it (and extending its points in the form of the video at hand), QBV signals a high level of alignment with the views expressed in the post and doubles down on the epistemic authority that providing a definition of a contentious term indexes. QBV recognizes that the post sparked drama, but sticks to his guns.

With regard to the stance triangle, QBV and Soytheist differ in their evaluations of white veganism as the stance object. Queer Brown Vegan evaluates white veganism negatively and positions himself in opposition to white veganism. In providing a definition of white veganism

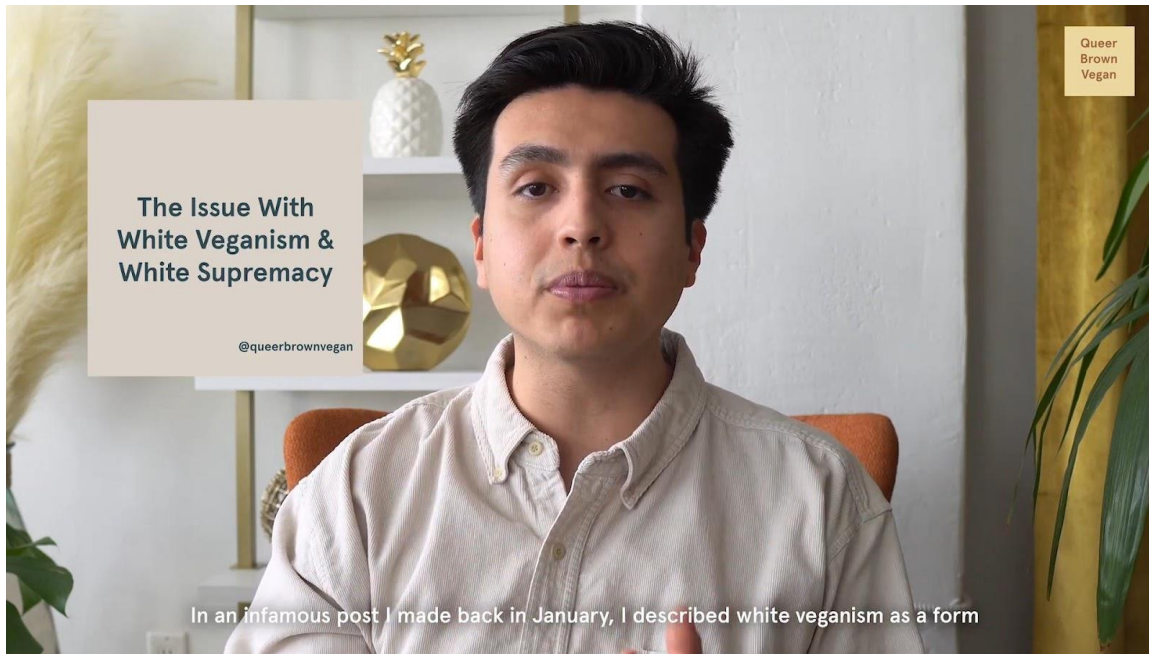


Figure 3.4. *The Issue With White Veganism & White Supremacy*

and situating it within the context of veganism as an ideology, QBV claims epistemic authority on the topic which allows him to advocate for intersectional veganism. In doing so he presents two distinct stance objects — white veganism and intersectional veganism — framing them as diametrically opposed. As such, Soytheist is tasked with evaluating both. Soytheist does not deny the existence of white veganism; however, he questions the extent to which it is a problem for veganism, and, in doing so, calls into question the need for intersectionality within the scope of veganism. Overall, he evaluates intersectionality as a good thing, but not necessarily something that veganism needs to address, framing veganism as a movement dedicated exclusively to nonhuman animals. Thus, the overall stance object is not white veganism or intersectionality, but rather ideologies that hinder the vegan movement. In this, both creators are

aligned; however, they are not aligned in their position on which ideology is bad for veganism. For QBV the ideology that hinders the vegan movement is white veganism; for Soytheist it is identity politics and a lack of a cohesive and focused message that hinder veganism. Although QBV and Soytheist do not align in their position what holds back the vegan movement, they are in alignment on their understanding (i.e. the definition) of white veganism. Soytheist's acceptance of QBV's definition of white veganism allows him to take up the epistemic stance of QBV and demonstrate alignment. Later in the video Soytheist makes this more explicit, reminding viewers that they are using the definition of White Veganism provided by QBV, paired with a photo of Isaias Hernandez (shown in **Figure 3.5**) on the screen:

“Now as a response to that post, Queer Brown Vegan — and yes this is the same person whose post we used as a reference for the definition of White Veganism.” (00:12:22-00:12:32)

By reminding viewers that it is QBV's definition of White Veganism, Soytheist demonstrates alignment with QBV's epistemic authority and an investment to ensuring that they are on the same page with regards to what White Veganism means. Considering the broader stance object of the debate (i.e. ideologies potentially hindering veganism), Soytheist clarifying and accepting the definition illustrates a high level of investment with having a productive debate and is thus positively evaluating the process of debate. The photo of Queer Brown Vegan gives viewers a face to associate with the definition. In using a flattering photo of QBV, Soytheist indicates that he is participating in good faith, without incorporating personal attacks.

These intertextual references relate to the broader conversation in which QBV and Soytheist are engaged, and are incorporated in their videos through specific, direct mentions of



Figure 3.5. Photo of Isaias Hernandez in Soytheist's video

intertextual referents, supplemented by the use of visual cues — particularly the showing of screenshots of key interactions in that broader conversation. The visual cues act as sources/citations for the points being made and addressed. They also serve to further demonstrate the creators' fluency in visual and digital modalities.

Discussing a particular post or comment that appears on another website, such as Instagram, while displaying the comment on the screen shows an audience that the current stance object (i.e. the comment/post) is real and therefore worth discussing – that the creator is not misrepresenting the comment (and is therefore trustworthy) – while simultaneously demonstrating digital literacy skills, thus further giving credibility to the creators as YouTubers.

More than just a reference or way to engage the attention of the viewers, the screenshots serve an additional purpose in the realm of social media drama. When Soytheist makes a claim

that so-and-so said X and includes a screenshot of what so-and-so said, they are showing up to that conversation with receipts, taking the drama a step above he-said-she-said conjecture. This makes the stance object around which the creators orient their positions real. In thinking of this interaction as a debate, the screenshots provide a preemptive answer to the incessant question: *what's your source?*

Both Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan demonstrate their epistemic authority by engaging with the topic intertextually. In emphasizing and incorporating intertextual elements in their videos, they show (1) how they are tapped into the discourse outside of YouTube and, effectively (2) how this topic isn't something that is discussed just on YouTube or just online – it's a debate that matters in the meatspace, and is thus a debate that carries real-world implications.

3.4.5. CONCLUSION

Both creators employ similar discursive strategies to construct stances about the same topic. Though the stances vary and their evaluation of the topic “white veganism” differs, the use of similar strategies demonstrates, perhaps, that topics/stance objects impact the kinds of available stances to take and strategies for establishing those stances.

Stances develop in turn-taking. Although not an instance of spoken conversation with real-time turn-taking, each creator's video is a “turn” in a larger conversation. They are taking their turn within the context of an intertextual, intersectional conversation that is nevertheless focused on the same goal: advocating for ethical veganism. Though their stances regarding the stance object of *white* veganism differ, their stances regarding animal rights, as well as their

understanding of veganism as an ethical movement. They are on the same page in the discourse, so to speak. However, despite sharing the same end-goal (i.e. getting more people to go vegan), there are violations of face as the discourse develops. An overview of the development of this discourse is as follows:

Within a broad discourse and conversation about veganism, Queer Brown Vegan creates a post about intersectionality and white veganism; Soytheist responds in the comments on Instagram, actively disagreeing with the post (a minor threat to positive face); Soytheist then receives backlash in the comments from other vegan influencers including Queer Brown Vegan, matching the initial face violation in the same way (i.e. a comment expressing disagreement); Soytheist continues the debate in the comments (an uptake and escalation of the same violation of face); Soytheist's comments and account are blocked (an overt face violating act); Soytheist's posts a YouTube video focusing on the debate, clarifying his position, and attempting to take control of the conversation by continuing it in a new medium and employing the stancetaking strategies discussed above; QBV then makes a video whose exigence is the "infamous Instagram post" (i.e. where this debate started), employing similar stancetaking strategies, but with different ways of constructing epistemic authority such as using scripted rather than extemporaneous speech and citing other activists.

The result of this is that both creators' videos exist independently and don't need the context of the overall conversation to understand — necessary contextual elements are provided in the videos — even if knowing the full context adds additional layers of meaning. By not requiring knowledge of the entire debate, the videos then become resources that others can start

from in the ongoing conversation, thus giving others a new prior text association for veganism and, when referenced in conversations (online or otherwise), become a new intertextual resource.

These videos are just a snapshot of an ongoing conversation (cf. Burke's "Unending Conversation" metaphor). They are stances expressed at varying turns of a larger discourse that may violate the face of interlocutors, but still work to accomplish the same goal: to get more people to become *ethical* vegans. And thus, while their stances on white veganism differ, and they use different strategies to construct those stances, they take the same stance on the broader stance object — veganism — and, as such, minor violations of face don't necessarily constitute a difference or conflict in stances.

Overall, all compositions express stances about a given topic. These videos don't just express the stances of the creators regarding white veganism, but they also develop those stances throughout the video and surrounding discourse. These expressions of stance then become available for others to further develop their own arguments and construct their own stances. This ability to take up stances present in the video is encouraged by the creators and enabled through the affordances of YouTube — an essay wouldn't end with "tell me what you think in the comments" so, YouTube videos (particularly responses/video essays) can bridge the gap between turn-taking that happens in meatspace conversations and the arduous often siloed discursive turns that happen in academic conversations — allowing stances to be immediately taken up in a variety of ways (e.g. liking; subscribing; sharing; commenting, liking comments, tagging) which reflect the ways stances can be paralinguistically and semiotically affirmed in conversations happening

offline, or “in real life” (IRL). For example, liking a comment is an active but unobtrusive way of signaling support for a statement, much like nodding one’s head in agreement.

Veganism is a useful topic for looking at how stances at individual turns (i.e. a single video/utterance) can conflict, change, be taken up in different turns/places in the conversation; how the construction of those stances can involve both face-saving and face-violating actions; and, despite that, the interactants can express the same overall stance regarding the broader stance-object. These debates about veganism and how to approach activism provide a new layer to understand how complex topics are wrestled with in an increasingly intertextual and multimodal world — one where an individual’s unique understanding of a topic can create friction when met with another’s understanding of the topic, and where that friction is bound to happen in online discourse. The polysemic status of “vegan” is negotiated in the ways in which the content of these videos attempts to pin down *what* veganism *is*, and the implications of that definition. In doing so, they are engaging in a debate which is in stasis at the level of definition. While Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan might not come to agree on the scope of veganism, their videos become a prior text association which informs discussions about veganism, thus further contributing to the polysemy of the term.

Chapter 4: Stancetaking with *Likes*: Topics, Themes, and Attitudes in a Vegan YouTube

Comment Section

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is one of three distinct studies that seek to arrive at a fuller understanding of how users of CMC discuss vegan(ism) and how that discourse influences the stances those users take, particularly regarding the polysemy of vegan(ism). Building on the work of Shepard (2020), which looked at the ways in which paralinguistic features were remediated for the construction and performance of stance in online discussions of veganism, this chapter provides a general overview of a YouTube comment section, focusing primarily on the distribution of words associated with specific categories provided by the network analysis software Netlytic and stance objects of each comment according to their frequency and like count. This chapter uses Bolter and Grusin's (1999) definitions of remediation as "the representation of one medium in another" as well as the practices through which media "appropriate the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media" (45). The goal of this chapter is to establish the context in which this comment section is situated (Marwick and boyd 2014; West 2015), using *likes* as the primary paralinguistic feature of analysis. This exploration of a general overview of stances within a comment section is paired with a close reading analysis of specific comments, paying special attention to the paralinguistic features and affordances of a YouTube Comment. Given that *likes* on posts and comments represent digital remediations of paralinguistic features (Hayes et al. 2016) *and* indicate social support (Wohn et al. 2017) — compare a *like* to an affirmative head nod in conversation, or, as is often the icon of a *like*, a

reassuring thumbs up — they are thus especially salient at determining the general stance of a comment section overall.

I will first provide background information on stancetaking, online conversations, and digital paralinguistics. The background information draws heavily from previous work (Shepard 2020) and situates this chapter as a continuation of an ongoing project. Then I discuss methods and rationale. Next, I provide visualizations of the data extracted alongside analyses of each graph. I then discuss the ways in which the creator of the video in question performs digital activism, combining the affordances of spoken communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC), and how his comment sections align themselves with the content creator shaping both his and their own epistemic stances. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this project and provide suggestions for continued research.

4.2. BACKGROUND: STANCETAKING, ONLINE CONVERSATIONS, AND DIGITAL PARALINGUISTICS

The following sections provide background information on topics relevant to this study, particularly how the remediation of paralinguistic features in CMC influence stancetaking online. Section 4.2.1. offers an overview of stancetaking. Section 4.2.2. discusses previous work in which I examined two sets of online interactions – on Reddit and Facebook – to demonstrate some of the unique ways stancetaking happens online. Section 4.2.3. offers a brief overview of the performativity of activism and how online interactions shape understandings of that performativity and of activism more generally. Section 4.2.4. provides a broader explanation of the mechanisms that drive online conversations and how they are shaped by the sequential

environment of online platforms. Section 4.2.5. is an overview of paralinguistics in general, how paralinguistic features are necessarily remediated for effective online interactions. I provide some examples of common ways in which those features are remediated within CMC.

4.2.1. Stancetaking

Stance refers to the ways in which interactants establish their position and convey meaning in a given interaction or how they express the ways they know about or are commenting on a given stance object (Wu 2004). While some scholars focus on instances of stancetaking in regard to an individual speaker, others emphasize the importance of inter-speaker relationships and the stance focus (Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018). Traditional spoken communication relies on a multitude of factors working in conjunction with one another to convey meaning and establish stance: syntax, semantics, pragmatics, prosody, intonation, emotion, affect, etc. Kiesling (2009) argues that stance is the primary mechanism by which speakers develop their linguistic style, that a speaker's linguistic choices are made to convey whatever interpersonal or epistemic stances they want to take up with their various interlocutors.

While text-based communication allows users to effectively implement tools of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, other valuable linguistic resources such as prosody, emotion, intonation, and affect are less present in CMC. Essential for contextualizing, interpreting, and accomplishing the goals of a given interaction, emotion and affect are significant factors of language (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012). Historically, scholars have maintained that individuals are unable to know what the other is feeling, yet pragmatically, this position does not reflect how people live their lives or react to their own experiences (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012: 434). The

position that one cannot know how another feels ignores the fact that emotion is relayed in nearly every interaction (Ochs 1993) — even the absence of emotion is still an affective stance. By extension, the absence of an explicit portrayal of expertise constitutes an epistemic stance.

Du Bois (1993, 2007) triangulates the various factors one may use to construct stance into three basic criteria. Referred to as the stance triangle, DuBois' distillation of stance emphasizes the importance of a speaker's assessment of the various components of discourse, namely (1) the topic of discussion, (2) the audience/interlocutor, and (3) the discourse (speech, writing, etc.) itself. Put differently, stance is one's relationship to their utterance, the subject of their utterance, and their audience or interlocutors. A speaker can construct a stance that evaluates a stance object (or the main topic of discussion), the individual with whom they are interacting, and the language or utterance itself. DuBois' stance triangle indicates that stance is always about relationships and, as such, is highly recursive, interactive, and fluid.

Building on the work of DuBois, Kärkkäinen (2006) also highlights the significance of relationships in stance. Rather than viewing stance as an indication of an individual speaker's attitude toward discursive components, Kärkkäinen argues that stance emerges from a dialogic interaction between interlocutors. For Kärkkäinen, stance is a public action that is shaped by the stance of the involved participants. These public actions of stance can be either affective (i.e. representative of an interactant's emotional position) or epistemic (i.e. an interactant's confidence in or certainty of an utterance) and often occur simultaneously (Ochs 1993). This emphasis of broad relationships within discourse allows for scholars to add to DuBois' stance triangle in ways that allow for more information to be extracted from an interaction.

Following from Du Bois' stance triangle, Kiesling et al. define stance as "the discursive creation of a relationship between a language user and some discursive figure, and to other language users in relation to that figure" (2018: 687). This definition synthesizes Kärkkäinen's approach with the stance triangle, providing researchers the opportunity to examine even more aspects of stance, particularly within the realm of digital communication. Within this definition, they identify three dimensions of stancetaking: *affect*, *investment*, and *alignment* (Kiesling et al. 2018: 688).

Affect refers to the way a stancetaker emotionally evaluates a particular stance object or interlocutor. The same focus of stance might be evaluated positively or negatively. For example, Kiesling et al. (2018) show how, with a stance focused on Magic Eraser, high affect is maintained through comments such as "those things are made from ground up fairies" and "best purchase decision ever" (689). These comments demonstrate a high affect because they are evaluating the stance object positively and with high regard. Investment is the strength of a speaker's utterance, or how much they care about the subject and the lengths they will go to defend their claims and opinions. Investment is often marked by evocative words such as *love* and *hate*; however, it can also be lowered in an interaction. For example, if someone were to say to their friend "I loved that movie" and their friend responded with "the movie was fine, I guess," they are demonstrating a lower investment in the stance object of the movie. Alignment is the extent to which a speaker orients or positions themselves to their audience, whether real or imaginary. Alignment can be constructed and maintained by interactants explicitly agreeing with an interlocutor; conversely, low alignment can be achieved through explicit disagreement. It's

worth noting too, that *likes* on social media subtly signal alignment in online CMC (Wohn et al. 2017), as they allow interactants to indicate their position in a conversation without having to enter the conversation themselves. These three dimensions of stance can be operationalized with different intensity or purpose to construct and perform stance.

The three dimensions of stancetaking provided by Kiesling et al. add further nuance to Du Bois' stance triangle and, as such, provide a solid framework by which to analyze the construction and performance of stance. By using the three dimensions of stance in conjunction with the stance triangle, one can more thoroughly explore the ways in which interactants establish stance. The combination of the stance triangle with the three dimensions of stance is especially significant for the assessment of stance within computer mediated communication (CMC) as the deeper understanding of one's stance gained from such an approach makes up for the loss of language features — such as prosody, intonation, backchannels, and gesture — within digital communication.

4.2.2. *Stancetaking Online*

The affordances of online spaces offer a variety of ways to compensate for lost language features in the construction of stance. In Shepard (2020), I described the ways in which two sets of interactants on two different comment threads — one on Facebook and one on Reddit — construct and perform stance by remediating otherwise lost paralinguistic features. In that project I identified the following methods of constructing and performing stance through alphabetic CMC: evoking location and tying authoritative comments to IRL places; using conditional formulations to allow interactants to make conclusions on their own, bolstering one's own

knowledge on a subject; marking uncertainty through the use of ellipses, effectively remediating prosodic cues of spoken language; using emoji to index affect and emotional state; employing informal written language to discuss serious topics, reflecting the nature of spoken face-to-face conversations. Moreover, I described how the sequential environment of many digital spaces allows users to present multiple stance markers that are viewed all at once in a single post, allowing interactants to respond directly to the multitude of stances in a preceding comment. The conversation-like threads of many comment sections enable users to address one another in ways that mimic synchronous in-person conversation.

Because of the medium(s) in which online conversations occur, users of CMC can demonstrate investment by including more details in their comment, they can also explicitly align with another user to co-construct stance by mentioning an interactant or embedding a direct quote. In fact, directly quoting another comment within a comment is a unique feature to CMC — particularly platforms like Reddit — that clarifies the stance focus of the comment. Other, more passive, ways of engaging — such as *liking*, *upvoting*, *favoriting*, etc. — allow users to align themselves with another commenter and show support for their position (Wohn et al. 2017; Marwick and boyd 2014). In order to determine how users of online CMC utilize the various dimensions of stance and to see how that applies to the stance triangle, it is important to consider the ways in which stance and activism are performative and how CMC changes the sequential environment of conversation that allows for the performance of activism through stancetaking.

4.2.3. *Performativity and Activism*

While many scholars argue about the extent to which stance is performative (Kärkkäinen 2006; DuBois 2007; Kiesling 2009), activism is often embedded in performativity. Carlson (1996) identifies three different aspects or clusters of performance: display of specific skills, performance of specific cultural behaviors or social rituals, and measurement of the efficiency or progress of social actors. Fidele Vlavo (2015) adapts Carlson's clusters of performance and argues that digital activism utilizes, to some extent, all three of these. In a sense, digital activism (and activism more generally) always involves some performative aspect. Focusing on protests that occur in digital spaces and through digital means, Vlavo deals with how to perform digital activism — that is, activism digitally — and illustrates the path that digital activism has taken since the advent of CMC: from activists using technology as part of IRL direct action to activists using digital technologies as the location of protest. Indeed, activists can now expand the reach of their activism across locations and borders cheaply, sustainably, and with a high level of replicability (Glenn 2015: 82).

Digital technologies have allowed people to engage in activist work unencumbered by the limitations of the physical world. Indeed, the web offers two key affordances relevant to activism: sharply reduced costs for creating, organizing, and participating in protest; and the decreased need for activists to be physically together in order to act together (Earl et al. 2011).

Moreover, what we know about activism affects how we talk about it generally, which, in turn, affects how we talk about it digitally (both through CMC and as digital activism). People can leverage their knowledge of these (whether learned or innate) to participate in online activist

discourses. When you understand all three of these things, you are better able to construct your stance/authority; as such, those aspiring activists seeking to make a case for their cause, can construct their epistemic stance. Gustaffson and Weinryb assert that digital activism, when combined with one's authority (or epistemic stance) is "fundamentally focused on personalized engagement, and simultaneously interconnected through the technological affordances of social media platforms" (2019: 1). In other words, digital activism relies on activists taking advantage of the capabilities of technology to demonstrate their knowledge and effectiveness as an activist in order to foster personal connection and engagement with real people.

4.2.4. *Online Conversations*

The success of interactional utterances in conversation is connected to the sequential environment that produces those interactional tasks (Sneijder and te Molder 2005; Edwards and Potter 1992), yet digital spaces, particularly online and networked spaces, upset the sequential environment in such a way that interactions are structured differently than spoken discourse. Even in relatively synchronous digital interactions, the sequential environment seemingly does not allow for the same quantity of interactional tasks that we would see in face-to-face interactions, such as cross talk – overlapping or simultaneous speech which may affect conversational flow – and byplay. However, one of the common affordances of most social media spaces — the *like* — can act as a form of byplay. Aarsand (2008) defines byplay as communication between ratified participants (Goffman 1981) that contributes to the conversation without being a main focal point of the conversation. For example, let's say there are three participants in a conversation: Kim, Tayler, and Kelly. As Kelly takes a turn at talking they may

say something controversial or contentions, to which Kim and Tayler respond to by making emphatic eye contact with one another, thus signaling their assessment of Kelly's statement and potentially shifting the conversation. By *liking* a comment, a user of online CMC is able to contribute to the conversation — the more a comment is *liked*, the more likely it is to reach the top of a comment thread as a popular comment — and potentially shift the overall conversation. A comment with the most likes that becomes a top comment in turn becomes one of the comments that elicits the most responses.

Comments that receive the most *likes* help to establish the context of the conversation (Marwick and boyd 2014). West (2015) argues that *likes* on Facebook convey “attention, acceptance, support, recognition, and appreciation in addition to potentially communicating a default positive response” (55). *Liking* a post or a comment allows users to align themselves with the poster/commenter and indicate a potential shift in the participation framework (Tannen 1979), effectively creating a window through which to enter a conversation and providing context for potential comments made by the *liker*. In this way, *likes* perform the work of crossplay or “communication between ratified participants and bystanders across the boundaries of the dominant encounter” (Goffman 1981: 134). When someone who is not engaged in the comment section (a bystander, if you will) sees which comments are *liked*, they are receiving information about the ratified participants in that comment section. Additionally, *likes* on social media comments/posts function as a display of social support (Wohn et al. 2017).

Conversations that happen online are also unique because language on the internet is informal and often written in ways that replicate spoken language (McCulloch 2019). People

respond to written content on the internet with comments that differ from typical writing through the use of “non-standard vocabulary and spellings” (Pavalanathan et al. 2017: 887). As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) note, “non-standard” language can be seen as a form of identity work wherein a speaker indicates authenticity, solidarity, or opposition to arbitrarily imposed norms and standards. Online discussions, consisting of informal language marked by “non-standard” variables, provide an interesting place for examining the role of identity (Eisenstein 2013) as it relates to the construction and performance of stance. Indeed Ramage et al. (2010) in their analysis of Twitter comments, address how less formal registers enable a more salient self-presentation.

Although contemporary digital technologies have indeed expanded communicative reach — an increasingly greater number of people can now communicate over great distances — there are still ways in which CMC has limited communicative capabilities. As mentioned above, many of the communicative properties of these technologies are still tied to alphabetic, orthographic communication, effectively hindering the use of paralinguistic features and altering how interactants position themselves and construct stance (Kärkkäinen 2006; Kiesling et al. 2018; Lyons 2018; Tannen 2013; Werry 1996). Essentially, because of the primarily alphabetic nature of CMC, many paralinguistic features must be changed or remediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999) in order for interactants to maintain the wide range of communicative capabilities present in face-to-face interaction and more effectively construct and perform stance, developing a distinct online linguistic style.

4.2.5. *Paralinguistics*

Paralinguistics is broadly understood as features that contribute to meaning making that exist alongside language (from the Greek *παρά*). Some definitions (Crystal 1974; Schuler et al. 2013) confine paralinguistics exclusively to vocal features that contribute to paralanguage (see also: Abercrombie 1968). Schuler et al. define the discipline of paralinguistics as “dealing with those phenomena that are modulated onto or embedded into the verbal message, be this in acoustics (vocal, non-verbal phenomena) or in linguistics (connotations of single units or of bunches of units)” (2013: 5). While this definition of paralinguistics takes into account the variety of ways in which meaning can be made through vocalization, it limits our understanding of the paralinguistic. Overwhelmingly, this definition ignores signed languages — that rely on visual cues — and doesn’t consider the myriad ways in which paralinguistic features manifest in computer-mediated communication. Indeed, if one were to only include vocal factors (and if vocal factors are inherent to spoken language) there is no need for a paralinguistic distinction. Even considering written language as purely linguistic ignores the visual component inherent to written language: to read words on a page/screen one must see the words on the page/screen; penmanship, font style/size, color, etc. are all visual elements inherent to written language. As such, this chapter builds from a framework of paralinguistics that includes gesture and facial expression, as well as intonation, prosody, tone, quality, etc. to encompass a more holistic understanding of paralinguistics. This understanding of paralinguistics allows for more opportunities to examine the ways in which (para)linguistic features are remediated in CMC, and truly encompasses those features that exist alongside language.

While there has been debate over the role of “non-verbal” components of communication and to what extent those non-verbal communicative cues ought to be considered as part of a language system, scholars have concluded that “verbal” language between adults in face-to-face interaction often doesn’t go beyond 35% of communication (Birdwhistell 1970; Vargas 1986). The implication of this number is that upwards of 65% of human face-to-face communication is nonverbal. Laver (2003) confirms this, pointing out that “managing social interaction through speech is never limited to spoken language alone” (414); as such, we can conceptualize these non-verbal communicative cues by dividing the aspects of human communication into three semiotic layers: the linguistic, extralinguistic, and the paralinguistic. In Shepard (2020), I follow from Laver’s (2003) and Ephratt’s (2011) work on paralinguistic to define paralinguistic features as those features of language that surround the linguistic layer of communication, including kinesics or body gestures and acoustic/vocal activity.

If paralinguistic features are an essential part of language and stance, then text-based CMC taken at face value (i.e. writing alphabetic texts) does not include these features and, as such, is missing a key component of language itself. It’s no wonder then that users of CMC have developed innovative ways to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic features in text-based CMC. Paralinguistic features are remediated in CMC in many ways including emoticons, kineticons, and emoji. Emoticons are typographical representations of facial expressions that reflect the expressive and non-verbal work of facial expressions in spoken language (Walther and D’Addario 2001), that also serve a pragmatic function (Dresner and Herring 2010) that marks utterances as non-confrontational, demonstrating a less invested stance. Kineticons are

alphabetic representations of physical actions (Lyons 2018). Emoji function as beat gestures (McCulloch and Gawne 2018) and remediating physical movement associated with high investment in CMC. **Table 4.1** shows a few examples of emoticons, kineticons, and emoji. It's also important to note that some spoken paralinguistic features are also present in CMC through the use of dialog act markers and back channels and expressive lengthening. Back channels and dialog act markers indicate a more casual conversational style, allowing interactants position themselves as friendly, informal, or non-threatening, informing their stance and relationship to an interlocutor, which, in turn, informs the affective stance (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen 2012; Greene 2018) of an interactant by replicating the characteristics of spoken lengthening (e.g. *cooooolllll*, *uggghhhhhhhh*) demonstrates subjectivity and sentiment (Brody and Diakopoulos 2011) which help to contribute both to an interactant's epistemic and affective stance.

Even something as simple as *likes* on a comment operate as paralinguistic digital

Table 4.1: *Ways of remediating paralinguistic features in CMC*

Feature	Description	Example
Emoticons	Typographical representations of facial expressions (Walther and D'Addario 2001)	:) :(>:(:^D ;)
Kineticons	Alphabetic representations of physical actions (Lyons 2018)	*hugs* *blushes* *cries*
Emoji	Function as beat gestures to remediate physical movement (McCulloch and Gawne 2018)	    

affordances — i.e. “cues in social media that facilitate communication and interaction without specific language associated with their messages” (Hayes et al. 2016: 2) — that significantly maintain social ties (Wohn et al. 2017). *Likes* can indicate acceptance, agreement, popularity and signal social validation (Chua and Chang 2016). As we will see below, *likes* are a particularly salient feature for arriving at an accessible and broad understanding of alignment within a comment section. The amount of *likes* a comment receives indicates the level of alignment that users in the comment section have with the content of that comment. Moreover, while not necessarily a difficult action to complete, *likes* may also suggest a higher level of investment with the comment(er) — *liking* is, after all, a deliberate action.

Goffman (1959) distinguishes between information that is given and information that is given off. When information is given, a speaker intentionally chooses to provide it. When it is given off, it is provided unintentionally. Both information that is *given* and *given off* are essential in creating and performing stance. The unintentional (given off) information allows interactants to better understand one’s affect and alignment to a stance object. By remediating paralinguistic features, and accounting for information that is given *off* we can allow for CMC to become more “characterized by written linguistic phenomena analogous to those... constituting conversational style in spoken interaction” (Tannen 2013: 100). As such, paralinguistic features are necessarily remediated in order to leverage the affordances of CMC.

Analyzing the ways in which paralinguistic features operate within digital communication presents unique challenges, especially in regard to stance and stancetaking. Paralinguistic features, like any language feature, constitute an integral part of constructing and

performing stance in spoken communication; however, the nature of digital and computer-mediated communication present challenges to one's ability to use the non-verbal and prosodic features of the paralinguistic to construct and contribute to a convergent stance (Kärkkäinen 2006). If someone communicating through alphabetic CMC wants to more fully demonstrate their affect, investment, or alignment regarding a stance focus, then they must develop ways to express paralinguistic features. It is due to both the affordances and constraints of CMC that interactants generate methods of remediating paralinguistic features (Shepard 2020). YouTube affords three semiotic modes that constrain the responses: video responses, *likes* and *dislikes*, and written responses in the comment sections (Benson 2015). This chapter analyzes two of those semiotic modes, examining what *likes*, as a way of signaling alignment, can tell us about a comment section and some of the interpersonal interactions occurring within that comment section.

4.3. METHODS AND RATIONALE

The data for this project comes from a YouTube video and its corresponding comment section. The video, entitled “Meat Eaters Questioned by Vegan Activist,” was released by Jack Hancock, under the YouTube channel name Humane Hancock, on July 5, 2021 and is an example of vegan street epistemology through the form of interviews and conversations with the general public *in* public places like parks, town squares, and such. I analyze the video, focusing primarily on its comment section, to examine how comments are constructed in response to a video, with the understanding that a video featuring spoken, face-to-face conversations influences both the stance objects and the sequential environment of the comment section.

Whereas Shepard (2020) looked at alphabetic CMC remediations of paralinguistic features in response to written posts, this project seeks to understand the ways in which interactants respond to spoken language online, rather than written, alphabetic text. In other words, the original post (OP) becomes an actual recorded conversation and not a singular written account.

4.3.1. Why YouTube Videos?

While there is certainly not a dearth of analyzable content on the internet, YouTube videos are especially relevant to my research for several reasons. First, there's simply a lot of content on YouTube. As Varshney and Vishwakarma point out “[a]mong all other platforms, YouTube is one of the leading ones for sharing videos, it has billions of users covering almost one-third of the internet population and reaches billions of views per day” (2021: 4214). By June 2016, YouTube was the third most-visited site in the United States and the second most-visited website in the world (Alexa 2016; Thomson 2019), by 2025 YouTube boasts more than 2.7 billion monthly active users (Global Media Insight 2025). Clearly a lot of online discourse is happening on YouTube, both through videos (spoken language) and comments (written language), potentially providing multiple avenues of analysis.

Secondly, the sequential environment of YouTube is similar to Facebook and Reddit in that the comments are in response to an original post (in this case, a video) and the comment section allows for threaded replies to contain individual conversations. Like on Reddit and Facebook, commenters on YouTube can tag other commenters, even within the threaded comments, making it clear whom the comment is addressing. Like on Reddit, YouTube comments can be sorted in multiple ways. Sorting by “top comments” will display comments

with the highest number of likes; sorting by “newest first” will display comments in reverse chronological order. Similar to Facebook, YouTube comments don’t allow for users to embed a direct quote from another comment; however, YouTube does allow commenters to include timestamps that link to a specific moment within the video. This allows commenters to directly reference the video content, much like a direct quote. Additionally, as there are so many videos on YouTube, there’s definitely no shortage of videos about veganism — from recipe videos, to debates, to videos of activism and direct action, to classic YouTube drama, so there’s a wealth of potential data to extract.

Thirdly, where my previous work (Shepard 2020) looked at text-based alphabetic comments on Facebook and Reddit that responded to an alphabetic original post, YouTube comments are unique in that they respond to an original post that often features spoken language, rather than alphabetic remediations of spoken language. Similar to Reddit and X (and, to some extent, Facebook and Instagram), whose comments are public by default (Eisenstein 2013) and feature informal written language that tends to mirror spoken language (Pavalanathan et al. 2017; McCulloch 2019; Shepard 2020), YouTube comments are freely and publicly available on all videos that allow for comments; however, unlike other public comments, YouTube comments can address a wide variety of stance objects. Such objects include the video itself (i.e. the cinematographic affordances of video like sound editing, lighting, etc.) the content of the video, another commenter through threaded comments, and even specific moments in the video tagged with timestamps that, when clicked, skip the player to that moment in the video. As such, there is a wide variety of stance objects that commenters could be responding to in any given YouTube

video comment section.

4.3.2. *Why did I select this particular YouTube video?*

The video that is the primary subject of this chapter was created by Jack Hancock-Fairs, a YouTuber who goes by the name Humane Hancock on YouTube. His channel description reads:

“Jack Hancock-Fairs is a filmmaker and animal advocate who creates educational resources about animal ethics.

Jack's work covers factory farming, farmed animal suffering, veganism, wild animal suffering, speciesism, digital sentience and effective altruism.

His YouTube videos on animal ethics have been viewed over 3 million times, and he is currently directing a documentary called *The Dying Trade*, which explores his relationship with his father who is employed as a slaughterhouse worker.

He is known for spreading concern for wild animal suffering within the animal movement.”

The Humane Hancock channel has, at the time of writing, 21.9 thousand subscribers and 207 videos. All of the videos on his channel relate to or are applicable to animal rights and vegan activism.

In the video in question, titled “Meat Eaters Questioned by Vegan Activist,” Humane Hancock employs the Socratic method, asking questions to his interlocutors and responding to their answers with additional questions to test the logical consistency of their arguments/positions in an effort to encourage them to consider (and hopefully support) veganism and animal rights. There are four interviewees in the video: one older man, a man appearing around the same age as Hancock, and a pair consisting of a man and a woman. The video is edited in such a way that it cuts between conversations as they unfold and is largely organized by

the topics covered in the interactions. In the order that they appear, the topics covered include bullfighting, culture, genital mutilation, farmed animals, taste and ethics, domestic violence, sacredness, species differences, breeding, suffering, disability, race, and one participant brings up universal basic income. All of these topics are approached within the framework of veganism and each conversation ends with Hancock posing the question “do you think living a vegan lifestyle would be more in line with your morals?” Despite the seriousness and sensitivity of many of the topics addressed, the overall tone of the video is friendly and casual, with none of the conversations arriving at a heated tipping point. As we’ll see in the following sections, viewers tend to evaluate Hancock’s approach as calm and measured and as an effective method of vegan street epistemology

Given that there are so many videos on YouTube pertaining to veganism, I chose to analyze this video for several reasons: First, it’s one of the few videos of Humane Hancock’s to feature a non-click bait title, with non-click bait understood as videos whose titles accurately represent the content of the video; in contrast to clickbait titles that “play with human psychology, to lure the user to view a content that does not faithfully represent the claim it presents” (Varshney and Vishwakarma 2021: 4214). A quick glance at the Humane Hancock YouTube channel reveals videos with titles such as “McDonald’s Lover DESTROYS Vegan Activist!,” “Intellectual Schools Vegan | EPIC DEBATE,” or “Vegan Crosses the Line And Instantly Regrets It,” and so on. Indeed, a video simply titled “Meat Eaters Questioned By Vegan Activist” might be one of the more accurate descriptions of the video content on the Humane Hancock channel. As the comment sections of videos with clickbait titles tend to discuss the title

of the video rather than the content of the video (Varshney and Vishwakarma 2021), selecting a video with a non-clickbait title potentially allows for more discursive work to be happening in the comment section.

Secondly — perhaps due to the non-clickbait title — the comment section on this video has relatively few comments and views. The most popular video on the channel — “Ex-military Defeats Vegan Activist!” — has over 159,000 views and over 4,000 comments, whereas “Meat Eaters Questioned by Vegan Activist” has over 6,000 views and only 356 comments. While a larger comment section may yield more quantitative data, for the scope of this project, a smaller comment section allows for both quantitative analysis and the potential for salient close readings of a select few comments.

Thirdly, the video in question is one of the few successful vegan street epistemology videos that’s been uploaded since the advent of the Sars-COV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic that began in the winter of 2019 and has since become endemic. While this video is structured like many common street epistemology videos (i.e. focusing on impromptu conversations with real life people, emphasizing the Socratic method, etc.) it differs from videos in the same genre from both Humane Hancock and other creators in that the video doesn’t focus on one conversation at a time. Humane Hancock’s video cuts between several conversations. In this way Hancock takes advantage of the video medium, using editing to craft a pseudo narrative. Because the video is not simply a recording of a conversation as it progresses, it is a careful representation of the positions of both Hancock and his interlocutors. This curation of conversations gives Hancock more control of the overall spoken language (of both himself and his interlocutors), including the

information that is given off (Goffman 1959). Additionally, unlike many street epistemology videos that often occur in crowded places and frequently feature passersby disrupting the interviews, the selected video showcases intimate interviews in a quiet park, allowing for a calm back-and-forth between the interactants and more thoughtful responses.

4.3.3. Data Extraction and Cleanup: Netlytic and OpenRefine

The comments analyzed in this chapter were extracted using Netlytic. Netlytic¹⁷ is a “community-supported text and social networks analyzer for social media researchers and educators to study public discourse on social media sites” that allows users to capture publicly available posts from a wide variety of social networks, discover discussion themes, and visualize data through social network analysis (Netlytic 2021). Users can create datasets by pulling information from Twitter, YouTube, GoogleSheets, text files, RSS feeds, and Reddit. Previous studies using Netlytic were able to use public comments on Facebook and Instagram (Santarossa et al. 2019); however, as of September 2019, Facebook (now Meta) disabled access to its API, preventing researchers from using Netlytic to analyze Facebook and Instagram comments.

Netlytic identifies and sorts conversational themes and creates categories of words and phrases to indicate broader concepts (e.g. swear words, feelings, size, etc.) and then automatically calculates what comments in the dataset belong to which category. Users are able to add their own categories and terms within categories to Netlytic’s dictionary. Additionally, Netlytic conducts a network analysis that allows users to see who is mentioning whom in their

¹⁷ It’s important to note that Netlytic is no longer operational.

comments, and links to the comment itself (Gruzd 2016). When selecting a specific comment on a YouTube video from the network analysis, the comment will show up as a highlighted comment under the video. Netlytic also produces an output file that can be exported as a CSV, that includes the comment, username, publication date, to whom the commenter is replying, like count and reply count. You can also export CSV files that include the categories and specific terms within the categories as columns.

I then exported a CSV file from Netlytic and added a new column to the dataset, enabling me to code a stance object for each comment (e.g. video itself, video content, video moment, commenter, veganism, nutrition, politics, religion, content creator, non-vegans, and trolling). The dataset was cleaned in OpenRefine, a free, open source tool for cleaning and organizing messy data. In OpenRefine I cleaned the data splitting multivalued cells, text-faceting cells, and removing null cells. I then exported as a CSV and visualized in R Studio using ggplot. At the time of writing, there were a total of 356 comments on the selected video.

4.4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The graphs below visualize the data in five different ways: (1) the frequency of words in certain categories appearing in the comment section; (2) the frequency of terms included in the category “feelings (good);” (3) the terms included in the category “feelings (good)” according to *like* count; (4) the frequency of stance objects appearing in the comment section; and (5) the number of *likes* comments with each stance object received. The first breakdown shows the emerging themes that provide a general overview of the comment section and what sorts of things people are commenting on. The second graph takes a closer look at one aspect of general

overview — good feelings — and looks at which good feeling words show up the most frequently, showing a generally positive affect. The third graph illustrates how participants respond to what’s being discussed within the category of good feelings and how they use *likes* to show support for particular types of comments. The general stance of the comment section is co-constructed through the use of *likes*. The fourth graph shows the frequency of what subjects commenters are addressing or orienting themselves toward, providing insight into the types of conversations occurring within the comment section. The final graph, like the third one, shows what stance objects the community positively responds to, using *likes* to measure that positive response.

4.4.1. Figure 4.1: Categorizing Comments

After excluding null cells — that is, comments that didn’t include words within Netlytic’s dictionary — I ended up with a total of 129 categorized comments. 4.1. is a bar chart showing the breakdown of comments containing words tagged by Netlytic according to different categories. The categories provided by Netlytic appear on the x-axis in the alphabetical order: appearance, emoji, feelings (bad), feelings (good) quantity, shape, size, sound, swear words (in English), time, and touch. The color variations within each bar indicate different examples of the words used within each category. For example, the different colors in the “emoji” category correspond to frequency of specific emoji used; the different colors within the “size” category show the frequency of different size words used within comments tagged in that category. For that reason, I elected to *not* include a key for each color, as the key would be larger than the chart

itself. All categories except for emoji were part of Netlytic's default dictionary; I added emoji as my own dictionary category, ensuring that the emoji used in the comments were entered.

Figure 4.1 shows that, of the comments containing words within the aforementioned categories, words described as "feelings (good)" feature the most prominently in the comment section for the video in question, with words describing sound featured in the fewest comments. This suggests that the majority of comments demonstrate a high level of alignment and construct generally positive affective stances.

4.4.2 Figure 4.2: Breakdown of Good Feeling Words

Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown of the specific terms tagged as "feelings (good)" by Netlytic. To analyze which good feelings words feature most prominently in this comment section, I removed comments that were tagged as "feelings (good)" but that didn't have a specific term tagged, bringing the initial good feelings subset from a total number of 52 down to a total of 30. Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown of individual words associated with good feelings according to their frequency. The words that Netlytic associates with good feelings include *amazing*, *brave*, *calm*, *enjoy*, *good*, *great*, *healthy*, *love*, *nice*, and *successful*. The graph reveals that *love* appears the most frequently in comments associated with good feelings, followed closely by *great* and *good*. Other terms such as *amazing*, *brave*, *calm*, *healthy*, and *successful* occur at relatively similar frequencies in the comment section. While it's tempting to argue that the frequency of the word *love* indicates that commenters tend to have a more positive

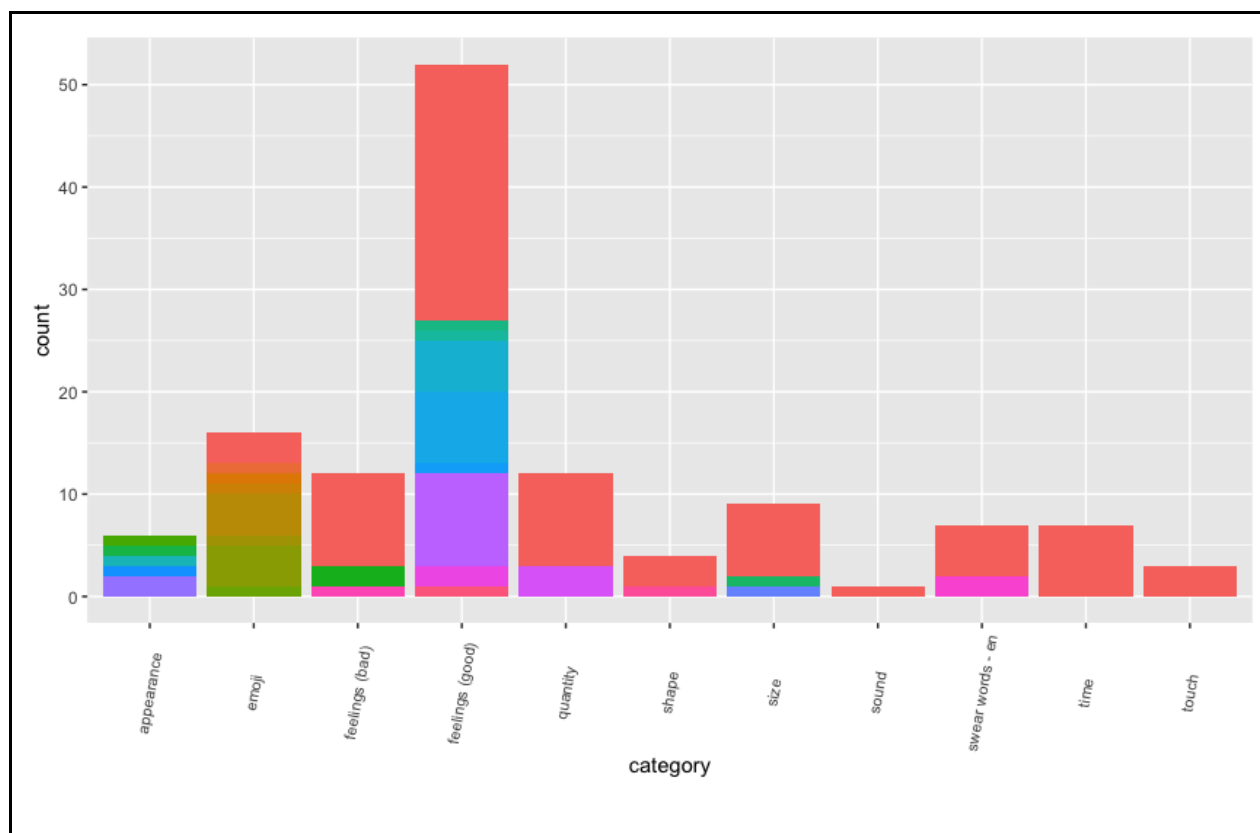


Figure 4.1. Breakdown of Categories (n=129)

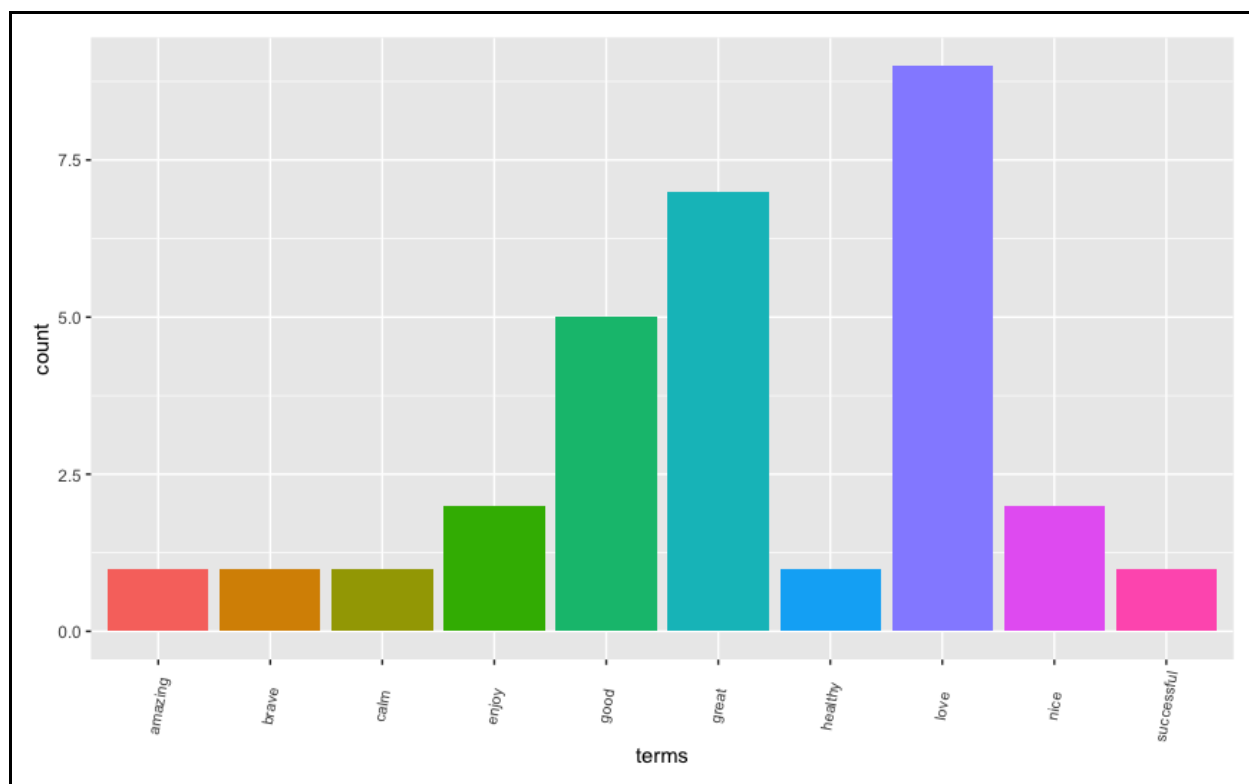


Figure 4.2. Breakdown of “feelings (good)” (n=30)

evaluation of the video (or perhaps even the comment section), it's worth noting that this graph simply tells us what words are being used, not necessarily *how* they are being used. In order to arrive at how these words are being used, a close reading of the comments is required, though, at first blush, we can assume that the evocative nature of words such as *love* suggest a relatively high level of investment in the comments.

4.4.3. Figure 4.3: Good Feelings According to Like Count

Figure 4.3 shows the relationship between comments associated with good feelings and their respective like counts. Here we can see that comments using the word *great* feature the most likes in the category “feelings (good),” with over 30 likes across all comments featuring the word *great*. Interestingly, while *love* appeared in the most comments tagged with the good feelings category, it does not have the most likes. This means that *great* has more likes across fewer comments than *love*. Indeed, comments containing the word *great* received 31 likes across a total of seven tagged comments, for a total share of 41.89% of likes. Comments using the word *calm* have the second highest total number of likes, with a total of 23 likes for just one comment. This means that, of the comments contained in the category of “feelings (good)” just one comment received 31.08% of likes. Just two key words — *great* and *calm* — receive 72.97% of likes (54 of 74 total likes) across eight comments (out of a total 30 comments containing good feeling words).

A cursory glance of the comment section reveals that comments featuring *calm* on this video are typically made in response to Hancock's approach to activism. There may be several reasons why people value calm vegan activism. For one, calm activism bucks the common

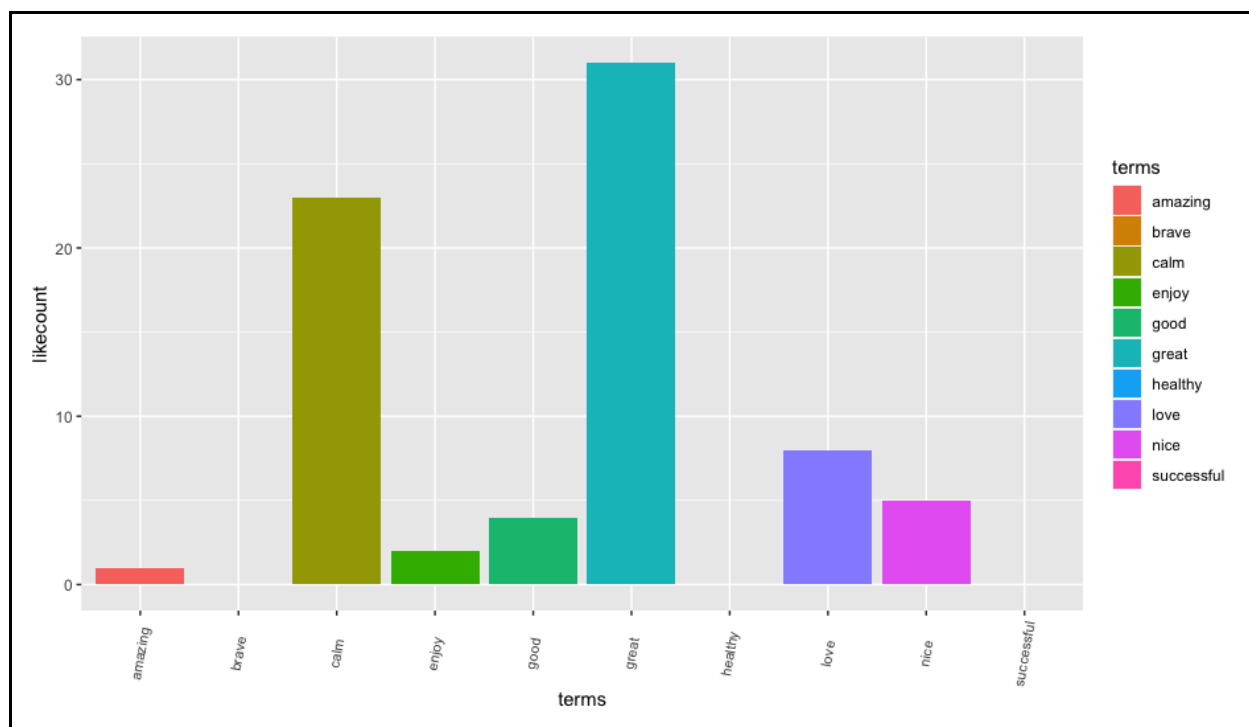


Figure 4.3. Good Feelings According to Like Count

stereotype of the crazy vegan (a stereotype that Humane Hancock leans into in the titles — though not the performance — of his other videos). A calm approach is useful for vegan activism as it positions the activist as approachable, thereby increasing the potential of actually engaging in discourse with nonvegans. Additionally, as contemporary veganism tends to focus on intersectional coalition building (Braunsberger and Flamm 2019) and, given the historic contention between veganism and human-centered justice movements (Wren 2017; Freeman 2014), calm activism may help circumvent the otherwise negative attitudes non-vegans have toward veganism (MacInnis and Hodson 2017; Braunsberger and Flamm 2019). As mentioned above, this video, while still taking place in public, features quieter and more intimate conversations. That comments containing *calm* (in reference to Hancock’s approach to activism)

receive the most likes, may be somewhat explained by the fact that Humane Hancock is the most-liked stance object in this comment section (as we'll see in **Figure 4.5**).

4.4.4. Figure 4.4: Frequency of Stance Objects

Figure 4.4 shows the total number of stance objects according to their category. I determined the stance objects by identifying which ones occurred in each comment, and then generalizing them into broader categories. The stance objects that I tagged include *commenter* (where primary stance object of the comment is another commenter, often tagged in threaded replies), *content creator* (comments explicitly addressing Hancock), *non-vegans*, *nutrition*, *politics*, *religion*, *trolling* (comments that were intentionally inflammatory), *veganism* (comments that were explicitly about veganism as an ideology), *video content* (ideas/arguments expressed in the video by either Hancock or his interlocutors), *video itself* (comments mentioning the technical aspects of the video like sound, editing, etc.) and *video moment* (comments that point to a specific moment in the video, often including a timestamp).

Although there was only a total of 356 comments on the video, some comments referenced multiple stance objects, bringing the total number of observations up to 374. Here we can see that commenters, trolling, and the content creator are the most prominently featured stance objects in the dataset. Many comments were both in response to other comments (hence the prevalence of “commenter” as a stance-object) and trolling other comments. Often commenters would respond to trolling comments, which prompted the stance objects of those comments to be tagged as both *trolling* and *commenter*. While the video did not specifically discuss religion, there were a few comments that explicitly referenced religion. The only topic

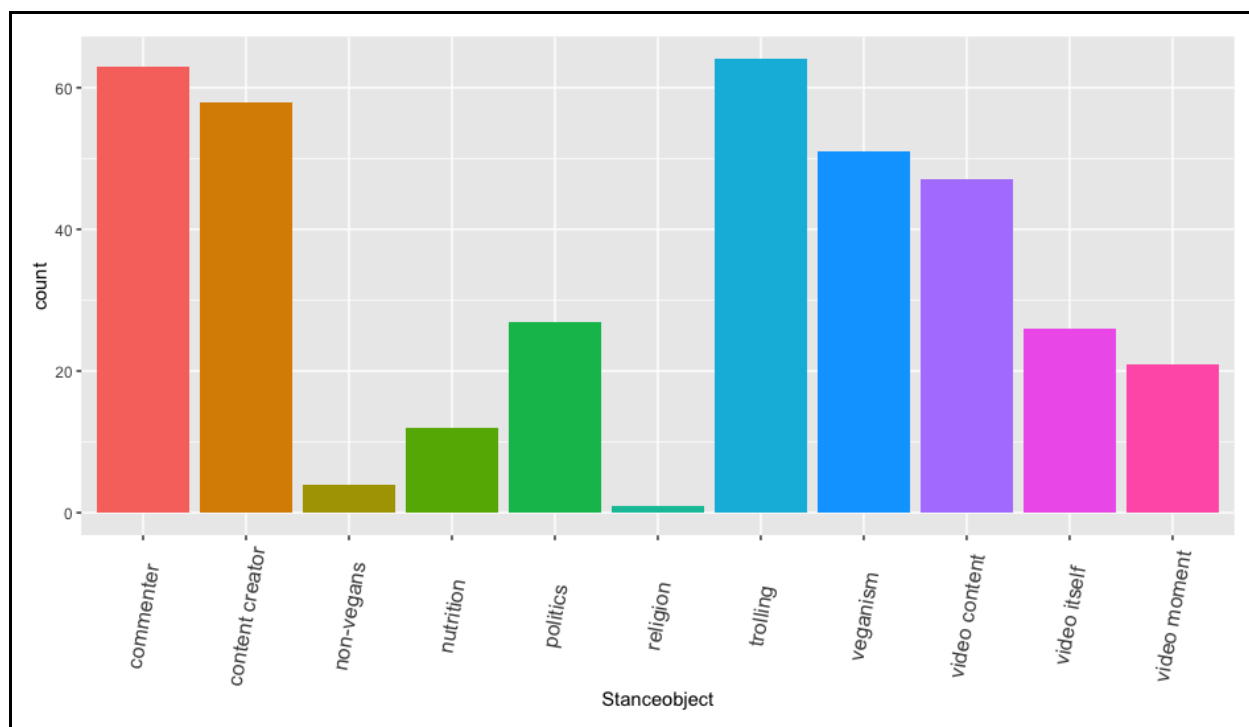


Figure 4.4. Frequency of Stance Objects (n=374)

that occurs as a stance object less than “non-vegans” is religion, suggesting that the conversations happening in the comment section of this video do not explicitly reference non-vegans. This simply shows us which stance objects occurred most frequently, which can, much like **Figures 4.1., 4.2, and 4.3**, provide some insights into what kinds of conversations are happening in the comment section, but reveals less about what the community values and which stance-objects they align themselves with.

4.4.5. Figure 4.5: The Like Count of Stance Objects

To get an overview of how the comment section aligns with certain stance-objects, I analyzed the stance-objects according to like count. **Figure 4.5** shows the number of likes each stance object received across all total comments. While *content creator* was only the third most

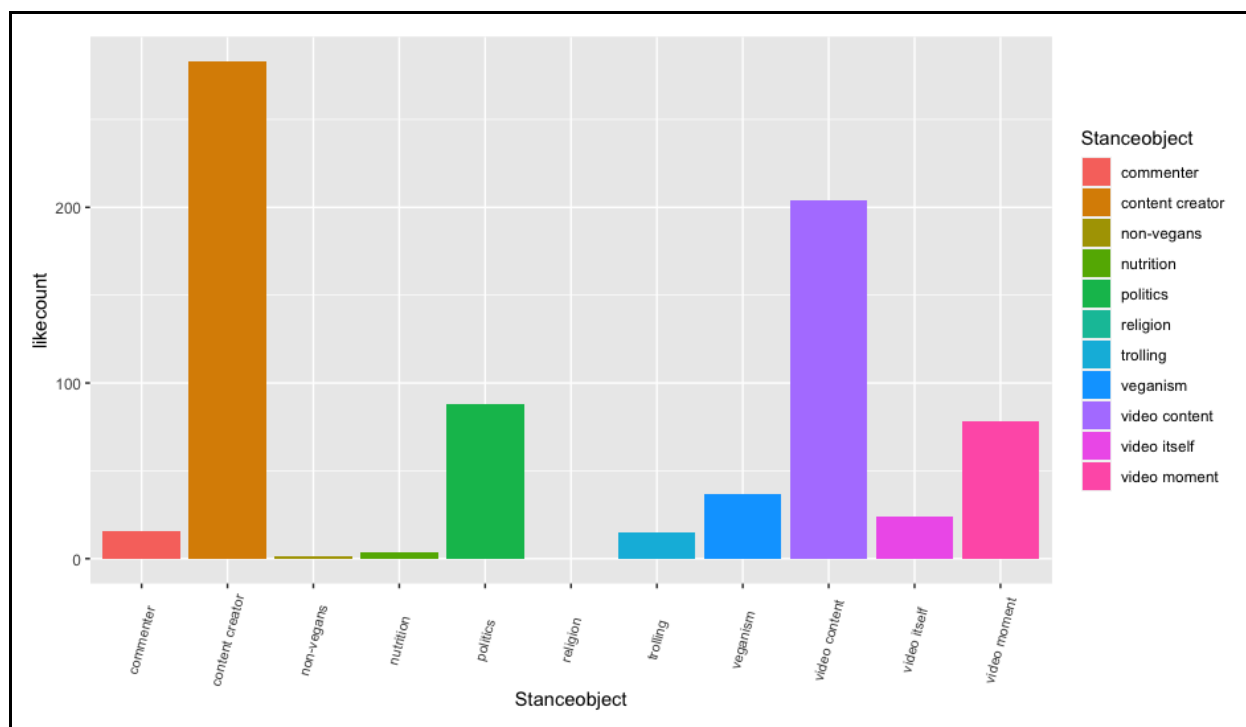


Figure 4.5. Like Count of Stance Objects

common stance-object (see **Figure 4.4**), comments explicitly oriented toward Humane Hancock received the highest number of likes by far, at nearly 300. Comments referencing the content of the video (i.e. Hancock's approach, a response made in the video, someone's argument, etc.) received the second highest total likes, at just over 200. As *likes* are one of the most basic ways people on social media can offer social support (Wohn et al. 2017), the number of likes associated with *content creator* suggests that interactants within this comment section support conversations explicitly discussing Humane Hancock.

The content creator being both the most-liked and one of the most prevalent stance objects suggest a comment section that, whether in agreement or disagreement, orients itself toward Hancock. Since Hancock Positions himself as an activist, the comments are oriented, in a

way, towards his activism. As illustrated by the overwhelming number of comments featuring good feelings. With this broad overview, we can begin to see how this comment section generally aligns with Hancock and expresses a positive affect and a high level of investment.

While comments oriented towards trolling occurred the most frequently in this comment section, those comments received relatively few likes. Additionally, the fact that comments oriented toward non-vegans receive very few likes suggest that the commenters within the comment section of this particular video do not value comments explicitly oriented to non-vegans, or that the comments about non-vegans that appear in this comment section receive less support from the commenters, providing further evidence for a generally positively aligned comment section (in spite of the prevalence of trolling). In other words, the social support provided by *likes* in this comment section, offer context for analyzing the discursive environment fostered by this particular comment section (West 2015; Marwick and boyd 2014).

4.5. DISCUSSION: A CLOSE LOOK AT SELECT COMMENTS

As comment sections are where *likes* are the primary paralinguistic feature analyzed above, it's beneficial to take a look at the some of the comments that receive the most likes, the stance objects and stances taken in those comments, and some of the responses to those comments. In this way, we can arrive at a better understanding of the viewers' alignment, investment, and affect (positive or negative) of the video content and the community of commenters. Below I examine two different interactions in the comment section that represent and explicate the data shown above. Regarding the first interaction, I look at an individual comment and describe the stances taken in the comment, how they relate to the content of the

video, and examine how the affordances of YouTube are used to draw special attention to that comment. The second interaction shows a series of three comments – one initial comment and two responses. In this interaction I also examine the stances expressed in the comment, how they relate to the data shown above, and the role of the comments in regard to the *initiation* and *response* moves in turn-taking, and what the abrupt end to the exchange can tell us about the community cultivated by Humane Hancock.

Figure 4.6 shows a screenshot of the first comment that appears when the comments are sorted by “top comments,” (i.e. the most-liked comment on the video). This comment from user @Hope00Love received 133 *likes* at the time of writing two replies from other users. It reads: “So admire the intellectual honesty of these people. Even the older man had to admit that he argued against himself when it came to tradition. I’m so impressed with the way you conduct these conversations!” @Hope00Love’s comment is representative of the overall comment section, which featured primarily positive comments, with most of the negative or contentious comments appearing in the replies to comments positively aligning with Humane Hancock’s overall stance and approach.

This comment contains several identifiable stance objects, primarily the content of the video (i.e. the interviewees), with one specific individual identified by this commenter, as well as the content creator (i.e. Humane Hancock) and his conversational style. Commenter, @Hope00Love, demonstrates a positive affect primarily through statements of praise “so admire” and “so impressed.” The use of the intensifier “so” suggests, albeit mildly, an increased

@Hope00Love 3 years ago

So admire the intellectual honesty of these people. Even the older man had to admit that he argued against himself when it came to tradition.

I'm so impressed with the way you conduct these conversations!

 133   Reply

[^ 2 replies](#)

Figure 4.6. *Top (Most-liked) Comment*

level of investment in the video's content and alignment with both the participants and Hancock.

By pointing out one specific individual “the older man,” @Hope00Love adds to their generally positive affective stance an increased level of investment with the content of the video. Not only do they admire the intellectual honesty of the people in general, but they paid close enough attention to the video to note one particular interviewee. This specific example serves as evidence to the commenter's assertion that the “these people” are intellectually honest, thus bolstering the commenter's epistemic stance and demonstrating their investment with the content.

Notably, this comment lacks any indications as to whether or not @Hope00Love is vegan. Even though we don't know if they are vegan, they aren't in misalignment with the non-vegans in the video. They simultaneously align themselves with vegans and non-vegans in this comment, by first praising the interviewees and then complimenting Humane Hancock. While non-vegans and vegans, particularly in videos such as this, might construct stances that are in opposition of their alignment to the stance object *veganism*, this comment shows how that's not necessarily true. Indeed, that difference of alignment toward veganism is the primary issue at

hand in the video itself — the issue that Humane Hancock seeks to resolve. As @Hope00Love offers level-headed admiration of both the interviewees and the interviewer, they are taking up the overall method that Humane Hancock employs; that is, an actively non-confrontational, respectful, and open dialogue that is, nevertheless, rigorous and thoughtful.

While *likes* are the primary paralinguistic feature analyzed in this chapter. YouTube allows creators to *heart* a comment, which is indicated by their profile picture appearing next to the thumbs up/down below the comment. With a standard like, commenters cannot see *who* liked their comment, including the channel. So, for a creator to add a heart to the comment, it makes their reception to that comment explicit. Comments that receive a heart tend to appear higher up in the comment section, with the additional visual elements drawing attention to that comment, essentially allowing the channel to guide viewers toward comments that they want to be seen. Humane Hancock adding a heart to this comment reflects the multi-directional, active, and explicit sharing and community building that creators engage with in their comment sections (Thomson 2019). While *likes* are an action that allows the liker to easily express alignment and positive affective evaluation of the comment, the additional steps (though minor) required for a creator to *heart* a comment indicates a higher and more overt level of investment with the comment. Additionally, as the heart promotes and highlights comments, it then allows the creator to point to the type of discourse that they approve of within their comment section, effectively shaping the landscape of the comment section.

Turning to another example, **Figure 4.7** shows a screenshot of the second most-liked comment. User @ReasonMakes writes “Just wanted to say I appreciate you doing so much for

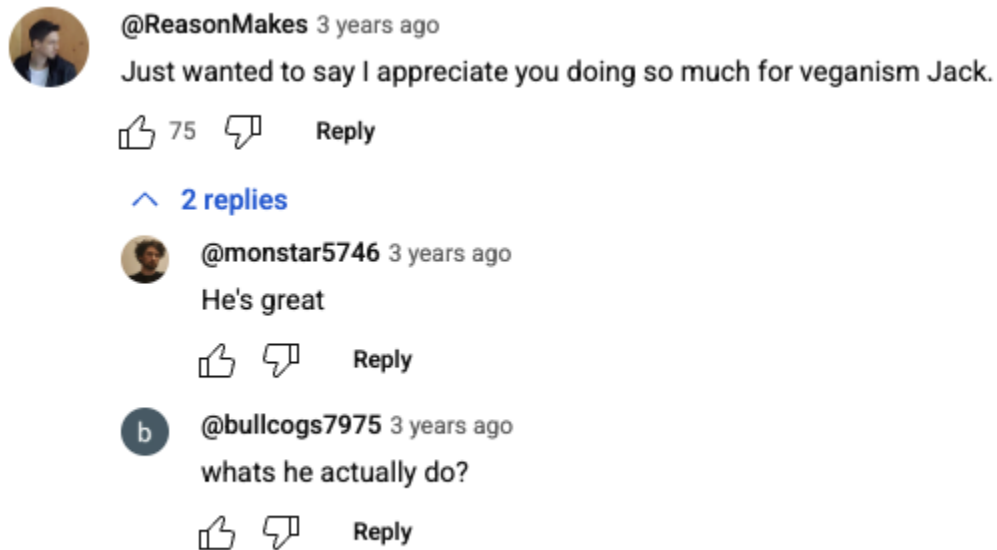


Figure 4.7. *Second Most-Liked Comment and Replies*

veganism Jack.” **Figure 4.7** also includes the two replies to this comment, with user @monstar5746 writing “He’s great” and user @bullcogs7975 replying “whats he actually do?”

The primary stance object of @ReasonMakes’ comment is Humane Hancock, particularly within his role as a vegan activist. This is in line with the content creator being one of the most frequently occurring stance objects (**Figure 4.4**) and occurring in the most-liked stance objects (**Figure 4.5**). Given that the channel name is Humane Hancock, for @ReasonMakes using the first name (Jack) indicates investment with Humane Hancock’s content and persona. Humane Hancock does not say his name in the video (though he does in other videos), but it is easily found in the channel’s description, thus we can infer that @ReasonMakes is either a frequent viewer of the channel – which would further indicate a high level of investment – or went out of their way to read the channel’s description. At any rate,

using the first name suggests a familiarity with the addressee that indicates a positive affective stance toward Humane Hancock. Within the context of YouTube content creators, this apparent familiarity may also be indicative of a parasocial relationship (Chen 2016). As an expression of familiarity, using the first name of the content creator deepens that parasocial relationship as @ReasonMakes moves beyond recognizing the channel Humane Hancock and acknowledging the person behind the channel.

The use of his first name also points to the fact that Humane Hancock exists outside of the digital persona they've created for themselves. Unlike the videos assessed in Chapters 2 and 3, this video shows people interacting, in real time, with other people outside, in public, and unscripted. The content of the video relies on interactions in the meatspace and, as such, the gap between the digital self and the flesh self is bridged – or at the very least reduced.

In examining the replies to @ReasonMakes' comment, we can see how YouTube is not just a form of social media, but is also a product of mediated social and interpersonal interaction (Rafaeli and Ariel 2007; Benson 2015). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) identify three moves in interaction: Initiation, Response, Follow-up. An Initiation begins an interaction, both predicting and constraining the following response (Coulthard 1985; Benson 2015) Though one could argue that the *actual* first initiation is the video itself, with the expected outcome of responses in the comment section to be constrained to the topic(s) of the video. For the sake of analysis, we'll view this thread as a distinct exchange. In this exchange, @ReasonMakes provides the first initiation, while also constructing a response to the video. They are responding to an exchange (Hancock's method of activism as shown in the video), evaluating it positively ("appreciate you

doing so much for veganism”), and, by mentioning Humane Hancock by his first name, anticipating a response from the creator. Hancock does not respond, however, and thus the exchange plays out differently. So, when taken within the context of the video and the comment section, @ReasonMakes offers a hybrid Response/Initiation; when examined in this particular thread it is an Initiation (whose responses are nevertheless colored by the commenters’ interpretations of the video).

In response @monstar5746 expresses alignment with both @ReasonMakes and Humane Hancock by indicating that “he’s [Humane Hancock] great.” The adjective “great” shows a positive affective evaluation of both Humane Hancock and agreement with the previous comment. In doing so, it bolsters the affective stance of @ReasonMakes and provides an additional evaluation of Humane Hancock’s approach. It’s not just that Hancock does “so much for veganism,” but that what he does – and by extension himself – is “great.” Interestingly, this Response does not initiate nor anticipate a response (it doesn’t even receive a passive Response in the form of a like); however, @monstar5746 *does* receive a Response.

In another example of a hybrid Response/Initiation, @bullcogs7975 comments “whats he actually do?” In phrasing this comment as a question, @bullcogs7975 predicts an additional Response, or a follow-up to their Response and attempts to shift the conversation away from an evaluation of Humane Hancock’s approach toward a discussion of the mechanism and impact of that approach. This comment is not just a Response to @ReasonMakes’ and @monstar5746’s comments, it is also a challenge to their evaluations of Humane Hancock which anticipates a Follow-up – expecting the previous commenters to defend their stance. As such, it is another

example of a hybrid Response/Initiation. Notably, there is not another interactional move and the exchange does not carry on.

The lack of reply to the contentious comment suggests that @ReasonMakes and @monstar5746 are disinclined to engage with contention. While Humane Hancock's entire channel, and this video in particular, is focused on engaging with the contention that comes from discussing veganism, these commenters are not. So, while they appreciate his style and approach to activism, they are not going to debate. It's worth noting as well that @bullcogs7975's comment is not about veganism and instead, is responding to @ReasonMakes' comment and simultaneously critiquing or calling into question Humane Hancock's approach, questioning not just if his approach is effective, but whether or not it's "actually" accomplishing anything. In doing so, @bullcogs7975 expresses a negative affective evaluation of Humane Hancock's style of activism.

Although @bullcogs7975's comment is contentious within the context of a conversation about veganism, the stance object is Humane Hancock and not veganism. Indeed, we can't know from their comment if @bullcogs7975 is vegan or not, and the comment doesn't necessarily express hostility towards veganism. The comment tells us nothing about their stance regarding veganism. If @bullcogs7975 is vegan, then their questioning the efficacy of Humane Hancock's approach could be an example of the kind of infighting that occurs among vegans (see chapter 3) as they negotiate the scope of veganism. However, as their identity as a vegan is unknown, it cannot be analyzed within the context of infighting, though it is worth noting the implications and additional layers of stance that would exist if they were vegan.

4.6. COMPUTER-MEDIATED ACTIVISM FROM THE MEATSPACE

The videos produced by Humane Hancock are themselves examples of the kinds of meatspace activism discussed in Shepard (2020), but, as discussed in chapter 3, are also a form of digital activism that expands the reach of the filmed activism beyond the location of the activist (Glenn 2015). The comment sections of YouTube videos allow the conversational threads established in the video to continue and develop. Over 20 comments were specifically in response to spoken utterances in the video and tagged with timestamps, illustrating one of the ways in which YouTube comment sections can blend the affordances of spoken communication and CMC. The comment sections become remediations of the types of conversations in the video. Therefore, videos posted to YouTube of activists provide an interesting way of examining the language of activists both IRL and online.

Humane Hancock's YouTube channel leverages the affordances of both spoken language and computer-mediated communication. The main content of the videos are spoken, face-to-face interactions, but the personal engagement occurs in the comment section. The commenters tend to align with Hancock while also demonstrating a high level of investment and affect, which, in turn boosts the epistemic authority of Hancock, thus further enabling him to use that authority to successfully continue in his approach to vegan activism. Indeed (as **Figure 4.5** shows), commenters who are directly addressing — or aligning themselves with — Hancock tend to receive the most *likes* on their comments. By uploading videos of activism that occurs in the meatspace to a generally engaged, and highly aligned, community, Hancock performs digital activism while enabling commenters to contribute to that activism, even after the face-to-face

conversations have ended. By continuing the conversations, commenters aligned with Hancock are engaging in the same kind of activism that Humane Hancock does – that is, having conversations about veganism in the hopes that somebody, either their interlocutor or, perhaps, someone reading the comments, might be moved by their positions.

4.7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This chapter sets out to arrive at a fuller understanding of how interactants online discuss veganism and the ways in which that online discourse shapes the stances those users construct, take up, and extend in comment sections. Benson (2015) describes a tension reflected in the layout of YouTube’s comment section between the YouTube as an interactional space and the comment section as a “satisfactory multimodal reading experience” (93). That is, comments are, by default, arranged by “top comments” in descending order according to most-liked comments and/or comments with the most engagement (e.g. replies, comments *hearted* by the channel). This default organization prioritizes what YouTube thinks its audience would prefer rather than the sequential environment and conversational structure of threaded comments. This affects the first impressions viewers get from the comment section and subsequently serves as the first Initiation that informs exchanges and Responses within the comment section. As such, YouTube’s “top comment” default impacts the overall comment section.

The analysis above shows but a small glance of a large landscape. In this chapter I have shown the general context of one particular comment section on one particular video. The comments on the video tend to feature words associated with good feelings and the primary stance objects of the comments focus on other commenters, Humane Hancock himself, trolling,

and veganism; however, the overwhelming number of likes are given to comments that are oriented toward Hancock. While the individual comments demonstrate a variety of the paralinguistic remediations discussed in Shepard (2020), by focusing on the overall response to the types of comments and the stance objects — looking particularly at the number of *likes* received in each category — I have begun to establish a picture of the overall context of the comment section that exists as a relatively public “networked private” (Marwick and boyd 2014). The context of this comment section is one that is generally positive, with a high level of investment in both the content (as demonstrated by the amount of likes given to comments discussing veganism) and the content creator.

The positivity and high levels of investment and alignment with the video content, particularly Hancock’s performance and approach as an activist is illustrated in section 4.5. **Figure 4.6** shows how viewers regard the tone of the interactions, the responses given, and Hancock’s demeanor. **Figure 4.6** also shows how likes function as a subtle, yet noticeable, indication of approval, thus expressing alignment with and positive evaluation of the comment and its contents. Beyond the default arrangement of comments, another affordance of YouTube is illustrated in **Figure 4.6**: the ability for a creator/channel to *heart* a comment. This draws special attention to the comment, further shaping the overall comment section.

Figure 4.7 further illustrates the overall alignment with Hancock, while also demonstrating a small level of contention. Of the three comments shown, two indicate a positive affective stance toward Hancock and vegan activism in particular, while the other questions the impact of Hancock’s approach and/or what he does for veganism. While the first comment in

Figure 4.7 is the second most-liked, it has very little interaction beyond those likes, thus further demonstrating why likes are a salient feature for determining the general stance of the comment section.

The primary digital paralinguistic feature examined in this chapter is the role of *likes* as providing social support as paralinguistic digital affordances (Wohn et al. 2017) to co-construct stance and to signal alignment. A key limitation to the data evaluated in section 4.4. is that, while it attempts to provide an overview of the comment section using likes as the primary paralinguistic feature analyzed, many of the replies to comments do not have any likes. As such, the interactions happening between commenters, and thus a fuller understanding of the overall discourse happening in the comment section is not borne out in this analysis. In an effort to address this limitation, I have conducted a brief close-reading analysis of interactions happening within the comment section. In order to arrive at a more complete understanding of how stance is constructed and performed in YouTube comments future research may consider: (1) performing a deeper close-reading analysis of specific comments that exemplify the context created by the landscape of the comment section; (2) comparing the comment sections of multiple videos by Humane Hancock to examine the trends within his community; or (3) comparing the comment sections of similar videos by different creators.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Despite varied senses of meaning, speakers tend to interact as if they have a shared sense of meaning (Carston 2020). The ways of arriving at that shared understanding vary depending on the extent of the word's polysemous ambiguity. How an individual arrives at their own sense of meaning of a given term is driven by their prior text associations and past experiences with the term (Sierra 2021). With topics such as veganism, which are socially, politically, and ethically charged (Eckersley 1992; Garner 1993; Jasper and Nelkin 1992), the prior text associations one can have are wide-ranging: inside jokes, associating a word with a particular song, a first encounter with a word or phrase, repetition of words in advertisements, occupational jargon, and so on. Considering that vegan is also an identity and community marker, the various motivations for going vegan and the differing practices of vegans (Yarbrough 2010), and thus, the various interactions one can have with vegan(ism), significantly affect the range of prior text associations that contribute to this polysemy. Distinct understandings of veganism influence the stances an interactant takes both about veganism, and with veganism. These stances then contribute to the ever-expanding repertoire of prior text associations, which are then used to further perpetuate the polysemy of veganism.

Online vegan discourse is a useful topic for looking at how stances at individual turns (i.e. a single video/utterance) can conflict, change, be taken up in different turns/places in the conversation; how the construction of those stances can involve both face-saving and face-violating actions; and, despite that, the interactants can express the same overall stance regarding

the broader stance-object. These debates about veganism and how to approach activism provide a new layer to understand how complex topics are wrestled with in an increasingly intertextual and multimodal world — one where an individual's unique understanding of a topic can create friction when met with another's understanding of the topic, and where that friction is bound to happen in online discourse. On YouTube, the friction happens at the sites of discourse afforded by the platform (i.e. videos, comments, (dis)likes) and often crosses different platforms, effectively utilizing the interdiscursivity inherent to CMC. The polysemic status of “vegan” is negotiated in the ways in which the content of these videos and comments attempt to pin down what veganism is and the implications of that unique understanding.

In the following sections I review the preceding chapters and the issues at hand. Following that, I provide an overview of stasis theory and how it might be used to navigate polysemy, particularly in discourse regarding veganism. I suggest that incorporating stasis theory in discourse, especially about contentious topics, is a way of exercising empathy and constructing a joint stance with an interlocutor that is oriented towards productive discourse. I then offer suggestions for future work that can build on the ideas presented in this project.

5.2. CHAPTER REVIEW

Each chapter in this dissertation functions as a distinct study examining, through different scholarly frameworks, how one's framing and understanding of veganism impacts the stances they take and the strategies they use in deploying those stances. The subjects of each chapter approach veganism from differing perspectives. In chapter 2, *The Ex-Plant Eater* frames veganism in the context of health and wellness, contrasting veganism with the carnivore diet to

construct an anti-vegan stance. In chapter 3, *Queer Brown Vegan and Soytheist*, approach veganism from an ethical understanding, interrogating group boundaries and the intersectional scope of veganism, while maintaining a pro-vegan stance. In chapter 4 the way that interactions between a professional vegan activist and various laypersons play out inform the general tenor of the comment section, enabling a wide range of stances about veganism that are nevertheless positively aligned with the approach taken by Humane Hancock. The chapters are reviewed in more detail below.

In chapter 2, I looked at how an ex-vegan YouTuber, *The Ex-Plant Eater (EPE)*, employs a conversion narrative framework to position herself as a full and committed member of the carnivore diet community. Drawing from Ayometzi (2017), Burke (1970), Johnston (2013), and Mishler (1995), I synthesize rhetorical theories on conversion narratives to present a four-step conversion process following the rejection of a previous identity to describe the rhetorical moves EPE makes: (1) rationalizing the rejection of a previous identity; (2) use of extraordinary claims to reframe that rejection/shift in identity as supernaturally motivated; (3) aligning with a newfound community and reinforcing that community's identity markers; (4) becoming a full member and claiming the identity of the new community. I suggest that the digital persona curated (Snyder 2015) by EPE is one that was not vegan, as there is no evidence of prior veganism on the channel (i.e. digital self) *The Ex-Plant Eater*. I argue that the effectiveness of EPE's conversion narrative hinges on her audience's acceptance of a vegan identity that is presupposed at several points in the video and the channel itself – the channel name, the video title, and the specific linguistic moves made in the video are the primary presupposition triggers.

As such the validity of her arguments against veganism depend on the extent to which one accepts that presupposition. Additionally, I show how The Ex-Plant Eater's health-related motivations for going vegan contribute to the sense of meaning that positions veganism as primarily concerned with health and diet. In contrasting their supposed negative health outcomes as a vegan with her positive health outcomes on the carnivore diet, EPE perpetuates the negative portrayal of veganism in the media (Kew 1999; Munro 2012) while also contributing to the polysemy of vegan(ism).

Chapter 3 focused on two vegan YouTubers and social media influencers – Soytheist and Queer Brown Vegan – and how they negotiate different meanings of ethical veganism, and, in doing so, establish guidelines for doing veganism, which informs what it means to maintain an ethical position that allows for claiming a vegan identity and membership to the vegan community. It examines an asynchronous, cross-platform debate between two ethical vegans about the concept of white veganism and the extent to which intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) should be considered within the scope of veganism; they debate whether veganism should be a movement solely focused on nonhuman animals or if, in advocating for animal liberation, it should consider the struggles and issues affecting human animals. The two subjects of this chapter leverage the multimodal and intertextual affordances of YouTube, referencing and contextualizing conversations across different social media platforms to perform the role of YouTuber. They supplement their stance moves with screenshots of posts and comments on Instagram, GIFs, photos, and other multimodal elements. They use these multimodal affordances to *do* YouTuber, positioning themselves as “amateur experts” (Bhatia 2023), and thus authorities

on veganism. Due to their pro ethical vegan stance, they are able to engage in debate without having to defend veganism ideologically, reflecting how infighting among members of an in-group is essential for delimiting group identity (Ghaziani and Fine 2008). In participating in this infighting, these two YouTubers and ethical vegans interrogate group identity as well as the practices of ethical veganism, while maintaining the meaning of veganism as an ethical stance. The differences in approaches to veganism, and debates about its ethical purview shows how, even among interactants who view veganism similarly, there is polysemous variation in what veganism means.

Chapter 4 identifies the overall stances of the comment section of a vegan street epistemology YouTube video from professional vegan activist, Humane Hancock. I examine how the interactions in the video, and thus the tenor of the conversations had in the video, influence the general tone of the comment section. This chapter primarily takes a big-picture approach, drawing on practices from digital humanities, to examine how commenters who may or may not be vegan (but aren't necessarily hostile toward veganism) interpret the debates about veganism shown in the video, and how those interpretations affect epistemological conversations and the stances viewers take in response to those conversations. I identify the most frequent words used in the comments, as well as the most frequent stance objects, and use likes as the primary paralinguistic feature that indicates the general stance of the comment section. Additionally, I use close-reading analysis to illustrate how the general stance of the comment section is expressed in select comments. I argue that the content of the video, and the creator's use of the tools that YouTube's comment section offers, impacts the general stance and attitudes

expressed in the comment section. I find that the overall stance of the comment section is one of commenters positively aligning with the content creator, despite potential disagreements with veganism as an ethical position. This positive, non-combative alignment with Humane Hancock, particularly his measured approach to activism, provides a new prior text association of vegan activism which challenges the negative portrayals of veganism common in popular mass media.

These chapters show how different understandings and framings of veganism affect the stances one takes regarding veganism, whether an anti-vegan stance, pro-vegan stance, or a positive evaluative stance of a particular approach to vegan activism.

5.3. STASIS THEORY

Broadly, stasis theory describes a systematic way of asking questions about and identifying the evolution of arguments and different levels of understanding, attempting to provide a heuristic for identifying the vital issues in a debate (Hoppmann 2014). Stasis describes the level where a debate, dispute, or discussion takes place — where the point of contention is made clear (Marsh 2018; Dieter 1994).

Stasis theory has roots in the classical Greek rhetorical tradition. It was developed by Hermogenes of Tarsus in the third century CE as a method of teaching strategies for success in legal and political careers (Katos 2007; Marsh 2018), and, as such, analysis of stasis theory often centers formal, litigious uses. Yet even ancient rhetoricians such as Cicero, Quintilian, and Pseudo-Augustine promote argue that stasis theory applies to not just judicial, but deliberative and epideictic rhetoric as well (Marsh 2018). Moreover, in recent years, scholars have promoted stasis theory as a means of analyzing and participating in conversations outside of the courtroom

and formal rhetorical contexts, from disputes among teams in the English Premier League (Marsh 2018) to composition and argument writ large (Crowley and Hawhee 2011; Jackson and Wallin 2009).

Given its ancient roots, multiple interpretations and approaches to stasis theory have since developed, with different scholars hierarchizing varying relevant levels (issues) of stasis. For example, Heath and Palenchar (2009: 93) identify “fact, value, [and] policy” as the key issues that occur as an argument proceeds. Scholars contend that Hermagoras’ specified four levels in his hierarchy: fact, definition, quality, jurisdiction (Marsh 2018). However other rhetoricians extend these four into even more levels of stasis, with Hoppmann identifying 10 core stases (Hoppmann 2014).

While there are understandably variations in interpretations of stasis theory, for the sake of my argument I will confine my stases to four. Mirroring the classical tradition of Hermagoras, Crowley and Hawhee (2011) suggest four levels of stasis: conjecture, definition, quality, and policy. Each of these levels are concerned with fundamental questions. To achieve stasis at the level of conjecture, interactants must ask if X exists, or happened; at the level of definition interactants must determine what *kind* of thing X is; quality is concerned with if X is “right” or “wrong;” and policy concerns what should be done about X. It is this framework that I will also employ in my argument. Indeed, if stasis theory is applicable to composition in general, and composition includes acts of communication across modalities (New London Group 1996), and — as I argue in chapter 3 — compositions are expressions of stance(s), then it follows that stasis theory proves useful for analyzing how stances are constructed and expressed in discourse.

Ultimately, I argue that, because vegan(ism) is a contentious and polysemous topic, wherein the stances constructed within an interaction depend on one's understanding and usage of vegan(ism), stasis theory provides a useful tool for analyzing debates surrounding veganism and, hopefully, engendering more productive discourse.

In her analysis of (in)effective communication strategies of animal rights organizations, Freeman (2014) wrestles with how those organizations communicate anti-speciesist messages while existing within a speciesist society to increase awareness of animal rights issues without provoking hostility from those operating within a speciesist framework. She argues for an approach incorporating a stance of “ideological authenticity” — a strategy that blends abolitionist approaches and reformist, welfarist approaches. This stance is meant to increase “resonance of transformative frames” or the use of communicative frames that resonate with others. Almiron (2015) notes, however, that achieving common ground is prerequisite for achieving resonance. Freeman (2014) identifies strategies animal rights groups are using to try and reach common ground within a speciesist world, strategies that the general public already holds (such as negative attitudes toward industrial farming practice), yet ultimately argues that appeals to justice are more effective than appeals to altruism and utilitarianism since appeals to justice, as Almiron (2015) suggests resonate with commonly shared values such as “the right to life, the avoidance of unnecessary violence and suffering, and the unethical nature of enslavement’ (2). While Freeman’s analysis focuses on practical communication strategies, the importance of finding common ground is the essence of stasis theory, thus I argue that stasis theory is an effective framework for negotiating the polysemy of vegan(ism). Employing stasis

theory in conversations (especially about contentious topics) allows interactants to find common ground while maintaining ideological authenticity.

5.3.1. *Stasis Theory and Empathy*

Drawing on Meneses and Larkin (2017) Figueras (2023) notes that “empathy is a form of interpersonal or social understanding that connects to the exercise of reaching a substantial insight into another person’s experience while, at the same time, being cognizant of the differences between the self and the other” (Figueras 2023: 357). Understanding another’s position, while respecting differences in that position (which *requires* an understanding of their position), and finding common ground are key tenets of stasis theory. As such employing principles of stasis theory in conversations not only contributes to more productive discourse, but also functions as a form of empathy. As interlocutors work to reach a significant insight into each other’s experience while also maintaining a sense and awareness of the self, they are engaging in the empathetic practice (Figueras 2023: Meneses and Larkin 217).

Figueras (2023) and Sacks (1992) point out the importance of noting the difference between one *claiming* to understand another’s position and experiences and actually *demonstrating* understanding. Figueras argues that those different displays — claiming vs demonstrating understanding — are linked to “the specific ways of asserting membership categories, epistemic (a)symmetries, and particular rights and obligations” (2023: 358), and that, in order to demonstrate understanding, interactants must intentionally attempt to adopt the others’ perspective.

Just as stasis involves different levels of understanding, so too, as Figueras suggests, should empathy “be conceived in terms of different levels of understanding that are projected into distinctive discursive operations and moves” (2023: 372). This implies that the extent of one’s empathy is seen in the choice of discursive strategies which are used to show understanding of the other’s position. Figuera (2023) identifies echoic formulations and resolute second stories as discursive strategies for demonstrating empathy. Echoic formulations are oriented toward surmising and reflecting the thoughts and feelings of the recipient; with resolute second stories, a respondent mirrors the experiences of another in how they construct their response, and uses that mirroring as a way to propose an “alternative reality” (Figueras 2023: 70).

Echoic formulations involve attributing a thought to the recipient of the message (indicating an understanding of their thought process), claims of understanding (working toward common ground), and demonstrating understanding (finding common ground). For example, although the subject of chapter 3 was the comment section, Humane Hancock’s approach to street epistemology evokes similarities to echoic formulations. He initiates an interaction by asking a question, then repeats his interviewees’ positions, asks another question that shows he understands their positions (while also challenging those positions). By repeating this process, he attempts to arrive at common ground by asking interviewees if veganism is in line with your moral compass, to which most reply affirmatively. Effectively, this allows the interviewees to demonstrate understanding of Humane Hancock’s position and, subsequently, veganism. While

not a one-to-one of echoic formulations, the interactions described above contain the elements necessary to arrive at a shared understanding.

Similar to echoic formulations, resolute second stories involve a respondent expressing their own personal perspective, often as a narrative, showing similarities to the experiences or concerns of the recipient of the message. The respondent then typically follows their recounting of a similar experience with an advice-giving act. In resolute second stories, respondents construct an affective stance showcasing alignment with the recipient through shared experiences. In a way, expressing a similar experience assumes shared or similar prior text associations between interactants. These shared prior text associations, coupled with the affective stances expressed in the story, give epistemic authority to the respondent when they turn to an advice-giving act. Offering advice demonstrates a high level of investment in the recipient's current situation and a shared desire to do something about it. While not necessarily sharing a second story in interaction, The Ex-Plant Eater's video (discussed in chapter 3), recalls resolute second stories. If we imagine the recipients of EPE's video as vegans who may be reconsidering veganism or – considering conversion narratives are often used to reinforce converts' group identity (Ayometzi 2007) – former vegans, then the account of her negative experiences as a vegan attempt to mirror the audience's experience. EPE uses the shared experience when offering advice, saying “I'm making this video because maybe you are in the same position that I was, not knowing what direction to go in with your health. And, you know, I would've benefited from finding a video like this when I was, you know, feeling really lost with my diet. So yeah, I hope this video will serve to help some people” (0:24:04-0:24:23). She builds her epistemic

stance by connecting with her viewers, acknowledging that they might have shared experiences. She uses that acknowledgment to give epistemic authority to her advice and prevents an alternative reality of a healthy life on the carnivore diet.

While the goals of Humane Hancock's and EPE's videos are diametrically opposed, they both show how empathy is used to demonstrate understanding and find common ground. They leverage affective stancetaking strategies to connect with their audience and, in doing so, construct an epistemic stance that positions them as resolute in their convictions and reliable sources of information. All four videos analyzed in this project prioritize making their positions clear. The explicit goal of EPE's video is to show her audience "where [she] came from, what [she does] know, and [... her] reasonings behind everything" (0:24:33-0:24:41). Soytheist's and Queer Brown Vegan videos center definitions. Soytheist also spends a great deal of time providing background information about how the discourse has unfolded thus far, ensuring his viewers are on the same page and can better understand his position. Queer Brown Vegan moves through the stasis levels quite clearly: demonstrating the existence of veganism and *white* veganism (conjecture); defining veganism and white veganism, including background information and rationale (definition); critiquing white veganism, non-intersectional veganism, and racism in the vegan movement (quality); and suggesting veganism should be intersectional (policy). All of these videos account for an audience that might not understand their position and goals, indicating an actively empathetic approach from the creators to arrive at a common understanding. They also assume that an audience would be receptive – empathetic – in engaging with their videos. In this way we can see the parallels between demonstrating empathetic

understanding and stasis theory. Much like demonstrating empathy is a conscious attempt to understand and productively engage in conversation — interactants *choose* whether or not to demonstrate empathy — incorporating stasis theory requires interactants to do the work to make sure they are on the same page, and that work requires some level of empathetic demonstration.

You can't empathize with someone if you don't understand them – you can't have productive discourse if you don't understand their position. So, both parties need to make sure they understand and are understood. If incorporating concepts from stasis theory allows interactants to find common ground. And if finding common ground requires empathy; then stasis theory, as a means to reach common ground, is an empathetic practice. Even when you disagree, employing stasis theory shows a positive affective stance towards the debate/discourse, alignment with the goal of a productive discourse, and a high level of investment in recognizing the positions of your interlocutor.

In the case of activism, Freeman (2014) recommends the best approach to nonhuman animal advocacy is to lead with the ethical case for animal rights, with the goal of prioritizing “ideological authenticity.” Akin to threshold concepts in writing studies (Adler-Kassner 2015), Freeman's emphasis on ideological authenticity is an approach that aligns with Foucault's (and others) notion that to rectify a social justice issue, people must change not just their behaviors, but the way that they think such that they can't imagine thinking differently, ideally resulting in people struggling to think about “things the way they have been thought” (Foucault 2000: 457). With the goal of transforming humans' conceptions of themselves as part of the “animal kingdom,” Freeman further argues that animal rights groups should consider *all* animals – human

and nonhuman – in their activism. As humans recognize their shared animality, the most transformative and supportive frames of animal rights ideology, “such as emphasizing justice, respect, freedom, life, and a shared animality” (Freeman 2014: 20), frames that (other than shared animality) drive all social justice movement, humans might begin to consider nonhuman animals in their moral framework. Regardless of one’s particular approach to veganism, empathy is a primary motivator of vegan practices. Self-empathy motivates health vegans to improve their health; environmental vegans express empathy for the planet and its inhabitants; ethical vegans are driven by their empathy towards nonhuman animals. In any case, discourse that negotiates the polysemy of a socially and politically charged topic, such as veganism, requires interactants to practice empathy.

5.4. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Although this project has negotiated different senses of meaning that people apply to *veganism*, I should clarify that the goal of this work is not to prescribe a single definition of *veganism*, nor to declare how one ought to approach veganism. My goal is to show how it is important for vegan activists to understand the need for and potentially agreeing on, shared values, motivations, and senses of veganism. Given the polysemy of veganism, and veganism’s status as a relatively small social movement, and the importance of activism that leads to justice, vegans must engage in the difficult rhetorical work to ensure that their advocacy is synchronized in order to accomplish those goals. I argue that stasis theory is a use a useful mechanism for doing that work. I should also clarify that stasis theory is not the *only* way of doing that difficult rhetorical work, nor is it necessarily the best way. As a rhetorical tool, it is simply a means of

temporarily arriving at an agreement or understanding, particularly within the context of complex debates. It is contingent upon individuals acknowledging disagreements and working to resolve (or at least understand) those disagreements, particularly in the case of activists working towards a unified end.

In this project, I have sought to provide a breadth of analysis, illustrating different approaches researchers can use to examine online discourse related to veganism, with implications for analysis of discourse in the meatspace. Informed by different scholarly lenses – religious rhetorics, multimodal media analysis, and digital humanities – each chapter seeks to further the interdisciplinary nature of discourse analysis. Future work should lean into the interdisciplinarity of discourse analysis and continue to apply various scholarly frameworks in their analysis.

Even though the subjects of each chapter approach veganism from different understandings, they aren't interacting with each other. In chapter 3, Queer Brown Vegan and Soytheist have different ideas about the scope of veganism, but not different understandings of veganism as being primarily concerned with animal rights. In chapter 4, although Humane Hancock's interlocutors may have different senses of veganism, he keeps his conversations focused on the moral, anti-speciesist concerns of veganism. As such, future work may benefit from analyzing interactions of people with different senses of veganism, looking at how those different understandings of veganism affect the interpersonal stance taking strategies used by the interactants. Indeed, while I argue for the potential of stasis theory as an effective tool for approaching interactions affected by polysemy, I have not conducted a stasis theory analysis.

Future work may consider using stasis theory to analyze interactions affected by polysemy in addition to how polysemy affects stancetaking strategies.

Due to the structure of this dissertation, I have provided a breadth of analysis rather than an intensely deep analysis. While I have endeavored to cover much ground, future work in the areas of animal studies, vegan discourse, and computer-mediated communication would benefit from more deeply examining the extent to which stasis theory and empathetic practice engender successful and productive discourse, particularly among subjects whose disagreements involve more direct or immediate interaction. Moreover, because of the breadth of this project, future research may apply similar approaches, but on a larger scale. Researchers ought to consider conducting large-scale surveys about perceptions of vegan *discourse* and practices rather than vegans or veganism (i.e. what do people think about how vegan(ism) is discussed and why?). Such an approach may elucidate the effects of prior-text associations and the extent to which they contribute to vegan polysemy. This approach would further interrogate the overarching assumption of this project, namely that prior-text associations are, in fact, a key driver of polysemy.

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Vita

Born and raised in Utah, James Robert Shepard III received a Bachelor of Science degree in English from Utah State University, with a minor in linguistics. Although he had intended to teach at a high school, ideally as a speech and debate coach, his wife's pursuit of a Ph.D. led him to Knoxville where he received his Master of Arts degree in English Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Afterwards he continued his studies at UTK receiving a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English, concentrating once more on Rhetoric Writing and Linguistics. His research focuses on stancetaking strategies in online activist discourses, particularly in the context of different approaches to veganism. He is immeasurably grateful for the support of his colleagues, teachers, mentors, and – most importantly – his wife. He looks forward to the future after receiving his terminal degree.