

From activism to the mainstream: Visual storytelling in representations of contemporary veganism

A visual analysis of vegan food advertising in Europe

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Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary veganism is represented through visual storytelling in European vegan food advertising. In recent years, veganism has shifted from its roots in ethical activism and animal rights towards a commercial and mainstream movement. This shift, often described as “Big Veganism”, refers to the integration of vegan products into everyday markets through corporate branding and large-scale marketing strategies. As veganism enters the mainstream, it also becomes more diverse, shaped by different motivations such as anti-speciesism, environmentalism, and healthism. These overlapping motivations can lead to tensions in how veganism is portrayed in public discourse. In this context, advertising plays an important role in shaping how these dimensions are visually communicated. The aim of this thesis is to explore how advertising represents the different strands of contemporary veganism and the role of visual storytelling in creating these representations. Through the study of visual choices in advertising, this thesis seeks to better understand how veganism is visually constructed in the European context.

To examine these dynamics, the study applies a visual analysis proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 49-56) to a sample of 100 advertisements from European countries, published between 2018 and 2025. Drawing on a visual analysis framework, and using ATLAS.ti software for data management and coding, the research connects new patterns emerging from the dataset to the existing literature and identifies the main thematic framings and the visual storytelling techniques used. The findings reveal a clear predominance of lifestyle-oriented framings, centred around narratives of consumer pleasure, cosmopolitanism, and healthism. In contrast, less frequent representations highlight veganism as a social movement that concerns anti-speciesism and environmentalism. Where ethical framings do appear, they are often visually diluted or embedded within broader lifestyle appeals, raising questions about the ideological compromises made in the commodification of vegan discourse.

The thesis concludes by calling for further research into underexplored areas such as the audience’s interpretations of the different representations of veganism, the

strategic use of humour and playfulness in vegan messaging, and the potential of counter-advertising to disrupt dominant market narratives. Overall, the study contributes to media and communication scholarship by exposing how advertising shapes evolving cultural meanings of veganism in an increasingly commodified media landscape.

KEYWORDS: *visual storytelling, advertising, veganism, visual analysis, vegan food*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, veganism has evolved from a niche movement into a widely promoted dietary and lifestyle alternative. It is officially defined by The Vegan Society (n.d.) 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. (para. 1)

From an environmental perspective, meat and dairy production are major contributors to global ecological degradation, accounting for 83% of land use, 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions, and water pollution (Carrington, 2018, para. 3). The increasing popularity of plant-based diets in Europe reflects shifts in dietary preferences alongside broader socio-political and environmental concerns. On a global scale, the market for plant-based foods is expanding rapidly; recent estimates project that the global market, valued at USD 33.14 billion in 2023, will reach USD 103.00 billion by 2032 (Fortune Business Insights, 2025, para. 1). This positive trajectory is largely driven by ethical and environmental concerns, such as opposition to animal exploitation and awareness of the ecological impact of animal agriculture. Greater availability and improved quality of plant-based products further contribute to veganism's accessibility and appeal among mainstream consumers (Research and Markets, 2025, para. 4). In Europe, the plant-based food sector grew by 49% between 2018 and 2020, indicating a marked shift in supply chains and consumer demand (Smart Protein Project, 2021, para. 3).

However, the movement has expanded its cultural relevance beyond its ethical origins, with public framing increasingly incorporating new motivations and aesthetics. Recent shifts in consumer behaviour suggest that the appeal of plant-based diets lies less in their ability to replicate meat and more in their alignment with health-conscious and whole-food lifestyles. Sales of popular meat alternatives such as Beyond Meat have declined in recent years: the startup's stock price decreased from \$239 in 2019 to just

over \$3 in March 2025 (Huang, 2025, para. 5). The overall decrease of the plant-based meat industry might be due to consumers favouring simple, recognisable, and minimally processed plant-based options, a trend driven by growing numbers of flexitarian eaters seeking balance rather than strict dietary exclusion (Ludmir, 2025, paras. 5–7). It reflects broader cultural dynamics: though initially rooted in animal rights and environmental concerns, veganism is now frequently promoted for its links to personal health, wellness, and environmental sustainability (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 1).

Sexton et al. (2022) discuss about the concept of “Big Veganism”: a model embraced by major corporations in the food and agriculture industries, characterised by the incorporation of vegan products into mainstream production and distribution systems through large-scale investments, acquisitions, and branding efforts aimed at normalising vegan offerings within conventional consumer spaces (p. 606). The mainstreaming of the movement has brought with it a notable change in public discourse, marked by the increasing avoidance of ethically charged animal rights rhetoric in favour of less confrontational narratives (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 569). Big Veganism aligns closely with neoliberal frameworks in which individual consumer behaviour is framed as a primary mode of political engagement (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10).

This discursive shift has prompted scholarly calls for a critical re-evaluation of societal transitions away from animal-based food systems (Morris et al., 2021, p. 2). Addressing the challenges and opportunities surrounding plant protein production requires an interdisciplinary approach that not only considers agricultural practices but also engages with questions of value chains, policy frameworks, and media attention (Morris et al., 2021, p. 7). With corporate investment in plant-based meat alternatives, dairy substitutes, and lab-grown proteins on the rise (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 613), tensions emerge between market expansion and ideological integrity. Some view this trend as scalable progress, while others criticise it as a delusion of vegan ethics and the entrenchment of capitalist logics within plant-based food systems (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 617-618).

Through storytelling techniques this tension is negotiated. It plays a critical role in shaping how ideas and practices such as veganism are commodified. Vegan

organizations have already started to encourage vegan businesses to apply storytelling to their brands' communication (V-Label, 2021, para. 1). In the visual form, storytelling appears to be a powerful strategy evoking emotion and building brand loyalty. These visual narratives can be applied to advertising to embed complex ideological messages into seemingly simple imagery (El-Desouky, 2020, pp. 118–119), and its persuasive power has demonstrated strong capabilities in fostering positive attitudes toward advertisements, enhancing viewer engagement, and increasing purchase intentions (Zatwarnicka-Madura & Nowacki, 2018, p. 697). As veganism enters commercial markets, it is essential that advertising narratives remain transparent, coherent, and consistent over time to build trust, navigate potential scepticism, and authentically reflect ethical discourses within the marketplace (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3150).

The scientific relevance of this research stems from the current limitations in the academic treatment of veganism in advertising. Scholars such as Belk (2017, p. 43) have argued for the enduring importance of qualitative research in the age of data analytics, particularly in understanding the symbolic and affective dimensions of advertising. Much of the existing scholarship on veganism has primarily concentrated on consumer practices and motivations (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 607). While recent research has examined how vegan discourse circulates in digital environments such as social media (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699), and focused on the messaging strategies employed by activist groups and advocacy campaigns (Fernández, 2020, pp. 151–154; Zhdanova et al., 2020, pp. 114–116), the role of visual strategies of commercial brand advertising in shaping representations of veganism remains underexplored.

Message framing in commercial campaigns is a crucial area for further investigation, given that symbolic cues and narrative strategies can potentially influence consumer perceptions and behaviours. Traditional campaign strategies often fall short when relying on generic messaging, prompting scholars like Beverland (2014) to advocate for culturally resonant framings that emphasise tradition, authenticity, and shared identity to more effectively support dietary change (p. 379). Furthermore, the roles of brands and influencers in driving the food system change warrant re-evaluation. Rather than focusing exclusively on activist groups, more attention should be given to market-based actors who increasingly shape norms around sustainability and

consumption through lifestyle branding (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10). These actors have the capacity to reframe plant-based diets in ways that make them more accessible and attractive to mainstream audiences, an approach already employed by animal advocacy organisations, as seen in campaigns like PETA's collaboration with body-positive influencers (Munro, 2025, para. 1). Accordingly, international marketing scholarship should develop targeted interventions capable of transforming the cultural meaning of meat, highlighting the importance of legitimising protein alternatives through strategic framing that normalises their place in everyday diets (Ruzeviciute and Thürridl, 2023, p. 98). In this view, message framing becomes a central mechanism for enabling widespread adoption of plant-based eating practices and advancing systemic dietary transitions.

Methodologically, this research aims to address a gap in academia through the use of a systematic visual analysis in advertising studies. While ATLAS.ti and other software tools are widely used in textual analysis, their use in analysing imagery remains relatively rare (Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 2), a gap particularly pronounced in studies focusing on the vegan food industry. Research training often overlooks methods for coding and interpreting photographs, despite their centrality in contemporary media (Chapman et al., 2016, p. 2). Visual data analysis tools like ATLAS.ti allow researchers to manage and revisit image-based datasets, contributing to ongoing research beyond the initial project and supporting comparative and interpretive approaches over time (Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 12). Visual content not only captures attention but also triggers multisensory associations, linking vision with imagined taste and desire (Lee & Lim, 2020, p. 146). Given the central role of visual culture in vegan food advertising, it is crucial to integrate such methods into communication research.

These gaps in the literature underscore the need for a closer examination of how commercial visuals construct meanings around veganism. As a result, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

How is contemporary veganism represented in European vegan food advertisements through visual storytelling?

To address this question, two central concepts require clarification. First, contemporary veganism is understood as a mainstream cultural phenomenon shaped

by anti-speciesist, environmental and lifestyle motivations. It is characterised by a shift away from activist roots toward market-driven representations and individualised consumption practices (Gheihman, 2021, p. 2; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 609). Second, visual storytelling refers to the use of visual narrative strategies to construct meaning and evoke emotion in visual media (El-Desouky, 2020, p. 118). These strategies are crucial in shaping how veganism is represented in European advertisements.

The study applies a qualitative visual analysis approach, following the multimodal critical discourse framework proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 49-56). The analysis focuses on a sample of 100 paid visual advertisements promoting vegan food products in Europe between 2018 and 2025. These were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diversity of formats, brands, and stylistic strategies. Imagery was analysed using ATLAS.ti, following a structured five-step coding process outlined by Chapman et al. (2016, pp. 5–12): data organisation, code creation, coding, relationship finding, and interpretation. The study used both deductive and inductive codes to balance theory with emergent insights during the data analysis.

This thesis is structured thematically to provide a coherent and critical exploration of the research question. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework by contextualising veganism as a mainstream movement, exploring how its ethical foundations and cultural representations have been reshaped in society. It also examines the role of message framing, visual aesthetics, and consumer identity in shaping the representation of veganism in public discourses. Chapter 3 details the methodological design and operationalisation of the study, justifying the use of visual analysis and outlining the criteria used for data collection and coding. Chapter 4 presents the findings, organised around two dominant narrative framings identified in the data: veganism as a lifestyle movement and veganism as a social movement, exploring the visual and symbolic strategies that shape these framings.

Finally, chapter 5 offers a critical discussion of the results, reflecting on the broader implications of the visual strategies used in commercial vegan food advertising. It interrogates how these narratives may contribute to the depoliticisation of veganism and considers the ethical consequences of aligning vegan discourse with consumer culture. It also acknowledges the study's limitations, and offers directions for future

research, advocating for further investigation into the role of visual media in shaping representations of veganism in an era of increasing commercialisation.

Overall, the study contributes to media and communication scholarship by critically examining how contemporary veganism is represented through visual storytelling in commercial advertising. By doing so, it highlights the cultural and ideological negotiations embedded within these representations and provides insight into the shifting boundaries of ethics, identity, and consumer engagement in the context of plant-based food systems.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Meat consumption and Veganism

Veganism emerges as a response to the environmental, ethical, and ideological foundations of industrial meat production. While the environmental consequences of meat and dairy production are increasingly visible, public engagement with these issues remains uneven, shaped by cultural values and ingrained belief systems. Veganism challenges the environmental unsustainability of animal agriculture and the moral logic that renders animal suffering invisible and acceptable while seeking to exclude animals for food, clothes or any other purpose (Bedin et al., 2018, p. 2; Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12; Doyle, 2016, p. 787; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 608).

Affective responses toward meat vary along a spectrum, from attachment to disgust, producing different approaches to dietary change. Joy (2010) describes the logic behind consumers' attachment to eating animal products as 'carnism': an invisible ideological framework that naturalizes and justifies the consumption of animal products while rendering alternatives as deviant or inferior. Carnism contributes to the erasure of animals from public discourse, reinforcing meat-eating as a non-choice and obscuring the ethical implications of dietary habits (p. 30). It underpins dominant food practices and shapes consumer expectations, particularly due to the widespread belief that vegan food is less flavourful or satisfying than meat-based meals. The perception of veganism as a symbolic threat to dominant group values mediates the rejection of vegan food's tastiness or adequacy, revealing a defensive reaction aimed at preserving the legitimacy of meat consumption (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 464).

The "meat paradox" refers to the contradiction among meat eaters between enjoying eating meat and simultaneously disapproving of harming animals. These consumers frequently deploy moral disengagement strategies, such as denying animals psychological characteristics or their capacity to suffer. This resolves the cognitive dissonance between ethical concerns and dietary habits, allowing individuals to justify the continuation of meat consumption despite growing awareness of its consequences (Graça et al., 2015, p. 88). While those who feel moral disgust are more open to plant-based diets, others who feel avoidant are open to information but still haven't

shifted eating behaviours (Graça et al., 2015, p. 87). This ambivalence, coupled with scepticism about the brand's ethical claims, is a key predictor of behaviour and can hinder the acceptance of vegan products (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3149). Consumers may selectively trust certain ethical products or brands, making brand perception a crucial factor in the adoption of vegan alternatives (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3150).

Cultural narratives around meat further engage with these dynamics. Meat is often imbued with symbolic meanings such as strength, virility, or tradition that reinforce its social desirability and gendered associations (Fegitz & Pirani, 2017, p. 296; Graça et al., 2015, p. 88; Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 613–614). These meanings contribute to the perception of veganism as both culturally subversive and personally inconvenient. Some recent advocacy campaigns have attempted to subvert these associations by portraying plant-based diets as sexually appealing, such as PETA's hypersexualised representations aimed at reassuring men that veganism does not undermine masculinity (Fegitz & Pirani, 2017, p. 298). However, they often end up reinforcing the same gendered logics they seek to challenge.

2.2. Mainstream veganism

The mainstreaming of veganism marks a pivotal transformation in its cultural, political, and material significance. Historically rooted in the radical ethos of the animal rights movement, veganism is increasingly framed as a consumer lifestyle choice, shaped by health and environmental logics, aesthetic appeal, and corporate interests (Gheihman, 2021, p. 2; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 609). In 2018, veganism became more normalised in Europe and North America (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 605-606), and its representation in media and advertising started to promote aspirational lifestyle values (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 567) and reflect individual choice (Gheihman, 2021, p. 9; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 613).

As veganism has grown in popularity since 2018, there has been a discursive shift from “vegan” to “plant-based”, aimed at easing ideological tensions and appealing to a wider audience (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 569; Doyle, 2016, p. 788; Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465; Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 609-610). While this shift facilitates mainstream acceptance, it also contributes to the “depoliticisation” of veganism (Buttny

& Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 568). The ethical foundation of veganism remains marginalised in public discourse, often avoided in favour of less confrontational narratives such as health and lifestyle benefits (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 569) and reinforcing the cultural erasure of animals (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 116). Part of this evolution is driven by "cultural entrepreneurship": the strategic mobilisation of high-status figures such as athletes, doctors or investors who promote veganism through narratives of personal transformation, performance, and wellness (Gheihman, 2021, p. 7). Veganism is framed as an aspirational consumer lifestyle by these agents, often marketed through tropes of trendiness and the rise of celebrity vegans (Doyle, 2016, p. 787).

The debate on mainstream veganism highlights the contrast between activist calls for change and what Sexton et al. (2022) refer to as "Big Veganism": a dominant force contributing to the popularisation and commercialisation of vegan identity within mainstream culture (p. 606). The overlap of ethical, health, and environmental concerns in contemporary vegan discourse often blurs the lines of what defines "authentic" vegan practice. The mainstreaming of veganism has introduced a plurality of practices and motivations, including anarchist and ecofeminist perspectives, that contest simplified understandings of vegan identity (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 608). Despite this multiplicity, a clear distinction of motivations persists: those citing animal rights or environmental reasons often face more negative reactions from omnivores than those who adopt veganism for health (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 567).

The clearest expression of mainstream veganism is manifested in "corporate veganism", identified as the commercial adoption of veganism by agri-food corporations, which often prioritises profit and individual consumption over the movement's original ethical and anti-establishment goals. Veganism is marketed to affluent, health-conscious consumers, often excluding those without the economic means to access such products (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 609), and consumer choices are seen as tools for political change (Gheihman, 2021, p. 5). Corporate veganism, however, raises ethical contradictions as many plant-based products are sold by companies that continue to profit from animal exploitation, revealing a dissonance between vegan consumption and production practices (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 610).

In this sense, Big Veganism frames veganism into a lifestyle movement that recasts collective political action into individualised consumption (Gheihman, 2021, p. 4). Three overlapping concepts define the contemporary vegan lifestyle movement: speciesism, healthism and environmentalism. These “isms” correspond to the ideological concerns of three intersecting movements: speciesism is central to the animal rights movement, healthism to the plant-based food tribe, and environmentalism is present across both. The vegan lifestyle movement encompasses all three, creating internal tensions due to the differing moral priorities each one entails (Gheihman, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Big Veganism translates ethical concerns into marketable narratives by broadening its appeal through cultural entrepreneurs (Gheihman, 2021, p. 7). These figures amplify the attractiveness of veganism by mobilising masculinised representations, most notably through “heganism”, a masculine aesthetic of veganism (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 614). This framing emerges in response to dominant associations of veganism and compassion for animals as feminine traits (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017, p. 644). The masculinisation of veganism is intended to facilitate its entry into the mainstream. However, such representations often reinforce masculine and white privilege, contributing to exclusions along lines of race, gender, and class (Fegitz & Pirani, 2017, p. 296; Graça et al., 2015, p. 88; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 614). Through these representations, mainstream veganism extends inclusivity only within dominant gender norms and existing power structures, a trend mirrored in broader media and advocacy landscapes (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, p. 568).

Recent research calls for a deeper reflection on the political economies underpinning contemporary mainstream veganism. As Big Veganism becomes increasingly intertwined with corporate food systems, pressing questions arise regarding labour conditions, equity, and the seemingly inevitable reliance on capitalist infrastructures for scalability (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 617–618). Within this capitalist framework, veganism is transformed into a glamourised, individualistic lifestyle that reflects the aesthetics and values of neoliberal societies, where political action is reframed through consumer-oriented cultures (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10). The healthism imperative appears to have gained the most traction in recent years (Gheihman, 2021,

p. 5), prompting further reflection on the roles of environmentalism and anti-speciesism. This raises important questions about whether these dimensions are being reinterpreted through the same capitalist logics, and to what extent engagement within consumer culture can genuinely coexist with the pursuit of systemic and meaningful transformation (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10).

2.3. Message framing

The integration of veganism into the mainstream underscores the importance of developing strategic advertising narratives around brands that remain faithful to ethical principles while aligning with consumer expectations. Clear, transparent, and consistent communication over time may contribute to building credibility and mitigating consumer scepticism, particularly when trust in a specific brand is at stake (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3150).

One of the most critical distinctions lies in the affective orientation toward meat consumption. Graça et al. (2015) identify three relevant affective responses toward meat: avoidance, disgust and attachment-oriented consumers. For the latter group, direct confrontations with the moral implications of meat-eating are often counterproductive; instead, more effective strategies involve portraying plant-based meals as attractive additions to the conventional diet rather than as direct substitutes (p. 88). By using the “addition framing”, vegan brands can reduce symbolic threat and the perceived challenge to personal identity (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465). Personal health benefits and consumption pleasures such as taste and texture are more likely to drive consumer engagement in practice, even if sustainability remains a background motivation (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12). Messages centred on individual well-being and responsibility for personal health resonate particularly well with mainstream audiences, especially health-oriented consumers. Likewise, framing plant-based choices within the aspirational values of cosmopolitanism can further broaden appeal beyond the ethically committed (Beverland, 2014, p. 379).

However, the importance of ethical framing should not be overlooked, especially for audiences sensitive to ethical issues, who may fall into avoidance or disgust-oriented segments (Graça et al., 2015, p. 87). On social media, users with a more positive

attitude toward veganism perceive altruistic messages, which focus on collective concerns, more informative and persuasive than egoistic messages centred on personal health or fitness (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699). Additionally, positive emotional tone in messages is more effective than negative ones that focus on the harms of meat consumption, both in terms of informational value and the likelihood of being shared (Phua et al., 2020, p. 700). When it comes to emotional appeals, ethical messages that evoke empathy for the well-being of both animals and the environment can enhance brand perception and reduce consumer ambivalence, particularly among ethically sensitive audiences (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3151).

In this sense, some scholars argue that brands should avoid vague ethical claims, as unclear messages are often not enough to overcome growing consumer scepticism, particularly in light of increasing concerns about greenwashing, which refers to the practice of companies misleadingly presenting themselves as environmentally responsible without substantiating their claims (Szabo & Webster, 2020, p. 719). Clear and concrete claims supported by data, NGO collaborations, or visible ethical initiatives are considered necessary to build trust and reduce ambivalence among ethically ambivalent consumers. Narratives that combine personal benefits with collective ethical outcomes can align self-interest with broader moral engagement and raise awareness (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3151). Avoiding ideological labels such as “vegan” or “vegetarian” may help prevent alienation among moderate or exploratory consumers. Instead, positioning plant-based eating as an individual lifestyle choice enhances inclusivity and minimises the identity-based resistance often triggered by rigid categorisation (Beverland, 2014, p. 379).

2.4. Visual storytelling

The strategic use of visual storytelling becomes especially valuable when developing these messages. Visual storytelling in advertising serves as a powerful medium for conveying messages, emotions, and identities. It involves the use of images, graphics, videos, and other visual formats to create narratives that resonate with audiences, fostering emotional connections and driving engagement (El-Desouky, 2020, p. 118). In vegan food advertising, visual storytelling can play a key role in

shaping how brands can connect with different audiences through its ability to use visuals as the primary narrative vehicle, allowing advertisers to communicate complex ideas quickly and emotionally. Designers must identify the most effective visual representations that will resonate with the target audience (El-Desouky, 2020, p. 119).

Visual strategies may promote plant-based products as indulgent, delicious, and familiar through visual mimicry of animal-based foods, such as the framing of frothing plant-based milk alternatives (Clay et al., 2020, p. 954). However, beyond consumer acceptance, challenges also persist on the production side, as substituting animal proteins may impact aspects such as shelf-life and texture, requiring producers to balance sensory expectations with product stability (Bedin et al., 2018, p. 5). These strategies are part of the “taste transition” needed to adopt and maintain vegan diets and aim to minimise resistance to dietary change (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 567). In addition, visuals can act as pedagogical mechanisms capable of generating moral shock and provoking ethical reflection, especially when they portray suffering and exploitation. They can function as ethical reminders for activists themselves, as repeated exposure to emotionally charged visuals helps reinforce activists’ commitment, moral orientation, and collective identity over time (Fernández, 2020, p. 151).

Through a multimodal approach of language and image analysis, Zhdanova et al. (2020) identify three key narrative structures around nonhuman animals that commonly appear in visual vegan advocacy campaigns: salience, conviction, and ideology, with an underlying presence of erasure as a counter-discourse (pp. 114–116). These storylines reveal how image-based features can be applied in vegan advertising to foreground their ideological stance.

Salience refers to the narrative strategy of centring nonhuman animals as sentient individuals with unique interests, emotions, and needs. This storyline is often conveyed through close-up shots in which animals appear to look directly at the viewer, inviting emotional engagement, as well as through horizontal angles that position them as equals. Visual and linguistic elements emphasise their emotional lives, portraying them as capable of feeling, caring, and experiencing loss. Salience works to counteract the common objectification of animals in mainstream media by making their presence emotionally visible and morally relevant (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 114). Although

rationality contributes to activism, emotional identification through moral emotions is key to moral transformation and sustaining long-term engagement (Fernández, 2020, p. 151).

The narrative of conviction reinforces the notion that nonhuman animals are “just like us”, emphasising their capacity for love, trust, joy, and familial bonds. This storyline relies heavily on scenes of affection, joy, sadness, or baby animals seeking protection that appeal to a strong emotional visual connection. The aim is to elicit identification, encouraging viewers to relate to animals by recognising shared emotional and existential capacities (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 115). This narrative is especially relevant when addressing species-related empathy gaps: mammals tend to evoke strong emotional responses, whereas less relatable species require thoughtful visual strategies to evoke identification with human animals and ensure a more inclusive representation of nonhuman animals (Fernández, 2020, p. 154).

Ideology articulates a biocentric worldview that contrasts with prevailing anthropocentric logics. Animals are not valued for their utility to humans but for their intrinsic worth as sentient beings. Visuals often use horizontal angles to involve the viewer, and animals are portrayed with dignity and individuality. Ideology not only makes animals visible (such as with the salience narrative) but also criticises the dominant ideology (anthropocentrism) that makes them objects of consumption, questioning normalised patterns of consumption and urging the audience to rethink the moral legitimacy of animal exploitation (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 115). To support this, strategic visual storytelling can go beyond graphic content to include portrayals of animal individuality and representations of their resistance to exploitation (Fernández, 2020, p. 153).

Despite attempts to centre and humanise animals, some campaigns reinforce anthropocentric frames by depicting animals as passive or subordinate and including erasure discourse. Animals are shown without agency or interaction (conceptual imagery), or humans are depicted from a high angle, placing them in a position of power and creating emotional distance. Although techniques of erasure appear, many campaigns also include emotional activation (eye contact, visible emotions, mother-offspring relationships) to counteract this invisibility (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p.

116). On the contrary, "positive" or "cute" representations that lack contextualisation of violence can also obscure the realities of exploitation and mirror industry narratives of happy animals (Fernández, 2020, p. 153).

Violent imagery, in this sense, can act as a corrective to such erasures by reintroducing the presence of suffering into public consciousness. However, overexposure to graphic visuals can lead to audience desensitisation, aestheticisation of suffering, or commodification of animal pain, especially when such content is not carefully contextualised (Fernández, 2020, p. 152). The growing prevalence of "shock" vegan media can further undermine empathetic engagement or reinforce passive consumption of suffering (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 615). As such, violent visuals must be used strategically and ethically.

Fernández (2020) proposes a combined visual strategy that integrates graphic content with alternative visual approaches in sensitisation campaigns to mitigate these risks and enhance effectiveness. These include depictions of cognitive ethology, sanctuary life, and scenes of activism or industrial practices, which offer a fuller picture of animal lives and struggles (p. 153). Visual storytelling should also reflect the diversity of audiences. Violent images may be more impactful for less informed viewers, while others may respond better to emotionally rich, ethically framed narratives (p. 154).

2.5. Aesthetics and Endorsers

Understanding the persuasive power of visual storytelling requires the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974, as cited in Gozali et al., 2024, p. 284). Studies on online consumer behaviour highlight the usefulness of the S-O-R model in exploring purchase intentions (Zhu et al., 2020, p. 482), which can also be applied to vegan food advertising. Within this model, visual aesthetics and endorsers serve as stimuli that trigger internal organismic reactions such as attitudes, emotions, and evaluations, and culminate in behavioural responses such as purchasing or sharing content.

The visual aesthetics of vegan food advertisements can attract attention and express ideological or emotional messages. Attractive visual elements, such as colour, shape, shadow, texture, and tone, along with balance, contrast, and composition,

contribute to an image's visual appeal (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 284) and generate positive attitudes (Margariti et al., 2021, p. 764). There are two types of visual aesthetics in product marketing design: classical, with elements such as symmetry, regularity, and clarity; and expressive, with creativity, originality, and human intervention (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 284). Visuals that follow classical aesthetic norms can foster impressions of naturalness (Hagen, 2021, p. 142). In the vegan food advertising context, consumers are especially drawn by the health and authenticity of their food, making the use of classical aesthetics crucial to enhance consumers' perception of the plant-based products (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290).

The emotional impact of visual storytelling is further amplified through the inclusion of endorsers. According to Gozali et al. (2024, p. 290), the presence of celebrity endorsers in vegan food-related social media content can reportedly have a positive influence on consumer attitudes toward the advertisement, particularly when compared to expert endorsers. A compelling evolution is the rise of non-celebrity influencers and prosocial endorsers in social media advertising. These endorsers, often situated within the consumer's social strata in terms of age, interests, and lifestyle, are individuals who embody a "friend-like" presence and generate strong electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) through their relatability (Phua et al., 2020, p. 701).

Their effectiveness in social media content may be attributed to their capacity to foster a sense of social support and reinforce identity, both of which are particularly important for sustaining dietary change over time. Among young and male consumers, role models who represent strength, athleticism, or physical vitality can help dismantle identity-related barriers associated with plant-based diets (Beverland, 2014, p. 379) while simultaneously acting as cultural entrepreneurs capable of promoting veganism through an aspirational lifestyle framing (Gheihman, 2021, p. 7).

Moreover, the narratives embedded are often structured around positive valenced messaging, which significantly influences social media virality and eWOM by increasing the perceived informational value of content and its shareability (Phua et al., 2020, p. 701). This has profound implications for the dissemination of vegan narratives, as positivity not only enhances persuasion but also facilitates communal identification and movement-building around shared values.

2.6. Values and Identities

The transition toward vegan consumption depends on a value proposition that reflects what consumers actively seek, such as health benefits, ethical concerns, or environmental sustainability (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12). However, contemporary veganism encompasses a diverse and evolving nature of practices and motivations, where individuals engage in plant-based consumption to varying degrees and are guided by distinct moral priorities (Gheihman, 2021, p. 6; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 608). A singular, undifferentiated value proposition is unlikely to persuade both ethically motivated and health-oriented audiences with equal effectiveness. This misalignment may contribute to the ineffectiveness of vegan branding, as companies often fail to systematically develop value propositions that resonate with diverse consumer motivations (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015, p. 107). Instead, advertising must segment audiences and articulate distinct value narratives tailored to their normative frameworks (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 13).

The relevance of segmentation is further supported by Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals define themselves through membership in social groups, and these group affiliations influence their attitudes and behaviours (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 284). In the context of animal welfare, identification with certain groups helps explain why some individuals are more likely to engage with animal advocacy, depending on the norms and values upheld by their in-groups (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 839). Emotional appeals, particularly those that evoke sadness, can foster empathy and improve attitudes toward ethical advertising. However, such emotional engagement tends to be more effective when the message aligns with the social identity of the viewer (Rawal & Saavedra, 2017, p. 98).

Thomas et al. (2019) identified three distinct profiles of individuals who support animal welfare, each combining different levels of dietary restriction, political engagement and ideological commitment. These social identities are shaped by beliefs about the best ways to achieve change for animals and include: ambivalent omnivores, who occasionally reduce their consumption of animal products but remain largely inactive in political or activist terms; lifestyle choice activists, who adopt plant-based

diets and engage in conventional political actions such as signing petitions or raising awareness about animal welfare; and vegetarian radicals, who are highly committed individuals who strictly avoid animal products and participate in actions like undercover investigations or civil disobedience (p. 850). These identities reflect differing combinations of lifestyle, ideology, and perceived efficacy, and are embedded in broader political and social worldviews.

Beyond these activist-oriented identities, another segment with particular relevance for mainstream diffusion is that of “health vegetarians”: individuals primarily motivated by health, fitness, or longevity rather than ethical or political concerns. This group constitutes the largest share of plant-based consumers and tends to be perceived more positively by omnivores and poses less symbolic threat to mainstream dietary norms (Beverland, 2014, p. 378). Because health vegetarians typically do not frame plant-based diets as ideological identities, they may serve as more relatable and less polarising role models for risk-averse or conservative consumers. As such, they represent an important leverage point for normalising plant-based consumption beyond activist or radical contexts.

Recognising the diversity of motivations and identities within plant-based audiences is key to addressing symbolic resistance among non-vegan consumers. Even though plant-based substitutes have reached sensory parity with animal products in taste tests, consumers, particularly meat-eaters, may continue to reject these products due to perceived symbolic incongruence. Veganism, when framed as ideologically oppositional, can trigger defensive reactions that reduce openness to its messages. To mitigate this symbolic resistance, research suggests strategic reframing that appeals to shared values such as sustainability rather than ideological distinctions (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465).

To effectively address this resistance and strengthen campaign impact, it is crucial to understand how individuals come to view the treatment of farmed animals as both a dietary concern and a political issue. Advocacy groups fostering relevant social identities and encouraging people to interpret the issue through a politicised lens that calls for action may increase engagement with campaigns (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 852). In the case of vegan brands, their high-growth success lies in their ability to clearly

communicate value propositions and tailor these messages to distinct audience segments (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 13), with health vegetarians as the most promising target for change (Beverland, 2014, p. 378).

The frameworks explored throughout this chapter offer a critical lens through which to examine the contradictions and possibilities within contemporary vegan discourse. While veganism challenges dominant paradigms of consumption and speciesism (Joy, 2010, p. 30; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 608), its mainstream uptake reflects a reconfiguration of its meaning into marketable identities and lifestyle narratives (Gheihman, 2021, p. 2; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 609). The tension between ethics and aesthetics, political commitment and consumer engagement, reveals how vegan messaging has become deeply entangled with neoliberal logics and its depoliticisation (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 569; Gheihman, 2021, p. 10).

Message framing, visual storytelling, and aesthetic strategies contribute to shaping subjectivities, managing moral ambivalence, and negotiating symbolic resistance (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 284; Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465; Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3151; Zhdanova et al., 2020, pp. 114–116). Moreover, strategic segmentation demonstrates the need to navigate emotional complexity across diverse audience groups, from ethically motivated individuals to health-oriented or ambivalent consumers (Beverland, 2014, p. 378; Cooper et al., 2022, p. 13). The theoretical insights outlined here form a foundation to analyse how advertising campaigns use visual storytelling to represent contemporary veganism and how they balance moral resonance and market logic, revealing how ethics and self-interest are negotiated within the narrative structures of commercial vegan messaging.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and justification of method

This research adopts a qualitative approach through the method of visual analysis proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 49-56) to answer the following research question: *How is contemporary veganism represented in European vegan food advertisements through visual storytelling?*

This study adopts a qualitative approach to advertising research because it offers a deeper understanding of how advertisements influence consumption, an aspect that even the most advanced quantitative methods have yet to clearly explain at the level of individual ads and consumers (Belk, 2017, p. 36). Credibility in qualitative research depends on a systematic and adaptable framework that enables meaningful engagement with the data while maintaining transparency. This means that, for qualitative research to be considered valid, its methods must be clearly articulated so others can evaluate the process (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 375). In line with this principle, the present study applies a structured visual analysis method to a curated dataset of 100 image advertisements. These are all paid media advertisements promoting vegan food products in European markets between 2018 and 2025, selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria ensure that each advertisement is visually rich and directly promotes vegan products, and that the sample reflects a range of brand types (from fully vegan to mainstream corporations), media platforms, and narrative strategies. This sampling approach supports analytical consistency while ensuring the data's relevance to the research question.

Given the visual nature of the data and the qualitative focus on meaning-making, this study employs the method of visual analysis, a systematic method for understanding how images communicate meaning, particularly symbolic and ideological meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49). The authors emphasise that visual meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic elements, each carrying distinct communicative potential beyond what language alone can offer (p. 11). Images are meaningful because they reflect specific social discourses, shaping perceptions of people, values, attitudes, and actions (p. 50). This makes visual media particularly

powerful in shaping perceptions, especially relevant when veganism is being repositioned as an aspirational, mainstream lifestyle (Gheihman, 2021, p. 4). Central to this framework is semiotic analysis, originally rooted in the work of Roland Barthes (Roland Barthes, 1973, 1977, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49) and further developed within media and communication studies. Applying this method enables a deeper reading of how visual strategies are used to align veganism with aspirational consumer narratives.

Visual analysis is a methodological framework grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how power operates through language and other communicative resources, and how these practices contribute to the reproduction of social and cultural structures (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 3). The term “critical” reflects its aim to go beyond surface-level description, seeking to uncover how texts serve ideological functions. Through this lens, power relations are enacted and contested within discourse, revealing the assumptions, exclusions, and silences that shape meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). This perspective is especially relevant in advertising, where visual strategies that may appear neutral or purely aesthetic, yet subtly promote specific discourses (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). Such discourses can be conveyed in advertising through visual storytelling, a visual technique that links imagery, narrative, and emotion to persuade audiences (El-Desouky, 2020, p. 118). As discussed above, vegan discourses frequently balance ethical motivations with less controversial narratives, foregrounding health, convenience or lifestyle while relegating animal-rights discourse to a background dimension (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, p. 569).

By applying visual analysis to the diverse discursive framings of veganism (healthism, speciesism and environmentalism), this research seeks to uncover how contemporary veganism is visually constructed in food advertising. As images increasingly dominate both digital and print media, understanding their ideological dimensions becomes essential for comprehending how representations of veganism may shape public discourse and personal choices.

3.2. Sample and sampling strategy

This study analyses 100 static image advertisements promoting vegan food products in Europe, produced and disseminated between 2018 and 2025. The sample size aligns with the methodological guidelines, and the time frame was selected due to its significance in the broader cultural and market mainstreaming of veganism. Since 2018, veganism has emerged as a significant driving force behind the mainstreaming of vegan identity, practice, and products across Europe and the US, marking a shift towards greater visibility and commercial integration (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 605–606). For instance, in 2018, sales in the plant-based foods market in the US increased by 20% compared to the previous year (PBFA, 2018, para. 3), whereas the European plant-based food sector grew by 49% between 2018 and 2020 (Smart Protein Project, 2021, para. 3). To ensure cultural and regulatory consistency within the dataset, and considering the particularly strong growth and visibility of veganism in the European context, this study focuses exclusively on European advertisements launched during the selected period. The advertisements are selected based on a purposive sampling, a non-probability method through which researchers deliberately choose specific cases from a broader set (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). It allows for a focused inquiry by selecting relevant cases that offer rich insights for the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 3). By selecting advertisements that are particularly relevant to contemporary vegan advertising narratives, the researcher can more effectively analyse how representations of veganism are visually constructed.

To ensure analytical consistency, the study exclusively includes still-image advertisements. This decision enables a focused semiotic analysis of objects, salience, and settings, which are central to the visual analysis framework adopted in this research (Machin & Mayr, pp. 49-56). Video content, by contrast, introduces temporal and narrative complexities which may compromise the comparability of the dataset.

The dataset is composed exclusively of paid media advertisements. This includes visual content produced and distributed with the explicit purpose of product or brand promotion through commercial investment. As Abdow (2019) explains, paid media refers to “advertising—paying to promote a practice’s services or products” (p. 74), and typically includes print media, digital ads, and billboards. Each of these formats

presents distinct strategic advantages: print remains one of the most trusted advertising channels, particularly effective among older demographics; digital platforms such as Google Ads and Facebook allow for highly targeted and measurable campaigns, especially popular with younger audiences; and billboards provide consistent visibility in high-traffic areas, reinforcing brand messages through repeated exposure (Abdow, 2019, p. 74). Accordingly, the nature of the research items is drawn from paid media formats to reflect the variety of promotional strategies and platforms through which vegan food advertising is currently disseminated. This ensures that all analysed material was created within a professional marketing context, where communicative intent is aligned with creating awareness and interest in a practice (Abdow, 2019, p. 73). The inclusion of advertisements from both digital and print media ensures that the sample reflects the diverse formats in which visual storytelling is deployed in contemporary advertising contexts and that the required sample size is achieved. In contrast, shared media such as organic social media posts or user-generated content are excluded from the dataset, as they are usually employed to foster engagement or community-building rather than to convey a deliberate promotional narrative (Abdow, 2019, p. 78). These formats lack the strategic intentionality that defines paid advertising and are therefore not suitable for the analytical focus of this study.

All advertisements will be sourced from reliable and verifiable platforms to ensure authenticity and contextual relevance. These platforms include official brand websites, creative agencies portfolios, media archives, print press outlets, online press releases, corporate brand reports, as well as verified advertising databases such as the Meta Ad Library and Ads of the World, the latter being a curated repository of high-quality global campaigns selected for their creativity, relevance, and industry recognition (Brooks et al., 2019, pp. 156–157). This multi-source strategy ensures access to a broad set of advertisements while adhering to a consistent standard of credibility.

To support both the literature review and the selection of advertisements, a defined set of keywords was developed based on a preliminary scan of academic publications, brand communications, and trend reports (e.g., Smart Protein Project, 2021). The main keywords included “vegan food” AND “advertising”, “plant-based” AND “marketing”, “veganism” AND “visual storytelling”, and “visual analysis” AND

“advertisements”. Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine and combine search terms across academic databases including Science Direct, Taylor & Francis Group, and Sage Journals, as well as in advertising repositories. These keywords were selected for their frequency and thematic relevance in both academic and commercial contexts, reflecting the dominant discourses through which contemporary veganism is promoted and represented in advertising.

In defining the brand selection criteria, the study includes both companies whose entire identity is rooted in plant-based values and mainstream food corporations that have only partially adopted vegan product lines. While vegan brands offer insights into how authenticity and ideological consistency are visually constructed, mainstream brands provide a lens into how veganism is being reframed and normalised within broader market logics. This distinction aligns with the theoretical framework of Big Veganism, which examines how veganism is depoliticised and commercialised through its incorporation into the mainstream (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 609–610). Although the study does not conduct a systematic comparative analysis between brand types, certain indicators, such as “dietary addition”, were found to be framed differently depending on whether the brand was fully plant-based or mainstream, and these differences are discussed in the results chapter where relevant.

Smaller or emerging brands were also included in the sample, provided they demonstrated notable strength in visual storytelling to ensure that the sample privileges narrative richness over market share. However, the analysis will remain focused on advertisements that explicitly promote vegan products, regardless of the broader brand portfolio and will exclude vegetarian food, given that most of the existing literature tends to focus on vegan rather than vegetarian food.

The dataset will include a balanced mix of product-centred and lifestyle-oriented advertisements, as each reflects distinct branding strategies that influence consumer perception differently. Product-focused visuals tend to emphasise concrete features such as packaging, ingredients, and food presentation, inviting a more immediate and tangible engagement with the product. In contrast, lifestyle-oriented advertisements often adopt a more abstract and symbolic visual language, framing veganism through themes such as well-being, community, or environmental values. These two approaches

reflect different levels of mental construction, with product-centred advertisements promoting low-level, attribute-based associations, and lifestyle-focused ones fostering high-level, value-driven interpretations that shape broader brand perceptions (Massara et al., 2019, p. 30). These different typologies also serve as vehicles for conveying the dominant discursive framings identified earlier in this study: healthism, environmentalism, and speciesism. While product-centred ads may foreground health benefits or meat-free formulations, lifestyle-oriented ads may communicate broader ideological narratives about ethics, sustainability, or identity. By analysing both types, the study can uncover how different visual strategies contribute to the mainstreaming and redefinition of contemporary veganism in advertising.

During the data collection process, each advertisement was systematically coded in a spreadsheet according to key variables, including brand, year of release, country, type of paid media (digital vs. print), and advertising style (product-centred versus lifestyle-oriented). The dataset also recorded whether the brand's portfolio was fully vegan or only partially vegan. This structured categorisation enabled comparative analysis across representational dimensions and ensured analytical consistency, providing a coherent foundation for the subsequent steps of visual analysis.

3.3. Operationalisation

The operationalisation of this study proceeds as follows. To examine how contemporary veganism is represented in the advertisements selected, two core concepts from the theoretical framework are translated into different dimensions and specific codes drawn from prior research: veganism as a lifestyle movement and veganism as a social movement (Gheihman, 2021, pp. 2-5). These represent, respectively, the individualistic and collective logics through which veganism is framed in contemporary media. Both dimensions are analysed through the lens of visual storytelling, which is used as an analytical tool to identify the narrative strategies and aesthetic devices used to convey meaning.

The concept of “lifestyle movement” captures how veganism is portrayed as an individualised, consumer-driven practice, tied to wellbeing and aspirational living. It is underpinned by egoistic messages that appeal to self-interest (Phua et al., 2020, p.

699). Within this framework, two key dimensions can be identified. The first is healthism, following Gheihman's (2021, pp. 5–6) identification of health-oriented discourses in veganism and represented by the figure of the “health vegetarian” (Beverland, 2014, p. 378). It is constructed through indicators such as fitness (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699), representations of veganism as a dietary addition rather than substitution (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465), classical aesthetics in product design to enhance perceived appearance (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290), visuals that emphasise individual pleasures such as taste and texture (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12) and the visual mimicry of animal-based products (Clay et al., 2020, p. 954). The second dimension is cosmopolitanism (Beverland, 2014, p. 379), identified through the preference for the term “plant-based” over “vegan”, as well as by the representation of different endorsers. Within these, the analysis distinguishes between celebrity endorsers (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290), and non-celebrity endorsers (Phua et al., 2020, p. 701), such as cultural entrepreneurs (Gheihman, 2021, p. 7) and the notion of “heganism” (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 614).

The concept of “social movement” comprises dimensions that reflect collective and ethical concerns in the representation of veganism. These are expressed through altruistic messages that emphasise the benefits for other people and society (Phua et al., 2020, p. 687). One dimension is collective concern (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699), which includes indicators such as the presence of political activists (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850) and clear ethical claims (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3151). The second dimension is speciesism (Gheihman, 2021, pp. 5–6), which is constructed through imagery related to animal rights (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, p. 567) and visuals that expose violence or exploitation (Fernández, 2020, p. 152). The third dimension, environmentalism (Gheihman, 2021, pp. 5–6), is observed through visual references to sustainability, which may also appear across lifestyle discourses, thus bridging both concepts (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465). See Figure 1 for an overview of the operationalisation chapter.

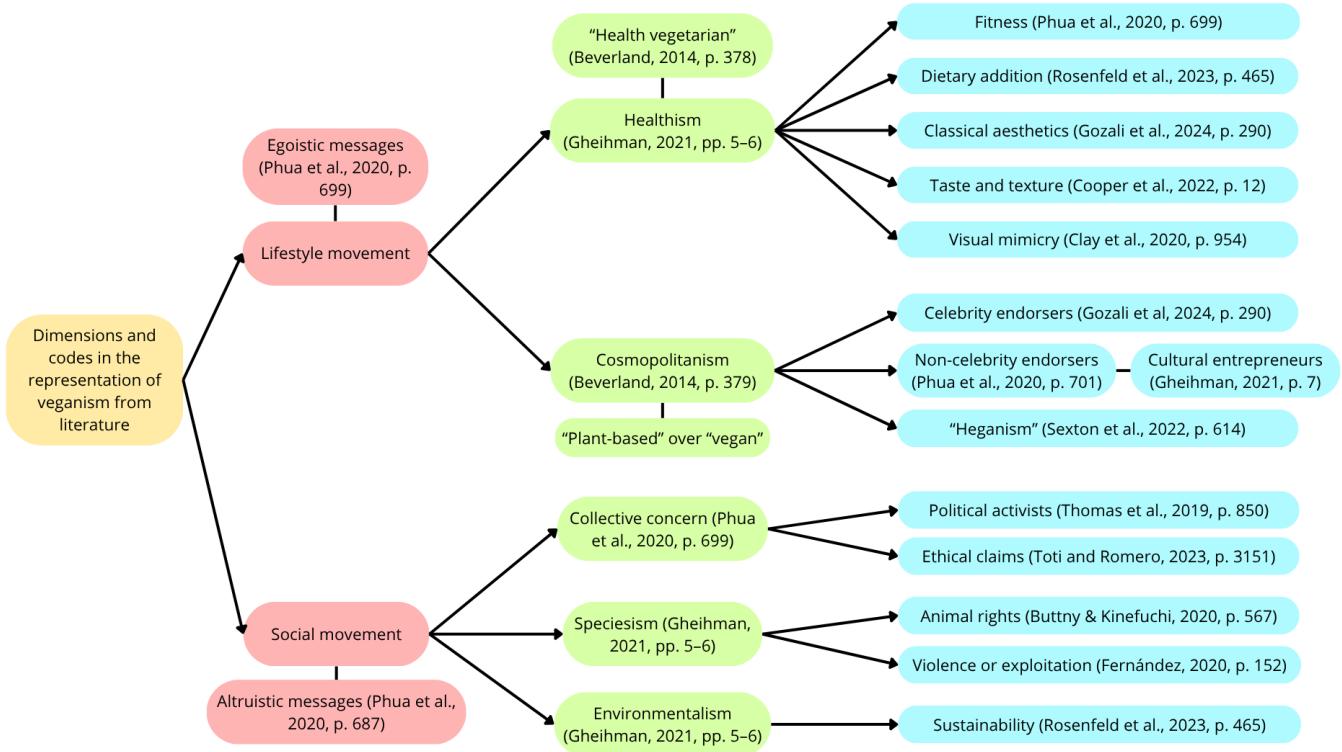


Figure 1: Visual representation of theoretical concepts

Source: created by author

While lifestyle dimensions mainly revolve around individualised consumption and tend to marginalise animal presence, the speciesism dimension of the social movement discourse directly engages with the visual representation of nonhuman animals. To explore this, the study applies the narrative categories developed by Zhdanova et al. (2020, pp. 114–116), which were specifically designed to analyse depictions of nonhuman animals in media. These include four key storytelling strategies: the first is salience narratives, with indicators such as emotional imagery (Fernández, 2020, p. 151) and a positive emotional tone towards animals (Phua et al., 2020, p. 700). The second, conviction narratives, are conveyed through the use of imagery that evokes empathy (Toti & Romero, 2023, p. 3151) and identification with the animals depicted. The third, ideology narratives, refer to those that question common patterns of consumption and which can include visual depictions of animals resisting exploitation. Finally, the fourth narrative type is erasure, in which animals are subordinated either

because of their lack of agency or interaction in their representations or through excessive sentimentalisation or graphic violence (Fernández, 2020, p. 153).

These narrative categories were applied specifically to the speciesism dimension due to their thematic relevance to nonhuman animals representation. Meanwhile, other dimensions, such as healthism, cosmopolitanism, environmentalism, and collective concern, were examined through distinct analytical codes derived from prior literature. This complementary approach ensured methodological consistency across the dataset and allowed for a balanced interpretation of both lifestyle and social movement framings. In contrast, the representation of human figures is analysed through codes drawn from the literature. These include the presence of political activists (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850), as well as different types of endorsers, such as celebrities and non-celebrities (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290; Phua et al., 2020, p. 701). Since these representations do not primarily involve interspecies dynamics, narrative categories from Zhdanova et al. (2020, pp. 114–116) are not applied to them.

This operationalisation provides a clear and systematic framework for identifying how contemporary veganism is visually represented across diverse advertising contexts. By interpreting individual and collective representations through visual storytelling strategies, the analysis allows for a comprehensive exploration of the meanings embedded in vegan food advertisements.

3.4. Data analysis

This research employed ATLAS.ti Mac version 25.0.1 to carry out the data analysis. ATLAS.ti is a powerful computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), offering a robust environment for managing, coding, and interpreting complex qualitative data. It allows for the tracing and documentation of the analytical process and can be modified within the software itself, making it an ideal tool for managing the depth and nuance of visual data (Friese, 2014, as cited in Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 3).

Given the qualitative nature of the images displayed in the advertisements, the use of ATLAS.ti is appropriate for systematically coding and organising visual data. While qualitative software applications have become increasingly common in visual

content analysis over recent years (Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 2; Chapman et al., 2016, p. 2), particularly in analysing photographs, its specific use for advertising images remains relatively underexplored. Although the use of ATLAS.ti for visual content analysis was less common before 2016, it has since become almost standard practice among researchers. Such software enables scholars to store, revisit, and build upon visual data beyond an initial research phase, supporting sustained scholarly engagement with visual material (Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 12).

The core of the study's visual analysis draws on Machin and Mayr's (2012, pp. 49-56) systematic approach, which distinguishes between denotative and connotative layers of meaning. Denotation refers to the literal content of an image, while connotation involves the broader cultural meanings and associations that the image may evoke. Through this distinction, I identify what Roland Barthes describes as "myths", symbolic structures that reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies (Huppertz, 2011, p. 89). In operationalising these stages, important connotators of meaning are presented as tools for the analysis. First, attributes refer to the depiction of human figures, objects, and products and how these signify meaning within broader consumer or lifestyle ideals (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-52). Second, settings encompass the physical or cultural environments in which the images are placed (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 52-54), providing insight into the narratives they create around veganism. Third, salience captures the visual elements that dominate each composition through positioning, scale, colour saturation, and other foregrounding devices that draw the viewer's attention and shape their interpretation of central symbolic values (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 54-56). The visual analysis framework used for the data analysis is provided in Appendix A.

The analysis followed the five-step structure for analysing photographic data outlined by Chapman et al. (2016, pp. 5-12): data organisation, code creation, coding, finding relationships or patterns, and interpretation.

All images were uploaded into a Hermeneutic Unit file within ATLAS.ti. This organisational step allowed the data to be structured within a comprehensive environment conducive to both curation and interpretation. This tool supports complex data interpretation and provides a space for researchers to curate and manage image sets efficiently (Budzise-Weaver, 2016, p. 3). Before coding began, a set of a priori

codes was established based on the literature. These codes were directly linked to the dimensions of “veganism as a lifestyle movement” and “veganism as a social movement”, as explained in the Operationalisation section.

The analysis began with a pilot phase in which 5 advertisements were purposively selected from the dataset for an initial visual analysis. Following Schreier’s (2014, pp. 178–179) recommendation, pilot material should represent the dataset’s diversity and allow application of most coding categories. The chosen advertisements reflect key variations in format (digital and print), style (product-centred and lifestyle-oriented), and brand type (fully vegan or vegan portfolio), enabling effective testing and refinement of the coding scheme across operational dimensions. This manageable subset facilitated identification and resolution of ambiguities, ensuring the coding framework was clear and robust before full-scale analysis.

A structured coding frame was developed to organise and interpret the analyses systematically. In line with Schreier’s (2014, p. 176) methodological guidance, this coding process combined both deductive and inductive strategies. The process began with a deductive, concept-driven approach, applying specific indicators derived from the theoretical framework and the operationalised categories discussed earlier. This ensured that the analysis was grounded in existing literature and aligned with the research question from the outset. To complement this and minimise the risk of overlooking relevant data or misinterpreting certain signs due to personal bias or limited contextual knowledge, an inductive, data-driven approach was also employed. This involved repeated engagement with the visual material to identify recurring themes and patterns emerging directly from the advertisements. This open phase allowed space for unexpected elements to surface, offering insights not necessarily anticipated during the operationalisation stage. Combining both strategies made it possible to remain open to the material while also engaging critically with the theoretical assumptions guiding the study.

Once the coding structure was finalised, the actual coding of the images began using the visual analysis tools. A priori codes were applied based on the operational dimensions, and new codes were added when necessary through observation. After the initial coding phase, related codes were grouped into categories and folders to facilitate

pattern recognition. ATLAS.ti's allows researchers to group related codes into hierarchies, thereby facilitating the transition from initial codes to broader thematic categories. Creating code families supports the development of relationships and preliminary themes (Chapman et al., 2016, p. 6). To visualise these relationships, a code tree was constructed, displaying the hierarchical structure between themes, subthemes, and examples of initial codes (see Appendix B).

The final step of the analysis involved interpreting the data by synthesising the patterns observed during coding. Interpretation required consideration of both presence and absence within the visual elements of each advertisement (Chapman et al., 2016, p. 12). These interpretations are presented and discussed in detail in the Results chapter that follows.

3.5. Reliability and validity

Ensuring the credibility of qualitative research findings requires careful consideration of both reliability and validity. In this study, particular attention has been paid to these aspects through a transparent and systematic methodological approach.

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the consistency of results across repeated instances of analysis (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). To address this, the research process adheres to a clear, step-by-step application of Machin and Mayr's (2012, pp. 49–56) framework for visual analysis. This includes a transparent account of how the dataset was selected and how visual semiotic categories were systematically applied. Coding was guided by established theoretical constructs and applied consistently throughout the dataset to minimise interpretative bias. Furthermore, to support transparency and replicability, a dataset overview has been documented in Appendix C.

Validity is defined as “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Hammersley, 1990, as cited in Silverman, 2011, p. 367). To enhance the validity of the findings, this research employed the constant comparative method (Silverman, 2011, pp. 376–378), which involved an iterative process of coding and analysis. Each ad was analysed in relation to emerging categories, and newly analysed material was continually compared with previously coded content. This approach helped refine the analytical framework and ensured the

consistency of visual and discursive patterns across the dataset. In addition, in line with deviant-case analysis (Silverman, 2011, pp. 378–379), special attention was given to advertisements that diverged from the dominant themes. These cases were explored in depth to challenge and improve the categorisation scheme, contributing to a more robust and comprehensive analysis. The validity of the findings is further supported through the presentation of detailed results and explicit examples from the dataset in the findings chapter.

4. Results

4.1. General characteristics of data

The analysis of the selected advertisements reveals a predominant visual presence of veganism as a lifestyle movement. A total of 256 code occurrences were categorised under the lifestyle theme, whereas only 17 related to the social movement theme. This imbalance highlights the extent to which veganism is currently promoted through individualistic and consumer-oriented narratives, rather than collective or ethical concerns, reflecting the dynamic described by Sexton et al. (2022, p. 606) as “Big Veganism.” Although the initial sample included both product-centred and lifestyle-oriented advertisements, defined by their visual style, this classification was used only at the stage of selection. The thematic coding of “lifestyle movement” and “social movement” was developed independently during the analysis. As the results show, some product-centred ads were coded under the lifestyle movement theme, while certain lifestyle-oriented visuals reflected social movement discourses. This confirms that visual style and thematic framing do not always align, and underscores the importance of analysing both the aesthetic form and the underlying message to fully understand how veganism is represented.

Lifestyle-oriented framings reflect the rise of corporate veganism, which redefines vegan identity around personal choice and market-based solutions, rather than structural or ideological transformation (Gheihman, 2021, p. 4; Sexton et al., 2022, p. 610). At the same time, it may also indicate an effort to popularise vegan practices by detaching them from rigid ideological frameworks, potentially making them more accessible to broader audiences.

Within the lifestyle framing, the subtheme of pleasure emerged most frequently, with codes accounting for 180 occurrences. This was followed by indicators of cosmopolitanism (39 occurrences) and healthism (36 occurrences). In contrast, the social movement theme was represented primarily through the subtheme of speciesism (13 occurrences), with a marginal presence of environmentalism (4 occurrences). A number of visual storytelling techniques were consistently employed across both

thematic categories. The most recurrent strategies included: naturalness (48 occurrences), proximity (32 occurrences), and tradition (8 occurrences).

While the coding scheme was initially informed by prior literature through a deductive approach, the inductive approach of data analysis following the pilot phase allowed for the emergence of new codes within the advertisements. In particular, the new subtheme “pleasure” emerged within the lifestyle movement framing. Even though the literature associates consumption pleasures with tastiness and deliciousness (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12), this study identified two additional visual dimensions: playfulness and accessibility. Similarly, new codes such as community and modernity were introduced in the subtheme of cosmopolitanism to capture visual indicators already discussed in the literature, such as celebrity endorsers, and new indicators that emerged inductively during the analysis.

Several pre-existing codes drawn from the literature were excluded after the pilot phase. The indicators that referred to political claims were removed due to its predominantly textual representation. As this research focused exclusively on visual analysis, political concerns were already sufficiently captured by the visual indicators of environmentalism and speciesism, the two subthemes under the social movement framing. The distinction between plant-based and vegan labels was also excluded from the visual analysis, as it was represented through text and not images. However, it is worth mentioning that although this distinction was not applied in the analysis, during the data collection phase it was noticeably easier to find advertisements using the term “plant-based” rather than “vegan”, especially for brands with mixed portfolios. Additionally, it became evident that terminology such as “plant-based”, “veggie”, “vegetal”, or “meat-free” often created confusion regarding whether the product was vegan or vegetarian. This terminological ambiguity presents a practical challenge for vegan consumers and highlights the need for clearer labelling standards in advertising.

The code “conviction”, which in previous research was associated with images that highlight identification between human and nonhuman animals (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 115), was excluded due to its absence in the dataset. The omission of this code may reflect a broader reluctance to moralise food consumption within commercial contexts. Additionally, the concept of “mimicry”, which refers to visual strategies that

emulate animal-based foods (Clay et al., 2020, p. 954), was merged into the broader category of “consumption pleasures”. This is because mimicry was primarily used as a visual tool to recreate familiar tastes and textures, thereby generating pleasurable associations, rather than functioning as a standalone code of meaning.

The themes, subthemes, and storytelling techniques introduced here will be examined in greater detail in the sections that follow.

4.2. Theme 1: Lifestyle Movement

The predominant framing of veganism as a lifestyle movement in the analysed advertisements is articulated through three core subthemes: healthism, cosmopolitanism, and pleasure. Each of these subthemes employs egoistic messages (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699) to construct an individualised, aspirational, and consumer-oriented culture of veganism (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10).

4.2.1. Healthism

Healthism was conveyed through three main indicators: classical aesthetics, dietary addition, and fitness. These visual cues promote vegan products as part of a health-conscious consumer lifestyle, which may particularly resonate with the segment of consumers identified as “health vegetarians” (Beverland, 2014, p. 378).

Classical aesthetics, as defined by Gozali et al. (2024, p. 290), were consistently employed in the advertisements to enhance perceptions of cleanliness, order, and healthiness. These qualities were conveyed through symmetry, regularity, and clarity, particularly in product composition and graphic design elements such as plain backgrounds, clean serif fonts, and neat arrangements. This visual strategy aligns with healthism by reinforcing associations between vegan products and a sense of refinement and naturalness (Hagen, 2021, p. 142). As observable in the selected advertisements, Figure 2 features clean serving suggestions that appear as attributes and display neatly sliced vegan food in salience, arranged with balanced proportions and ample white space to create a sense of order and approachability. Figure 3 employs symmetry prominently in the salience through the arrangement of milk bottles, while the use of a clean serif font reinforces refinement and structure. In Figure 4, the

light background and minimalist typography highlight the product's simplicity, which may visually communicate cleanliness. These aesthetic choices collectively support the association of vegan food advertising with health-oriented values.



Figure 2: Planted #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)



Figure 3: Califia Farms #1

Source: [Ads of the World](#) (2022)



Figure 4: Heura #4

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)

The indicator of dietary addition emerged in imagery that positions vegan products as complementary to an omnivorous diet. Fully vegan brands illustrate flexibility and a less committed transition into vegan consumption through compositions in which vegan items are placed among other everyday food products that are not

exclusive to vegan brands but commonly found in general diets, such as vegetables, grains, or sauces (see Figure 5 from the digital ad of French vegan brand HARi&CO). This framing invites consumers to “do what they can” by incorporating vegan products without fully abandoning conventional food categories. In contrast, brands with mixed portfolios or those primarily offering animal-based products tend to visually normalise the coexistence of vegan and animal products by placing them directly alongside each other (see Figure 6 from the grocery store chain Lidl and Figure 7 from the German meat manufacturer Rügenwalder Mühle).



Figure 5: HARi&CO #3

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 6: Lidl #1

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 7: Rügenwalder Mühle #1

Source: [Rugen Walder](#) (2022)

These advertisements may be adopting the approach suggested by Graça et al. (2015, p. 88), which proposes that presenting plant-based proteins as coexisting rather than directly challenging the centrality of meat may be a more effective step toward dietary change, especially for consumers with strong attachments to meat. Placing vegan and animal products within the same image may reduce the symbolic conflict that often leads omnivores to resist vegan messaging (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465), helping advertisers connect with ambivalent omnivores, those who occasionally reduce animal consumption without firm political motivations (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850), and with “health vegetarians”, who are not ethical or political driven (Beverland, 2014, p. 378). In this way, dietary addition serves to advertisers to erase the ideological opposition between veganism and carnism, as well as a visual mechanism to soften intergroup boundaries by appealing to a broader target audience.

Although fitness is a frequent narrative in social media content related to veganism (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699), it was notably scarce in the advertisements studied (only 3 instances out of 36). When present, it was signalled through representations of strength in illustrated forms (see Figure 8), as well as in masculine and feminine human figures, through strength gestures or fit bodies (see Figure 9, picturing a female football player, and Figure 10, with a male fit body). While the textual presence of the word “protein” was recurrent, its visual depiction remained limited, likely reflecting the broader appeal advertisers aim for in mainstream campaigns.



Figure 8: Vivera #3

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 9: Heura #2

Source: [My Vegan Magazine](#) (2023)



Figure 10: Future Farm #1

Source: [We Are Impero](#) (2022)

4.2.2. Cosmopolitanism

The subtheme of cosmopolitanism (Beverland, 2014, p. 379) highlights veganism as part of a modern, inclusive, and globally minded lifestyle. This framing was supported primarily through the indicators of modernity and community.

Modernity was expressed through visual elements that evoke trendiness, innovation, and cultural relevance. Celebrity endorsers, shown either holding the products towards the viewer (see Figure 11, from fast food chain with mixed portfolio McDonald's) or actively consuming them, functioned as figures that align veganism with the contemporary and aspirational lifestyle values promoted in mainstream veganism (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, p. 567). Modernity cues included urban settings, technological or futuristic aesthetics, and fashion-forward styling. In the sample, such effects were achieved through direct lighting and bold, saturated colours that enhanced the contemporary visual appeal. The models were dressed in fashionable outfits and distinctive accessories, such as clothing stickers (see Figure 12, from vegan brand Oatly), or statement earrings (see Figure 13, from vegan brand LikeMeat) that connect the products to global fashion trends and youth culture.



Figure 11: McDonald's #3

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)



Figure 12: Oatly #4

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2021)



Figure 13: LikeMeat #1

Source: [Little Black Book](#) (2021)

While these representations help increase the cultural visibility of veganism by embedding it within aspirational and individualised consumption aligned with its commercial integration, they also reflect the dynamics of capitalist and neoliberal value systems described in the literature (Gheihman, 2021, p. 10; Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 617–618). As such, they may foreground accessibility and appeal, but offer a more ambiguous framework for conveying the ethical or political dimensions of the movement, highlighting the analytical complexity of examining veganism through lifestyle-driven advertising.

Although some portrayals included representations of male vegan food consumers, masculinity was not particularly foregrounded in a visually salient or consistent manner. Male figures often appeared as neutral or as part of the setting, with limited emphasis on traditional masculine aesthetics or behaviors. As such, the narrative of "heganism", which Greenebaum and Dexter (2017, p. 644) describe as a discursive strategy to masculinise veganism and counter its association with femininity, does not appear to be especially relevant in European vegan food advertisements. The absence of explicit masculine cues invites reflection on how gender is visually negotiated or overlooked in contemporary vegan food advertising. However, while the narrative of "heganism" may be scarce in print and digital advertisements, it may be more visible in other media formats such as social media content or entertainment platforms.

Visual indicators of community, such as groups of people, national flags, or cultural symbols, were frequently used and represented vegan consumption as a socially meaningful experience. These national symbols played a role in constructing cultural proximity, such as in Figure 14 (a digital advertisement from HappyVore, a vegan French brand), in which a French flag is foregrounding the product, signalling national origin of the ingredients and appealing to local identity. These visual cues may work to counteract perceptions of distance, presenting vegan products as culturally embedded and locally relevant. Community cues were particularly evident in lifestyle-oriented advertisements, where people appeared joyful and emotionally connected. In Figure 15, three friends are shown engaging and eating together, all wearing matching green-yellow outfits and adopting similar relaxed postures. The two women are seated with their legs crossed in the same manner, and all three appear to be laughing at something shared, a private joke or humorous remark. These visual parallels in styling, body language, and interaction represent vegan food consumption as a socially cohesive and emotionally engaging group experience. In Figure 16 (an international digital advertisement from vegan brand Oatly), a group of friends sits together around a table, with one visibly empty chair in the foreground, which could be interpreted as an open invitation for the viewer to join the gathering, subtly enhancing the sense of inclusion and belonging.



Figure 14: HappyVore #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)

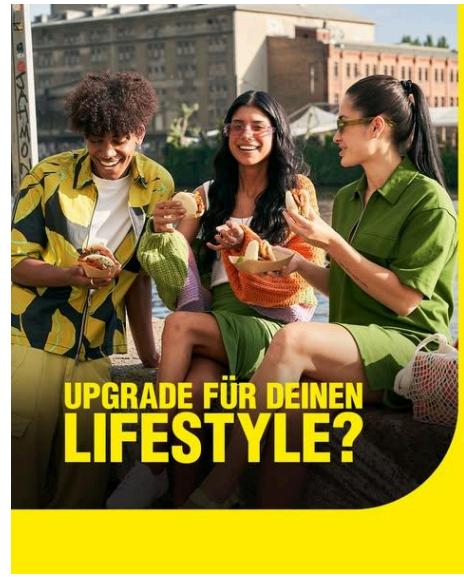


Figure 15: LikeMeat #3

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)



Figure 16: Alpro #2

Source: [Scott Gourmet](#) (2023)

Representations of community align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 284), which highlights how group belonging influences attitudes and behaviours. The value of group identity is acknowledged when advertisements show people engaging with vegan products in social settings. However, the ambiguity in the type of group being addressed, whether ethical, environmental, or health-focused, may limit the clarity of their messaging. Without clearly segmented value propositions, advertisements like the ones discussed above risk failing to connect meaningfully with

diverse consumer motivations (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 13) and build long-term identification and engagement with the brand's values.

4.2.3. Pleasure

Pleasure emerged as the most prevalent subtheme across the dataset, encompassing narratives of enjoyment, accessibility, and playfulness. These strategies remove veganism from the ethical and political sphere, framing it as fun, desirable, and easy to incorporate into everyday life.

The most dominant codes were those related to pleasures around the act of consumption, appearing in 96 instances out of 180. Highlighting individual consumption benefits such as tastiness and deliciousness can significantly influence consumer attitudes and motivate increased consumption (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12). In the advertisements analysed, these pleasures were represented through close-ups of food textures and dynamic representations of embodied experiences associated with eating. For instance, Figure 17 shows a person consuming the product in a relaxed posture, sitting with her feet on the table and casually holding a spoon, which evokes a calm and secure environment where the individual can enjoy the product freely and without restraint. This atmosphere is further emphasised by the act of licking the spoon, highlighting uninhibited pleasure and personal enjoyment in the act of consumption. Figure 18 features a woman licking her fingers in the background of the image, while holding the food product in focus in the foreground. This visual arrangement implicitly conveys that the model has just consumed the food and is experiencing satisfaction. The contrast in depth of field, where the model appears blurred and the product remains sharply defined, suggests that the attention is directed towards the product and invites the viewer to imagine the taste and sensory pleasure associated with it. Finally, in Figure 19 (a print advertisement from the Veganuary campaign of vegan cheese brand Violife) a person lifts a slice of vegan pizza, creating a cheese pull that highlights the sensory appeal of melted dairy cheese.



Figure 17: Alpro #5

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 18: Garden Gourmet #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 19: Violife #1

Source: [VCCP UK](#) (2023)

Emphasising the hedonic appeal of vegan food aligns with Beverland's (2014, p. 379) observation that lifestyle-oriented consumers are particularly responsive to messages centred on individual well-being. Moreover, the high level of mimicry observed (Clay et al., 2020, p. 954), such as the fluid motion of plant-based milks or the unwrapped butter packet, visually reinforces the similarity between vegan and traditional animal-based products and bridges perceived sensory gaps. In this way, advertisements may be contributing positively to the "taste transition" needed to adopt and maintain vegan diets (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, p. 567) by reshaping sensory expectations and making vegan options feel familiar and satisfying to mainstream consumers. This emphasis on consumption pleasures may also function as a strategic

response to the cultural resistance that denies vegan food's tastiness or adequacy, a defensive reaction from omnivorous consumers aimed at preserving traditional food norms and values (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 464).

The notion of accessibility was visually constructed through representations of product variety, everyday contexts, and inclusivity across age groups. Advertisements showcase multiple product types and serving suggestions within a single frame, representing the idea that vegan eating is flexible, convenient, and compatible with diverse lifestyles. This sense of abundance and ease contributes to the overall pleasure of consumption, countering the perceptions of vegan food as restrictive or lacking in variety. Figure 20, for instance, shows a consumer eating vegan nuggets from his car in a Burger King advertisement, a mainly animal-based fast-food restaurant company with vegan product lines. The car framing and the takeaway bag next to the salient suggests that the consumer may have purchased the product from Burger King's drive-through service, or as a takeaway meal. By placing vegan products in familiar contexts such as supermarkets, city streets or personal vehicles, advertisements present these options just as accessible and integrated into everyday routines as the rest of the brand's offerings. The advertisements also present a selection of different vegan products arranged together, emphasising the expansive and enjoyable range of possibilities (see Figures 21 and 22). Accessibility was also communicated through the settings in which the products appeared. Moreover, the inclusion of individuals from various age groups in some advertisements suggest that vegan products are suitable for everyone, from children to older adults. This framing reinforces the idea that vegan food is mainstream, practical, and readily available across common consumer touchpoints.



Figure 20: Burger King #2

Source: [Vegcomonist](#) (2023)



Figure 21: Oatly #5

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2020)



Figure 22: Better Nature #1

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)

A notable and previously underexplored element within vegan advertising is the use of playfulness, which appeared with frequency across the sample (56 instances out of 181). This indicator encompasses a visual style characterised by humour, bright colours, dynamic layouts, and interactive or imaginative design features. The imagery presents asymmetrical text distribution, and movement suggested through shapes that expand, bounce, or interact with other elements. In Figure 23, food items are playfully used to draw a lion's face, transforming the product into a creative, childlike visual that evokes imagination and spontaneity. In Figure 24, a vegetable is visually manipulated to resemble a bomb, blending natural ingredients with visual metaphors to spark humour

and curiosity. A sense of engagement with the product is represented in advertisements like Figure 25, in which a milk carton is turned into a handicraft project, suggesting interactivity and fun beyond the act of consumption. Other recurrent features in the sample included dashed arrows, illustrated smiles, flower doodles, and emojis that create an informal and playful aesthetic. Veganism is represented as something joyful and entertaining, and contrasts sharply with traditional framings of veganism as an ethical or activist cause. This makes veganism appear more accessible for audiences who might feel alienated by the more serious or ideological aspects of veganism, such as ambivalent omnivores (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850). However, when advertisements focus too heavily on the fun and playful aspects of veganism, they risk obscuring its ethical foundations in animal rights and environmental activism, replacing a sense of responsibility with a desire for relatability.



Figure 23: Rügenwalder Mühle #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)

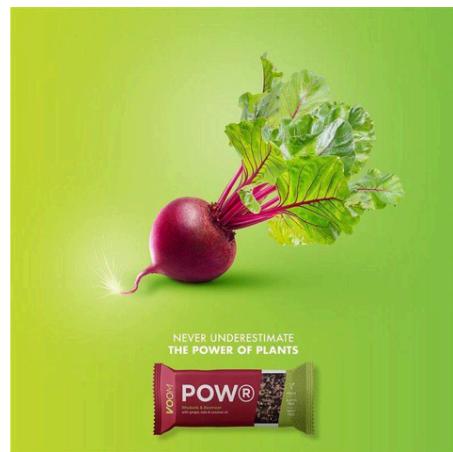


Figure 24: VOOM Nutrition #1

Source: [McCann Central](#) (2024)

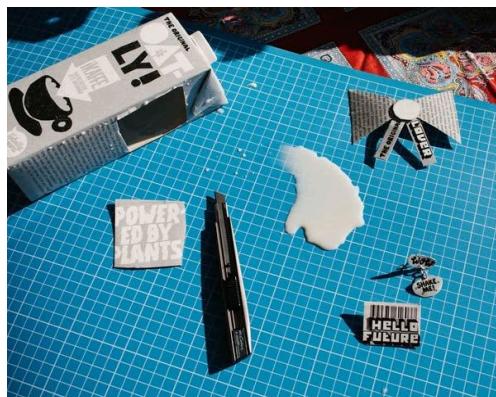


Figure 25: Oatly #3

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2020)

4.3. Theme 2: Social Movement

The social movement theme was notably underrepresented in the analysed advertisements. This theme, which encompasses altruistic messages that emphasise the benefits of veganism for other people and society (Phua et al., 2020, p. 687), was articulated through two subthemes: environmentalism and speciesism. Together, they accounted for only 17 instances in the dataset, suggesting that collective appeals remain marginal within visual marketing strategies for vegan food.

4.3.1. Environmentalism

The visual representation of sustainability is notably limited across the advertisements analysed, with only 4 instances out of 17 identified within the sample. This is particularly striking given that environmental sustainability is a recognised value proposition among vegan consumers (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12), and is potentially shared by non-vegan audiences as well (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465). Despite its relevance and presence in the literature, the advertisements from the sample rarely incorporate visual elements that explicitly evoke sustainability. When such representations do appear, they tend to rely on references to pollution (see Figure 26) or broad symbolic cues such as depictions of the Earth being pointed out (see Figures 27 and 28). However, these visual strategies remain sporadic and are not integrated as a consistent narrative device across the broader advertising landscape. While some textual elements such as slogans or labels may allude to sustainability, these references are marginal and not visually reinforced, which limits their narrative coherence within the ads.



Figure 26: Meatless Farm #2

Source: [Meatless Farm](#) (2023)



Figure 27: Future Farm #2

Source: [We Are Impero](#) (2022)



Figure 28: Meatless Farm #4

Source: [Vegconomist](#) (2024)

The limited presence of environmental messaging in the analysed sample, contrasted with its acknowledged importance among consumers identified in the literature, suggests a misalignment between consumer values and the representation of veganism in vegan food advertising, which may undermine the effectiveness of vegan branding (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015, p. 107). One possible explanation lies in the mainstreaming of veganism and its increasing dependence on capitalist infrastructures for growth (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 617–618), which has contributed to a softening of its original framing as a response to the environmental damage and broader ethical issues associated with industrial meat production. Moreover, visual marketing strategies tend to emphasise positive and emotionally engaging content that captures immediate attention, rather than complex reasoning or negative messaging highlighting the harms

of meat consumption. This approach aligns with research showing that positively framed messages are generally more impactful and have a higher potential to be shared compared to those focusing on negative consequences (Phua et al., 2020, p. 700), which may explain the avoidance of explicit visual references to environmental harm or industrial meat production in vegan food advertising.

4.3.2. Speciesism

Veganism's anti-speciesism is related to the welfare of animals and the opposition to the discrimination of some animal species among others (Gheihman, 2021, p. 2). In this behalf, animals can be depicted throughout different narratives (Zhdanova et al., 2020, pp. 114–116). This subtheme is primarily visible in fully vegan brands, which are more likely to incorporate narratives that foreground animal individuality and moral worth, whereas non-vegan brands tend to adopt the narrative of erasure or do not represent nonhuman animals in their advertisements.

The narrative of salience is marginal, with only 2 instances out of 17 focused on emphasising the individuality of nonhuman animals in a positive framing. Although emotional imagery has been identified as an effective strategy to evoke empathy towards animals (Fernández, 2020, p. 151), and a positive emotional tone is known to foster more compassionate attitudes (Phua et al., 2020, p. 700), these elements are scarcely used in the sample. For instance, Figure 29 (from the vegan meat brand Beyond Meat) uses a horizontal angle between a human and a nonhuman animal to create a sense of equality and shared perspective, encouraging viewers to recognise the animal as a subject rather than an object of consumption. Figure 30 (from vegan meat brand Vivera) depicts a cow mid-moo, a behavioural cue that foregrounds the animal's agency and capacity for communication. This representation detaches the animal from human-controlled environments and highlights its individuality. However, these examples are isolated and do not indicate a broader trend across the sample.



Figure 29: Beyond Meat #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2025)



Figure 30: Vivera #1

Source: [True Ideas](#) (2021)

These findings align with previous studies suggesting that omnivores evaluate vegans motivated by animal rights most negatively, followed by those motivated by environmental or health concerns (Buttny & Kinoshita, 2020, pp. 567–568). This hierarchy of social acceptability may help explain the underrepresentation of animals as conscious beings with emotions and interests, a narrative which advertisers avoid to reduce symbolic threat and maintain broader appeal among non-vegan audiences.

Some advertisements in the sample engage with the ideological narrative by questioning dominant patterns of animal consumption and inviting critical reflection on the moral legitimacy of such practices (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 115). This is evident in Figure 31, where the inclusion of animal species not typically subjected to human consumption destabilises the cultural logic that legitimises the exploitation of certain animals while protecting others, directly addressing the speciesist perspective of animal food consumption. Likewise, Figure 32 frames veganism as part of a broader trajectory of human progress, situating the development of plant-based alternatives as a natural step forward in societal evolution. While such ideological critiques are not dominant across the sample, their presence reveals a discursive effort to challenge speciesist norms through visual storytelling.



Figure 31: Flora Plant #1

Source: [The Drum](#) (2023)



Figure 32: Heura #4

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)

The most frequent pattern in the representation of animals across the sample is the erasure narrative, appearing in a total of 9 code occurrences. This narrative is achieved through visual strategies that strip animals of agency or individuality, reducing them to passive, subordinate objects or background elements. In Figure 33, from the mainly animal-based fast-food restaurant company Burger King, cows are shown merely grazing while one of them is staring blankly at the viewer. Animals here function as part of the pastoral setting, framing them with no narrative function or emotional presence. On the contrary, Figure 34 (from the vegan chicken brand VFC) employs graphic imagery of dead chickens in a slaughterhouse. This digital advertisement emerged as a response to the biggest UK brand campaign of the fast food restaurant chain of fried chicken and chicken sandwiches KFC, which asked the viewers to "believe in chicken" (VFC, 2024, paras. 1-4). While violent images reintroduce the presence of suffering into public consciousness, its decontextualisation risks creating a commodification of animal pain (Fernández, 2020, p. 152). In addition, the depiction simultaneously positions animals as victims, reinforcing their subordinate status within the visual hierarchy. The conceptual imagery of animals can also use the erasure discourse of animals: in Figure 35, the vegetarian brand with vegan portfolio Garden Gourmet represents fish on the

floor through an illustration that aestheticises their form as food. Although the product being advertised is vegan, the visual language still frames the animal body as an edible and fun object and perpetuates the notion of animals as consumables. These representations contribute to the erasure of animal subjectivity, sustaining speciesist norms through the visual narratives explained above.



Figure 33: Burger King #1

Source: [Ads of the World](#) (2023)



Figure 34: VFC #1

Source: [VFC Foods](#) (2024)



Figure 35: Garden Gourmet #1

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)

While these findings primarily reveal the visual erasure of animals as a way to preserve speciesist norms and avoid symbolic threat, they may also reflect a tentative shift in representational strategies. The avoidance of animal imagery, particularly within plant-based brand advertising, could be interpreted as an attempt to dissociate animals from their traditional framing as food. Advertisers may be subtly contributing to a reframing of vegan products as independent from the animal itself, rather than portraying animals as consumables. This strategy, whether intentional or incidental,

invites further reflection on the role of absence and silence as forms of visual discourse in vegan food advertising.

4.4. Storytelling techniques

The use of visual storytelling through encompassing images, graphics, videos, and other visual formats emerges as a strategic tool to construct narratives that resonate emotionally with audiences (El-Desouky, 2020, p. 118). Within the sample, such techniques are employed to articulate both lifestyle and social-oriented discourses, although the visual strategies used in each case differ substantially. These techniques do not fit neatly into the thematic categories discussed earlier, as they function more broadly across the advertising landscape to shape the perception of veganism as either a desirable lifestyle or an ethical choice. Among these storytelling tools, some recurrent visual techniques stand out: naturalness, proximity, and tradition, which frequently appear in lifestyle-oriented contexts and may evoke associations with health, familiarity, or cultural belonging, without being reducible to those thematic categories.

While the prominence of specific techniques may vary depending on the characteristics of the dataset, some patterns appeared with significant frequency in the sample analysed. One of the most prominent techniques identified is the narrative of naturalness. This approach constructs vegan food as inherently connected to nature, drawing on visual cues that emphasise the organic and unprocessed qualities of the ingredients, which may suggest health-related connotations. However, these visuals primarily serve a broader naturalness narrative that functions across various advertising framings, such as those centred on environmental responsibility, ethical motivations, or aspirational lifestyle values, as defined in the thematic coding of this study. This is achieved by surrounding vegan products with whole, uncut vegetables and natural elements such as leaves, wood, or soil. Bright lighting and saturated colours, particularly green and blue settings, are used to evoke freshness, purity, and ecological harmony. For example, in Figure 36, the vegan products are placed directly on a bed of leaves, enhancing its association with natural growth and earthiness, while Figure 37 uses a wooden surface as a setting to position the original ingredients used for the vegan milks around them. In Figure 38, the product is depicted as emerging directly

from plant stems, visually collapsing the distance between nature and the end product. Through these techniques, the naturalness narrative promotes vegan products as unprocessed and aligns them with a broader cultural desire for health, sustainability and ecological connection.



Figure 36: AH Terra #1

Source: [blowUP media](#) (2023)



Figure 37: Spar #1

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)



Figure 38: Peas of Heaven #1

Source: [Ads of the World](#) (2022)

The naturalness of vegan products is reinforced through the contrast with the sense of artificiality used in animal-based products representation. It is characterized by visual depictions of industrial, manufactured settings and processed food appearances. Images such as Figure 39 employ unpleasant textures and colours that evoke a sense of disgust, portraying food as inedible or contaminated. In Figure 40, the advertisement

presents a laboratory-like setting with visible additives, suggesting chemical manipulation of animal products and the unappetising appearance and muted colours of the animal-based food provoke, in stark contrast to the fresher and more natural vegan alternative, therefore challenging animal-based products' appeal.



Figure 39: Oumph #1

Source: [Lola Mullenlowe](#) (2021)

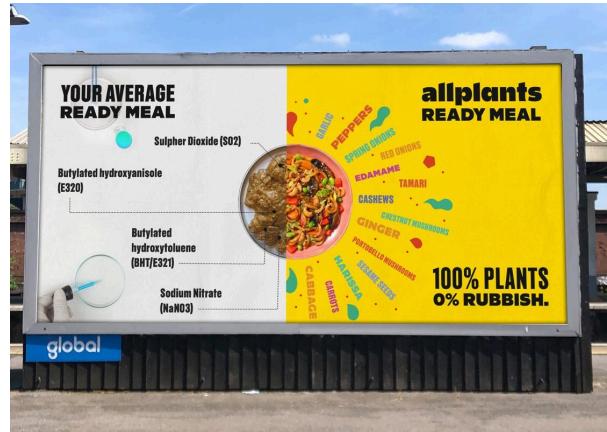


Figure 40: All plants #1

Source: [Grocery Gazette](#) (2023)

Another recurrent visual technique identified in the sample is proximity. This narrative relies on visual strategies that create a sense of closeness between the advertisement and the viewer, facilitating a feeling of inclusion and familiarity. Through gestures such as hands offering a dish that is presented to the viewer as if it were about to be consumed (see Figure 41), people serving drinks directly to the viewer (see Figure 42), the directional positioning of objects toward the camera (see Figure 43), and close-up shots of the products, these images reinforce a sense of invitation and immediacy.



Figure 41: Allplants #2

Source: [X](#) (2019)



Figure 42: Violife #2

Source: [Meta Ads Library](#) (2024)



Figure 43: The Tofoo Co #1

Source: [Ads of the World](#) (2020)

The inclusion of traditional elements is employed through diverse visuals.

Animal-based food customs can be reinterpreted through the vegan framework, such as the vegetarian butcher on Figure 44. Other visual elements are elderly figures (see Figure 45), religious iconography (see Figure 46), classical art references, traditional practices or domestic artifacts like tablecloths or blankets featuring vintage patterns. These elements invoke a sense of continuity with the past, but also evoke ideas of community and belonging, such as intergenerational connection or shared cultural practices. Throughout this narrative the visuals create a deliberate tension, as veganism is often perceived as ideologically opposed to traditional values, especially those related to food (Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465). The advertisements address this tension

through visual juxtaposition of vegan products and traditional elements, making veganism appear as a harmonious evolution of cultural practices.



Figure 44: The Vegetarian Butcher #1

Source: [Vegconomist](#) (2021)



Figure 45: Meatless Farm #1

Source: [Meatless Farm](#) (2020)



Figure 46: Heura #1

Source: [Reason Why](#) (2022)

The resulting themes and subthemes in vegan food advertising construct veganism primarily as an aspirational and depoliticised lifestyle, emphasising health, cosmopolitan modernity, and individual pleasure, while also reflecting the contradictions and ideological tensions embedded in contemporary veganism: the shift from ethical activism to individualised consumption practices (Gheihman, 2021, p. 2), the depoliticisation of animal rights discourse in favour of health or trendiness (Buttny & Kinnefuchi, 2020, pp. 568-569), and the incorporation of veganism into capitalist infrastructures to grow (Sexton et al., 2022, pp. 617-618). These tensions illustrate how

visual storytelling in advertising often smooths over ethical complexity in order to align veganism with aspirational consumer narratives. The following section addresses the research question by synthesising the key findings and situating them within broader theoretical discussions. It also provides a critical reflection on its limitations and suggestions for future research directions.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the following research question: *How is contemporary veganism represented in European vegan food advertisements through visual storytelling?*. Drawing upon the visual analysis method developed by Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 49-56), the findings demonstrate that contemporary veganism is represented in advertising as a lifestyle movement promoted through individualistic and consumer-oriented narratives. The conclusion has critical implications for understanding how veganism is currently framed in European advertising and the ideological tensions underpinning its integration into mainstream culture.

The different chapters of this thesis formed the foundation for this final interpretation. Chapter 2 provided the theoretical basis for understanding visual communication, discursive strategies, and vegan consumer profiles, drawing from literature on Big Veganism, lifestyle politics, and social identity. Chapter 3 provided the study's research design and operationalised these concepts using a clear coding scheme and Machin and Mayr's (2012, pp. 49-56) visual analysis approach. Chapter 4 discusses how themes and subthemes were deployed in advertisements to convey narratives around veganism as a lifestyle or social movement. In this concluding chapter, these insights are synthesised to develop a broader understanding of how visual storytelling facilitates a shift in vegan discourse from ethical commitment to a lifestyle framing.

The lifestyle framing is constructed through narratives of consumer pleasure, cosmopolitanism, and healthism. Visual storytelling frequently presents veganism as a desirable, accessible, and playful lifestyle choice, marginalising its ethical and political foundations. This aligns with the concept of "Big Veganism", which suggests that veganism has been absorbed into neoliberal consumer culture and reconstructed for mainstream audiences, stripped of its original ethical and anti-establishment roots (Sexton et al., 2022, p. 606).

Within the healthism framing, the presence of fitness-related visuals was notably limited, despite its prominence in social media content in previous analysis (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699). Visual strategies such as classical aesthetics (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290) contributed to impressions of cleanliness and order but did not directly communicate

health benefits. These patterns suggest that health vegetarians, though a promising consumer segment for vegan food products (Beverland, 2014, p. 378), are not yet fully addressed within this advertising medium.

A particularly insightful finding is the strategic decoupling of veganism from consumer responsibility, present in advertisements from both vegan and non-vegan brands. These campaigns often depict vegan products as casual choices that can be consumed without committing to a fully vegan lifestyle, a narrative coded in this study as the “dietary addition”. Its use emerges predominantly from non-vegan brands, when placing vegan and animal-based products alongside each other. In the case of vegan brands, advertisements adopt a narrative of flexibility, fun and enjoyment. The dietary addition seems to serve as a deliberate strategy to appeal to ambivalent omnivores (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850), reinforcing the literature's suggestion that easing ideological tension is critical to broader acceptance, especially for consumers with a strong attachment to meat (Graça et al., 2015, p. 88). However, this approach raises concerns about the erasure of ethical and political consequences from consumer decision-making. By portraying veganism as compatible with animal-based consumption, these advertisements undermine its ideological coherence and reinforce carnist norms (Joy, 2010, p. 30).

Among the subthemes, cosmopolitanism appeared most frequently, conveyed through visual indicators such as modernity cues and the use of endorsers (Gozali et al., 2024, p. 290). These representations align with Gheihman's (2021, p. 7) notion of cultural entrepreneurs: high-status figures such as athletes, doctors, or investors who strategically frame veganism as an aspirational, contemporary lifestyle, thus contributing to its mainstream appeal. Additionally, new codes such as community emerged, revealing a pattern toward representing vegan consumption as a socially engaging experience. This perspective expands upon the literature and connects to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 284), which helps explain how individuals derive part of their identity from group membership and how such affiliations influence behaviour and attitudes. In the context of vegan food advertising, the visual construction of community supports the formation of group belonging, presenting veganism as a shared social identity. However, it reinforces the need for brands to develop clearly segmented value

propositions that resonate with specific audience motivations (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 13), whether ethical, environmental, health-driven or social.

Pleasure, as anticipated, was the most dominant narrative across the dataset. Tastiness and deliciousness are key values for vegan food consumers (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12), and mimicry has emerged in advertising as an effective strategy to emphasise these qualities in vegan food products. Accessibility and inclusivity were central visual strategies to counteract perceptions of veganism as a restrictive diet and enhance the sense of pleasure when consuming vegan food products. The emergence of playfulness as a new narrative element was particularly significant. This playful tone, less explored in existing scholarship, positions veganism as joyful, interactive, and entertaining. While it may effectively appeal to ambivalent omnivores (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 850), this narrative raises critical concerns about the depoliticisation of veganism. Playfulness, in this context, reframes moral engagement as light-hearted enjoyment, supporting a commodified version of veganism that privileges pleasure and personal choice while sidelining the movement's ethical foundations. As such, playfulness becomes a defining feature of Big Veganism, contributing to the depoliticisation of animal exploitation and sustainability concerns and reinforcing the commercialisation of vegan identity within mainstream consumer culture, as described by Sexton et al. (2022, pp. 606–609).

By contrast, the representation of veganism as a social movement remains limited. Environmentalism, a potentially unifying motivation for both vegan and non-vegan audiences (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12; Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465), was visually underrepresented. The misalignment between consumer values and advertising visual strategies highlights a missed opportunity for brands and suggests a need to refine value propositions to better exploit the potential of sustainability, avoiding ineffective vegan branding (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015, p. 107).

Anti-speciesist narratives were present, but represented inconsistently. The absence of the conviction narrative across the dataset (Zhdanova et al., 2020, p. 115), which invites identification between human and nonhuman animals, suggests advertisers' reluctance to challenge anthropocentric norms and erase moral barriers between species. While some indicators of salience and ideological narratives were

identified (Zhdanova et al., 2020, pp. 114-115), their limited presence suggests that omnivorous discourses continue to exert significant influence over vegan food advertising, considering that motivations related to animal rights tend to be the most negatively perceived by omnivores (Buttny & Kinoshita, 2020, pp. 567–568). Regarding non-vegan brands, the advertisements representing animals would often use the narrative of erasure, portraying animals in non-interactive or abstract ways, thereby reinforcing their subordination to humans. What is especially notable, however, is not only how nonhuman animals are represented, but how they are rendered absent altogether.

Across the dataset, most advertisements did not include animals either visually or symbolically. The animals' omission can be interpreted as a new form of speciesism that no longer distorts animal representation, but instead erases them entirely from the visual field. In doing so, it reinforces a consumerist framing of veganism that displaces ethical reflection in favour of convenience, aligning with the broader trend of shifting moral responsibility away from consumers and toward aestheticised narratives. This erasure ultimately exemplifies what Sexton et al. (2022, p. 618) describe as the seemingly inevitable reliance on capitalist infrastructures for scalability, where the promise of mainstream expansion entails the sacrifice of core ideological elements. However, the visual erasure of animals, while reinforcing speciesist norms, may also signal a subtle shift in advertising strategies. Particularly in plant-based brand campaigns, avoiding animal imagery can serve to disconnect vegan products from traditional animal-based associations, reframing them as independent consumer choices. This use of absence and silence functions as a powerful visual strategy that invites further consideration of how what is left unsaid shapes the discourse around veganism in advertising.

Visual storytelling remains underexplored in the context of vegan food advertising. While storytelling strategies have been explored in advocacy campaigns or in the representation of animals (Fernández, 2020, pp. 151-154; Zhdanova et al., 2020, pp. 114-116), commercial food advertising has received limited scholarly attention. This analysis contributes to filling this gap by systematically revealing the specific narrative structures and visual strategies through which veganism is constructed and reframed in

paid media. By distinguishing between lifestyle and social movement framings, the study provides new insights into how commercial advertising negotiates ethical, health, and environmental discourses through visual storytelling, thereby advancing understanding of veganism's mainstream representation. Three main narrative techniques emerged from the analysis: naturalness, proximity, and tradition. The naturalness narrative links veganism to authenticity by foregrounding organic, raw, and minimally processed imagery, aligning with recent consumer behavioural shifts that favour recognisable, whole-food plant-based options over highly processed alternatives (Ludmir, 2025, paras. 5–7).

Moreover, proximity emphasises the closeness of veganism to consumers' daily lives, often achieved through close-up imagery that creates an intimate visual experience. This technique fosters a sense of inclusion, inviting viewers to feel directly engaged within the framing of the advertisement, thereby making veganism appear more relatable and convenient. The tradition narrative reframes veganism using the tension between the past and the present as an evolution of cultural and culinary practices, as well as through the ideas of community and belonging. These strategies reflect Beverland's (2014, p. 379) suggestion that alternative diets may gain traction when framed through tradition and authenticity, as seen in the main visual storytelling tools identified in this study. However, the findings also resonate with the author's concern that aestheticised and light-hearted framings, while emotionally effective, may fail to convey the ethical seriousness of the message, limiting their impact in driving deeper behavioural or ideological change.

The analysis reveals that visual storytelling frames veganism as a marketable and emotionally resonant identity shaped by consumer values. Aesthetic strategies and affective imagery repackage ethical consumption in ways that soften or neutralise its political charge, promoting a version of veganism centred on pleasure, convenience, and personal expression. While this shift broadens the movement's visibility and appeal, it also raises a key dilemma: how to scale up without diluting its transformative potential. The findings suggest that commercial growth often entails depoliticisation, particularly when advertisers favour inclusivity and mainstream appeal over ideological depth. This raises important questions about whether the ethical foundations of veganism can

genuinely coexist with capitalist market imperatives: Can ethical consumption thrive within pleasure-oriented narratives? And how might advertisers balance desirability with critical, ethically engaged messaging?

5.1. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer relevant insights for academic scholarship, as well as for stakeholders involved in the development and distribution of vegan food advertising. One immediate insight is the underexploitation of health vegetarians as a consumer segment of vegan food products. Despite their potential receptiveness, advertisements largely overlook visual cues related to fitness and health, particularly in contrast to other media forms like social media (Phua et al., 2020, p. 699). Brands could benefit from tapping into this segment more explicitly by aligning product visuals with well-being and nutritional value.

Additionally, the underrepresentation of environmental narratives in the dataset suggests a missed opportunity for advertisers to capitalise on values shared by both vegan and omnivorous consumers (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 12; Rosenfeld et al., 2023, p. 465). As sustainability continues to grow in public relevance, incorporating environmentally driven messages into visual storytelling could enhance credibility and resonance. Such an approach could also help reposition veganism in mainstream media as a socially responsible and globally significant lifestyle choice.

Furthermore, the strategic erasure of animals from visual narratives represents a crucial ethical concern. This absence undermines the moral grounding of veganism and reflects a broader trend of displacing ethical reflection in favour of convenience and consumer appeal. Addressing this issue in advertising practice would require a shift toward more ethically coherent messaging that acknowledges the role of animals in the vegan movement without alienating broader audiences. Striking this balance is essential if visual storytelling is to support both the commercial success and ideological integrity of veganism.

While lifestyle representations have facilitated the mainstream acceptance of veganism, they also risk hollowing out its ethical substance. Representing veganism as playful and accessible is commercially effective, but it diminishes the political urgency

that originally shaped the movement. It raises important questions for advocacy organisations as well. By adopting some of the visual storytelling techniques utilised by food advertisers, such as narrative devices centred around naturalness, proximity or tradition, activist campaigns might enhance their appeal without compromising ethical integrity. The challenge lies in balancing the persuasive power of lifestyle narratives with storytelling that honours the ideological roots of veganism.

5.2. Limitations

Despite the study's contributions to understanding how commercial visual storytelling reframes veganism through lifestyle and consumer-oriented narratives, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis was confined to visual elements, excluding verbal or textual content. Advertisements often rely on the interplay between imagery and text to communicate layered meanings. Textual cues may carry explicit ethical or political claims that complement or contradict visual messages. A multimodal approach could have revealed how visual and textual cues collaborate or conflict in conveying ideological messages. The dataset was limited to still-image paid advertisements, excluding other formats such as video, user-generated social media, or grassroots activist content. These media may deploy different emotional registers, narrative pacing, or sensory modalities that could alter the reception of veganism. Including these would allow for a more comprehensive view of how visual storytelling functions across platforms.

The study focused exclusively on the European context. While it included a variety of countries, the sample was not perfectly geographically balanced, with underrepresentation of Eastern European ads. Cultural, political, and economic differences across Europe may influence how veganism is framed, making generalisations more difficult. A more balanced or comparative sample would improve external validity. Additionally, the focus on brand-driven commercial advertising means the study did not account for alternative or oppositional forms of representation, such as activist counter-narratives. Including such content could provide insight into how resistance to mainstream visual framings is visually articulated in the advocacy perspective.

Finally, my positionality as a researcher may have influenced the interpretive process. As a vegetarian transitioning toward veganism, my analysis may reflect subjective perspectives. However, this influence was mitigated by a transparent methodological approach, following Silverman's (2011) guidelines for enhancing reliability through step-by-step systematic analysis (p. 360), validity through the constant comparative method (pp. 376–378), and rigour through deviant-case analysis (pp. 378–379). The inclusion of detailed examples from the dataset further supports the credibility of the interpretations presented.

5.3. Recommendations for future research

Building on this study's insights, several avenues for future research appear particularly promising. First, reception studies could explore how different audience segments interpret visual narratives. Understanding how health vegetarians, flexitarians, omnivores, or ethical vegans respond emotionally to various framings, such as playfulness, naturalness, community, could clarify which strategies are effective or problematic across groups. Additionally, future studies could address a relevant gap omitted in this research: the visual and ideological representation of vegetarian food advertising. Investigating how vegetarian products are portrayed, and how audiences respond to those representations compared to vegan advertising, would enrich our understanding of how ethical or transitional diets are positioned within consumer culture.

Future research could also explore how the absence of nonhuman animals in advertising visuals affects viewer perceptions and ethical engagement. Investigating this omission through audience studies or experimental designs may help clarify its ideological impact. Beyond audience responses, examining how supply chain dynamics, such as sourcing practices, production models, or retailer expectations shape visual strategies could shed light on why brands adopt certain representational choices over others. Cross-cultural and comparative studies also offer fertile ground for exploration. While this study focused on European representations, future research could investigate regional differences both within and beyond Europe, such as contrasts between Western and Eastern European countries or comparisons with Latin American or Asian

advertising discourses. Intersectional analyses are another important direction. Examining how dimensions such as race, gender, and class intersect within vegan advertising aesthetics could reveal whether current campaigns reproduce or challenge social inequalities. Future research could investigate whether this dilution of ethical meaning occurs across other media formats beyond paid advertising, in order to assess whether this represents a broader cultural shift in the representation of veganism. Moreover, expanding the scope to include video-based content and social media is essential, given that they use emotional tone, music, and participatory storytelling in ways that still-image ads cannot. Pursuing this line of inquiry may enrich our understanding of how narrative techniques vary across media formats.

Another compelling area of inquiry involves activist counter-advertising or subvertisements. For example, campaigns like VFC's (2024, paras. 1-4) response to KFC's "Believe in Chickens" campaign demonstrate how visual strategies can be repurposed to challenge dominant corporate narratives. Studying these interventions could provide insights into the use of visual storytelling to represent resistance and reintroduce ethical concerns omitted from mainstream campaigns. Longitudinal research could trace how the visual framing of veganism changes as the plant-based market matures, in order to determine whether the current emphasis on lifestyle softens or intensifies over time, and whether ethical dimensions regain prominence. Finally, future research should further explore how playfulness mediates engagement, especially among ambivalent consumers, could enrich our understanding of how ethical products are made desirable within neoliberal media cultures.

In conclusion, this research delves into the visual narratives shaping the representation of contemporary veganism in European advertising. It highlights the ideological tensions and narrative strategies used to normalise vegan consumption, while also pointing to future directions for both scholarship and practice. Continued inquiry is encouraged into the intersections of food, ethics, and identity within contemporary visual culture.

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Appendix A - Visual Analysis Framework

Visual analysis framework from Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 49-56):

	Denotation	Connotation
General description		
Attributes (<i>objects, human figures, products</i>)		
Settings (<i>background, physical or cultural environments</i>)		
Salience (<i>calls attention: potent cultural symbols, size, colour, tone, focus, foregrounding, overlapping</i>)		

Appendix B - Code Tree

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Notes
Lifestyle movement	Healthism	Classical aesthetics	Clean layouts, bright lighting, visual order suggests health.
		Dietary addition	Vegan items positioned alongside non-vegan/generic groceries.
		Fitness	Toned bodies, athletic wear, gestures of strength.
	Cosmopolitanism	Modernity	Urban settings, bold colours. Celebrities and non-celebrities endorsing the product.
		Community	People eating together, shared symbols.
	Pleasure	Consumption	Close-ups of textures, mid-bite imagery. Visual mimicry of animal products. Casual clothing and posture.
		Accessibility	Familiar environments. Packaging or meal-ready imagery.
		Playfulness	Saturated colours,

			exaggerated gestures, childlike props. Cartoons or illustrated products.
Social movement	Environmentalism	Sustainability	Plants, nature backdrops, wooden textures, earth tones. <i>Note:</i> Represented by a single code due to its limited frequency. However, when it does appear, its visual presence is symbolically strong and theoretically relevant, which supports its inclusion as a distinct code.
Speciesism		Salience	Eye contact, horizontal angles, animals in the foreground.
		Ideology	Abstract visuals, illustrations of animals. Plain backgrounds.
		Erasure: absence	No animals shown.
		Erasure: subordination	Animals present in low angles and with no interaction.
		Erasure: violence	Red tones, chains, or allusions to harm.

Appendix C - Overview of Advertisements

15 advertisements have been selected to provide an overview of the dataset. The number in this table corresponds to the number of the advertisement in the complete dataset table.

NUMBER	BRAND	PRODUCTS	MONTH AND YEAR	COUNTRY	TYPE OF PAID MEDIA	ADVERTISING STYLE	LINK
2	Allplants	Fully Vegan	January 2023	UK	Print media	Product	https://www.gocerygazette.co.uk/2023/01/19/allplants-ready-meal-campaign/
6	Alpro	Vegan Portfolio	December 2023	International	Digital media	Lifestyle	https://www.scottgrummett.com/blog/alpro-feed-your-you
12	Beyond Meat	Fully Vegan	May 2025	Netherlands	Digital media	Lifestyle	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=9756336954447690
14	Burger King	Vegan Portfolio	August 2023	Austria	Print media	Product	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/going-meatless-in-fleischessen
21	Future Farm	Fully Vegan	January 2022	UK	Print media	Lifestyle	https://www.weareimpero.com/work/choose-the-tastier-future-for-future-farm/
23	Garden Gourmet	Vegan Portfolio	September 2024	Spain	Digital media	Product	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=520864407098468
31	HARI&CO	Fully Vegan	May 2025	France	Digital media	Product	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=1192038222150583
34	Heura	Fully Vegan	April 2022	International	Print media	Lifestyle	https://www.reasonwhy.es/actualidad/heura-foods-tradicional-catolica-campa-semana-

							<u>santa</u>
43	Lidl	Vegan Portfolio	May 2025	Bulgaria	Digital media	Product	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=1878060116264293
51	McDonald's	Vegan Portfolio	May 2024	Germany	Digital media	Lifestyle	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=382539604784934
54	Meatless Farm	Fully Vegan	August 2020	UK	Print media	Lifestyle	https://meatlessfarm.com/2020/08/03/meatless-farm-launches-m-f-campaign/
62	Oatly	Fully Vegan	May 2020	Sweden	Digital media	Product	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=3857350064338395
72	Planted	Fully Vegan	November 2024	Germany	Digital media	Lifestyle	https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=603567928707291
91	VFC	Fully Vegan	July 2024	UK	Digital media	Lifestyle	https://vfcfoods.com/we-believe-in-chickens/
94	Violife	Fully Vegan	January 2023	UK	Print media	Lifestyle	https://www.vcpc.com/uk/work/violife/cheez-y-the-way-you-like-it