

# Selling Veganism in the Age of COVID

## Vegan Representation in British Newspapers in 2020

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## *Objectives*

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- ❖ Veganphobia a persistent issue, yet
- ❖ Veganism increases in popularity
- ❖ How has media representativeness changed?
- ❖ Could COVID offer a political opportunity?

# Background

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## ❖ Mainstream media key for drawing **attention**

- ❖ **Veganism negotiates** with mainstream channels to raise awareness to injustice, mobilize activists and other resources, and put pressure on industries and policymakers.
- ❖ These negotiations are not without **risk**

## ❖ Most coverage treats veganism, at best, as barren, boring, or a passing fad, and, at *worst*, a dangerous and hostile threat (Cole and Morgan 2011)

- ❖ Newspapers **set the agenda** to protect speciesist industries (Freeman 2016, 2009)
- ❖ When the connection between animal agriculture and climate change *is* made, **individual behavior change** emphasized (Kristiansen et al. 2021).

## ❖ The marketplace dominates the media discourse

- ❖ **Industries are protected** while **individuals are scapegoated** and pressured to consume as directed

Cole, M. and K. Morgan. 2011. "Veganphobia: Derogatory Discourses of Veganism and the Reproduction of Speciesism in UK National Newspapers." *The British Journal of Sociology* 62 (1): 134-153.  
Freeman, C. P. 2016. "This Little Piggy Went to Press." Pp. 169-184, in *Critical Animal and Media Studies*, N. Almiron, M. Cole, and C. P. Freeman (Eds.). New York: Routledge.  
Freeman, C. 2009. "This Little Piggy Went to Press: The American News Media's Construction of Animals in Agriculture." *The Communication Review* 12 (1): 78-103.  
Kristiansen, S., J. Painter, and M. Shea. 2021. "Animal Agriculture and Climate Change in the US and UK Elite Media." *Environmental Communication* 15 (2): 153-172.

## *Method*

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- ❖ Exploratory analysis of mainstream UK newspapers to survey the new normal of vegan ideology in a post-COVID society
- ❖ Content analysis of articles mentioning veganism published in 2020

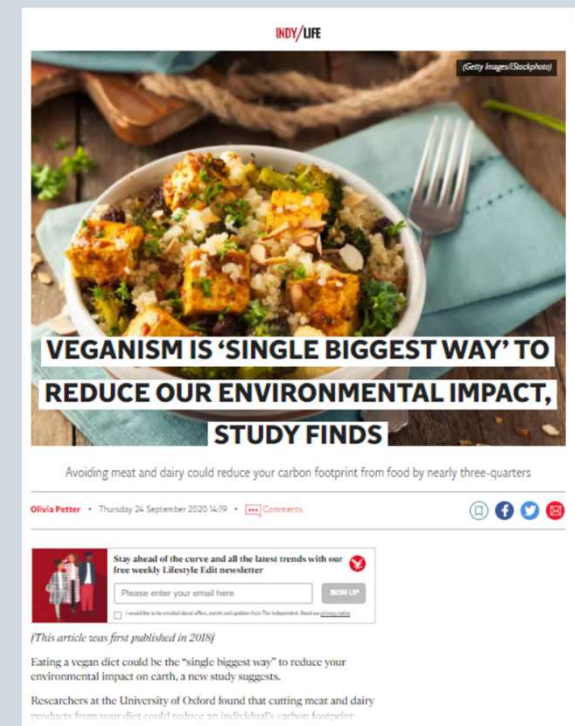
# *Methodology*

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- ❖ Content analysis of mainstream UK newspapers to survey the new normal of vegan ideology in a post-COVID society
  - ❖ Replication of Cole & Morgan (2011) for 2020
- ❖ Keyword search for “vegan”
  - ❖ 41,175 results across dozens of papers
  - ❖ 1% sample (n=420)
- ❖ Reused negative coding:
  - ❖ Ridiculous, ascetic, difficult, a fad, dangerous, overly sensitive, or hostile.
- ❖ Additional subcoding for positive
  - ❖ Product spotlights, weight loss, climate-friendliness, healthfulness, deliciousness, ethics, or transition advice
- ❖ Neutral
  - ❖ Even amounts of positive and negative, matter-of-fact product announcements or discussion of vegan options

# Results

- ❖ Frequency increase by 100x: 41,000 vs. 400
- ❖ **Right-leaning newspapers**
  - ❖ Equally likely to discuss veganism positively as they were negatively
  - ❖ Most positive coverage was about new, exciting, or delicious vegan products and services
- ❖ **Left-leaning journals**
  - ❖ *Guardian* was much less likely to feature veganism and this coverage was overwhelmingly neutral (mostly product-related)
  - ❖ *The Independent* offered the most positive vegan coverage (64% of the 36 articles)
    - ❖ Half of these (48%) related to vegan products and services



Newspaper	Positive		Neutral		Negative		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Chronicle Live</i>	5	1.1	7	1.6	1	0.2	13	3.1
<i>East Anglian Daily Times</i>	7	1.6	1	0.2	0	0.0	8	1.9
<i>Macclesfield Express</i>	4	0.9	4	0.9	1	0.2	9	2.1
<i>MailOnline</i>	25	5.9	4	0.9	27	6.4	56	13.3
<i>Mirror</i>	18	4.3	16	3.8	16	3.8	50	11.9
<i>Scottish Daily Mail</i>	4	0.9	0	0.0	5	1.2	9	2.1
<i>Standard</i>	4	0.9	1	0.9	2	0.4	7	1.0
<i>Guardian</i>	3	0.7	8	1.9	0	0.0	11	2.6
<i>The Independent</i>	23	5.5	4	0.9	9	2.1	36	8.6
<i>The Sun</i>	8	1.9	6	1.4	9	2.1	23	5.5
<i>The Times</i>	7	1.6	1	1.6	6	1.4	14	3.3
Other	108	25.7	49	11.7	27	6.4	184	44.0
Total	216	51	101	25	103	24	420	100.0

# *Positive Results*

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- ❖ Across all, 63% (136 articles) positively coded articles related to vegan **products and services**
  - ❖ 28 articles alone discussed Gregg's product line
- ❖ Of the remaining positive articles
  - ❖ 27 (6.4% of the sample) were predominantly related to ethics (primarily human justice issues)
  - ❖ 18 (4.3% of the sample) touted the health benefits of veganism
  - ❖ 16 centered its deliciousness
  - ❖ Remaining related to climate, transitioning, and weight loss





# *Invisibilizing Nonhuman Animals*

Only **one of 420** sampled in this study spotlighted Nonhuman Animal rights purely for the sake of the animals



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► Tyson Fury's wife Paris is pregnant with the couple's SEVENTH child, boxer's pal Carl Froch claims - just hours before Gypsy King takes on Dillian Whyte in title fight

► Brooklyn Beckham flashes diamond wedding ring in latest cooking video before being torn to shreds for calling Poke bowl his 'favourite snack'

► Married At First Sight 'villain' Davina Rankin gets her happily ever after as she weds fiancé Jaxon Manuel in stunning ceremony overlooking picturesque Mount Warning

► Peter Kay launches wheelchair accessible boat in Lancashire in

## Poor lamb! Heartbreaking footage of a baby sheep shivering in paddock after the herd was sheared is posted online as vegans call for the wool industry to be axed

- A vegan group has taken aim at the wool industry after video of shivering lamb
- Activist group Vegans Rising halted traffic in Melbourne CBD in April 2019
- The group said it was planning 'further large scale actions and disobedience'
- Many farming practices are cruel, group says, and wants to see them abolished

By BRETT LACKEY FOR DAILY MAIL AUSTRALIA  
PUBLISHED: 06:41, 7 July 2020 | UPDATED: 08:50, 7 July 2020

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Shivering uncontrollably in an open paddock, a newborn lamb struggles to keep warm as temperatures plummet.

Heartbreaking video, released by animal activist group Vegans Rising, has gone viral online and calls for the wool industry to be abolished.

The footage was filmed in Victoria's rural west in early July where winter temperatures are in the single digits.

The image shows the young lamb standing alone and shivering in the paddock as the rest of the newly sheared herd huddles for warmth.

# Negative Results

## ❖ ¼ of the sample

❖ Primarily in *MailOnline*, the *Mirror*, and smaller newspapers

## ❖ 33 warned that veganism was **dangerous** in some way

❖ Primarily to one's health or to that of companion animals

## ❖ 24 emphasized the **difficulty or impossibility** of sustaining

## ❖ 15 **ridiculed** veganism

## ❖ 12 pitted vegans as **hostile**

## ❖ 10 described vegans as **overly sensitive**

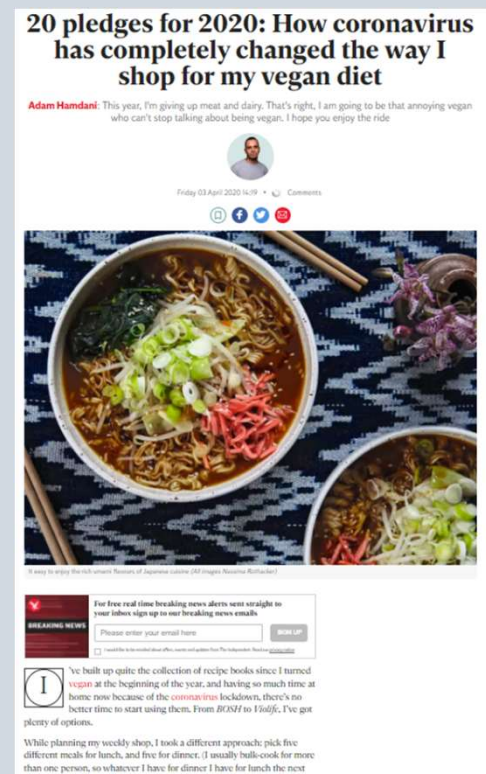
## ❖ 5 emphasized the **asceticism** of veganism

## ❖ 4 presented veganism as a **fad**



# COVID-19

- ❖ 22 mentioned **COVID-19** or the associated lockdowns as a **motivation for going vegan**
  - ❖ 2 negative; 20 positive; 7 neutral
- ❖ 43 mentioned COVID-19 as a reason for **changing shopping patterns** in favor of veganism
  - ❖ 14 neutral; mostly product related
  - ❖ 29 positive; 15 of these were also product related



# COVID-19



- ❖ Did little to alleviate the **invisibilization of animals**
  - ❖ Attwood and Hajat (2020) have suggested that COVID-19 has disrupted humanity's complacent relationship with "meat"
  - ❖ But little discussion of this correlation surfaced in the sample
- ❖ One notable exception in the *Independent*: "Go Vegan or Risk Further Pandemics, Experts Warn"
- ❖ The *Mirror* was unsympathetic: "Man Sparks Outrage by Claiming Coronavirus 'Wouldn't Exist If World Was Vegan'"

# New Vegan Marketplace

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- ❖ Although 51% of the sample coded as positive...
  - ❖ Nearly two-thirds (62%) of positive articles covered product launches
  - ❖ I.e., 1/3 (136 articles) related to positively-framed product launches
- ❖ Most neutral articles (1/4<sup>th</sup> of the articles in this study were coded as neutral) *also* related to product launches or vegan options
- ❖ Quite a few product launches mentioned the **lockdown as an opportunity** to create new products or test new services like takeaway menus and grocery boxes



# *New Vegan Marketplace*

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- ❖ The data would indicate that a smorgasbord of delights await the vegan consumer...
- ❖ But emphasis on consumption suggests that veganism is gaining in **legitimacy through the marketplace** rather than political resonance
- ❖ Several articles also **emphasized the marketplace opportunities** for entrepreneurs and investors
- ❖ **Ethical mentions were brief** and subsumed within the larger narrative about marketplace



## *New Vegan Marketplace*

- ❖ A piece about a commercial vegan chef in *The Telegraph* exemplifies this
- ❖ Featured in the Food and Drink section and over 1,200 words, but the *only* reference to vegan philosophy:  
*“But when Omari turned eight he decided to go vegan, after watching a Peta video on animal welfare. ‘It made me sad how the animals were treated,’ he recalls. ‘I decided I couldn't eat meat after that’”*
- ❖ Vegan ethics relegated to a soundbite in a sales pitch



## *Conclusion*

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- ❖ Veganism is predominantly presented **positively**, especially with regard to **consumerism**
- ❖ **Follows preexisting momentum** of veganism, not COVID
  - ❖ COVID-19 acknowledged mostly in relation to the space created for new **products or services**
  - ❖ Importance of veganism could have been emphasized but was not
- ❖ “Veganphobia” seems to have been cured, and the antidote was **commodification** in the marketplace



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