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Becoming Vegan in a Non-Vegan World: A Qualitative Analysis of Social and Psychological Experiences After Adopting a Vegan Lifestyle

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Supplementary Materials: Data [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

Veganism is increasingly understood as a moral lifestyle rather than a dietary choice. This study explores how individuals experience life after becoming vegan, focusing on emotional well-being, social relationships, and perceptions of society. Data were collected via a qualitative online questionnaire and analysed using inductive content analysis; participants also completed semantic differential scales assessing perceptions of veganism. Results indicated that veganism was predominantly experienced as psychologically affirming, characterised by alignment between values and behaviour. Yet participants reported emotional burden related to heightened awareness of animal suffering, social exclusion, and systemic injustice. Emotional experiences varied by social proximity, with more positive or regulated emotions reported in close relationships and predominantly negative emotions directed toward society at large. Online vegan communities emerged as important sources of support. Overall, the findings highlight veganism as a lived moral identity that fosters psychological coherence while requiring ongoing emotional regulation in a largely non-vegan world.

Keywords

veganism, moral identity, psychosocial experiences, social relationships, emotional well-being

Non-Technical Summary

Background

In recent years, more people have chosen to live vegan. For many, this is not just about food. It reflects deeply held values about animals, fairness, and how we want to live. While researchers have spent a lot of time studying why people become vegan, much less attention has been paid to what life is actually like after that decision.

Being vegan often means living differently from most people around you. Family members, friends, colleagues, and restaurants may not share your lifestyle. This can affect everyday situations, relationships, and even how you feel about the world. We wanted to better understand these experiences.

Why was this study done?

Many vegans say that the hardest part of being vegan is not giving up animal products, but dealing with a world where most people still consume them. Social gatherings, family meals, or even watching the news can sometimes feel emotionally difficult. At the same time, some people describe feeling proud or at peace with their decision.

There is still relatively little research exploring these longer-term emotional and social experiences. Our goal was to understand how becoming vegan affects people's well-being, relationships, and sense of belonging.

What did the researchers do and find?

We invited adults who identify as vegan to take part in an anonymous online questionnaire. They answered open-ended questions about their experiences and also rated how they perceive veganism in general. We carefully analysed their written responses to identify common themes.

Many participants described positive changes. Living in line with their values often made them feel calmer, clearer, and more consistent in who they are. They felt relieved not to contribute to animal suffering and proud of acting according to their beliefs.

However, participants also reported emotional challenges. Becoming more aware of animal suffering sometimes led to feelings of sadness, frustration, or helplessness. Some described social difficulties, such as not being invited to events or feeling misunderstood. While close relationships often involved compromise and adjustment, participants' feelings about society as a whole were more negative.

A strong theme was connection with other vegans. Meeting fellow vegans, who are sometimes even strangers, often created an immediate sense of understanding. Online communities were especially important for those who did not know many vegans in their everyday lives. These spaces helped people feel less alone.

Some participants who had been vegan for many years felt that things had improved over time. Vegan options are more available now, and social acceptance seems to be growing in some places, especially in cities. Rural areas were often described as more challenging.

What do these findings mean?

This study shows that veganism is not only about diet. Instead, it shapes how people feel, connect with others, and view society. For many, becoming vegan strengthens their sense of integrity and personal meaning. At the same time, it can bring emotional strain, especially when individuals feel isolated or overwhelmed by awareness of animal suffering.

The findings suggest that emotions depend on context. People often try to maintain harmony in close relationships, even if it means managing their feelings carefully. But when thinking about society as a whole, they may express more frustration or disappointment.

Understanding these experiences can help create more respectful conversations about lifestyle choices. Recognising both the positive and challenging sides of veganism allows for a more balanced view of what it means to live according to one's values in a world that may not share them.

Veganism is defined 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." (The Vegan Society, 2016). According to this view, veganism is not only a diet but a comprehensive lifestyle rooted in the recognition that animals are sentient beings with a right to live free from harm. Individuals who embrace this philosophy are often referred to as ethical vegans, reflecting a moral and political commitment to ending animal exploitation and advancing animal rights (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2019).

Although the number of studies on plant-based diets has grown substantially, most research has focused on vegetarianism rather than veganism, leaving the latter comparatively underrepresented (Salehi et al., 2023). Still, a considerable body of literature has examined why people become vegan, identifying health, environmental, and animal welfare concerns as the primary motivations (Białek-Dratwa et al., 2024; Janssen et al., 2016; Kerschke-Risch, 2015). Animal-related ethical motives tend to play a particularly prominent role in veganism compared to vegetarianism (Salehi et al., 2023). This ethical foundation often represents more than a shift in consumption habits; it marks a profound change in identity and worldview. Vestergren and Uysal (2022) describe the adoption of veganism as a major moral and identity transformation that shapes how individuals see themselves and their relationship to society. In this sense, becoming vegan is a moral conversion that redefines one's sense of agency, responsibility, and belonging.

Psychological and Social Correlates

Quantitative studies examining mental health outcomes among vegetarians and vegans provide a mixed picture. Some research suggests that reducing or eliminating animal products may be associated with improved short-term mood and well-being (Beezhold & Johnston, 2012). Other findings indicate elevated rates of depressive and anxiety

symptoms among vegetarians and vegans compared to omnivores (Iguacel et al., 2021; Michalak et al., 2012), yet, systematic evidence about the connection between vegetarianism or veganism and depression is contradictory (Jain et al., 2022). More recent evidence shows that higher depression scores may be particularly pronounced among meat-reducers rather than among committed vegetarians or vegans (Hopwood, 2022). This pattern has been interpreted as reflecting cognitive dissonance during the transition phase, as individuals attempt to reconcile ongoing meat consumption with ethical concerns about animal suffering. These results point to the complexity of psychological adjustment in dietary change, yet they seldom account for the broader social and moral context in which veganism is embedded.

Despite increased visibility, veganism remains marginalised in many Western societies. Media and public discourse frequently portray vegans as irrational, extreme, or overly moralistic (Bresnahan et al., 2016; Cole & Morgan, 2011; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). This stigmatisation can shape how vegans are perceived and how they perceive themselves, reinforcing their status as moral outsiders. Non-vegans often anticipate being judged if they turned vegan, leading to social and behavioural distancing (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). Within personal relationships, these dynamics are amplified by domestic routines and gendered norms around food provision, which can make dietary change particularly challenging in family contexts (Cherry & Asher, 2015).

The ability to sustain veganism over time depends not only on personal conviction but also on social and cultural support. Cherry (2015) highlights two crucial factors for long-term adherence: supportive relationships and access to cultural tools such as shared knowledge, skills, and communities that facilitate maintenance. Recent empirical work similarly demonstrates that family-based social support predicts reduced animal-product consumption and stronger goal commitment over time (Gregson & Piazza, 2025). These findings underscore that veganism is an inherently relational practice that unfolds within networks of interdependence rather than in isolation.

Research exploring how vegans manage these interpersonal challenges provides important insight into the social dimension of the lifestyle. Drawing on interviews with forty vegans in the United Kingdom, Twine (2014) interprets the vegan experience through Sara Ahmed's concept of the *"feminist killjoy"*. Vegans, he argues, disrupt the "happiness order" of meat-based culture simply by refusing to participate in its norms. This disruption often provokes defensiveness or ridicule from others, yet it also enables new meanings and communities to emerge. Twine identified several relational strategies through which vegans maintain connections with non-vegans: establishing boundaries within mixed households, encouraging "non-practising practitioners" who adopt partial vegan practices, and sharing vegan food as a form of bridge-building. These negotiations allow vegans to sustain both their ethical commitments and their social bonds, even when their values conflict with dominant cultural expectations. Twine's work illustrates that becoming vegan involves an ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging.

Identity, Activism, and Group Belonging

From a social identity perspective, veganism can be understood as participation in a politicised moral community. Group membership provides a sense of meaning and collective efficacy but also introduces tension between maintaining a distinct identity and engaging with the broader non-vegan world. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, and intergroup dynamics can shape emotional and behavioural responses toward ingroup and outgroup members. Veganism, particularly when grounded in moral conviction, may therefore function not merely as a dietary choice but as a salient social identity. Vegans often respond strongly to perceived ingroup disloyalty, i.e. behaviour that undermines group norms or moral integrity (Rothgerber, 2014), and their activism tends to be motivated by moral conviction and belief in the group's collective capacity to effect change (Judge et al., 2022). At the same time, visible expressions of moral commitment can generate ambivalence among non-vegans: while ethical vegans are often admired for their integrity, they may also be perceived as overzealous or socially distant (De Groeve et al., 2022). These ambivalent perceptions highlight the tension between moral expression and social acceptance that characterises the vegan experience.

The Present Study

Although motivations for adopting a vegan lifestyle are now well understood, much less is known about what happens after the transition. The majority of existing research focuses on antecedents such as attitudes, values, and barriers to change (Bryant et al., 2022; Salehi et al., 2023), leaving the psychosocial consequences of living as a vegan comparatively underexplored. The present study seeks to address this gap by qualitatively exploring the social and psychological experiences of people who have adopted a vegan lifestyle. Specifically, it investigates how moral transformation influences interpersonal relationships, perceptions of society, and emotional well-being. By focusing on the lived experience of veganism rather than its antecedents, the study aims to capture how individuals navigate, negotiate, and make sense of being vegan in a predominantly non-vegan world. In doing so, it contributes to a more holistic understanding of vegan identity as an evolving process situated at the intersection of morality, social relations, and affective experience.

Method

Participants

Participants were individuals who identified as vegan and were at least 18 years old. In total, 100 (90 female, 8 male, 2 non-binary) participants between 18 and 69 years

completed an online questionnaire (M = 36.45; SD = 12.17). Effective sample size for the quantitative part of the questionnaire was 91 because one participant stated they were not vegan and was excluded from the analysis and eight participants did not complete this part. Full demographic data can be found in Table 1. Recruitment took place through social media, vegan forums, and online communities related to plant-based living (e.g. social media of the research group / University, Facebook groups). Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. No compensation was provided. All procedures were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines. According to ethical requirements in Austria, this research was deemed exempt from ethical approval, as all data was anonymous, and no clinical data was assessed. The study was not preregistered. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The anonymised dataset and survey materials are publicly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF, see Mittmann et al., 2025).

Table 1

Demographic Data of Participants

Variable	Items / range	Counts / Mean
Sex	Female	90
	Male	8
	Diverse / non-binary	2
	Prefer not to say	0
Age	Between 18 and 69 years	M = 36.45; SD = 12.17
Education	No completed schooling	0
	Compulsory school / lower secondary education	4
	High school diploma	26
	Apprenticeship / vocational training	17
	University of applied sciences degree	6
	University degree (Bachelor's / Master's / Diploma)	41
	Doctoral degree (PhD)	4
	Other	2
Country	Austria	82
	Germany	16
	Switzerland	2
Current living situation	Urban (city / large town)	63
	Suburban / small town	19
	Rural / village area	18
Experience with agriculture	Yes	35, mostly during childhood
	No	65

Variable	Items / range	Counts / Mean
Time being vegan	Less than 6 months	9
	6 months – 1 year	4
	1–2 years	8
	3–4 years	16
	5 years or longer	63

Procedure

Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire created with SoSci Survey. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were presented with an informed consent statement outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and data protection in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participants confirmed their voluntary consent by proceeding to the survey. The questionnaire took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

Materials

The questionnaire consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions designed to explore the social and psychological experiences after adopting a vegan lifestyle. Open-ended items invited participants to reflect on how becoming vegan affected their relationships, worldview, and emotional well-being. All questions can be found in Table 2 in the order they were presented. Additionally, a semantic differential scale with 23 adjective pairs assessed how participants characterised their lives since becoming vegan (e.g., active–passive, meaningful–meaningless, sustainable–short-term). The adjective pairs were assigned *a priori* to two conceptual categories reflecting the focus of evaluation: individual experience of veganism (8 pairs, e.g., meaningful–meaningless, healthy–unhealthy) and perceived societal characterisations of veganism (15 pairs, e.g., modern–traditional, alternative–conventional). Demographic information collected included age, gender, education level, country of residence, urban or rural living environment, and personal experience with agriculture (e.g., growing up on a farm, studying or working in agricultural contexts).

Table 2

Open-Ended Items of the Questionnaire

Topic	Question	*N*	Word count of replies – mean	Word count of replies – range
Relationships	How has your vegan lifestyle affected your relationships with family, friends, or partners who are not vegan? (If it has not affected them, why do you think that is?)	100	28.01	1–286
	Can you describe a situation in which your vegan lifestyle led to tension, misunderstanding, or perhaps a special moment of connection?	100	37.56	1–200
	Since adopting a vegan lifestyle, have you formed any new friendships or communities (online or offline)? How do these relationships influence your sense of belonging or support?	100	18.05	1–94
Society	Has your vegan lifestyle changed how you see society, human behaviour, or the world as a whole?	99	20.41	1–105
	What emotions do you experience when navigating a predominantly non-vegan world? (e.g., frustration, hope)	99	18.81	1–104
Emotions	How has your vegan lifestyle affected your emotional or mental well-being?	94	20.83	1–77
	Are there specific situations that you find emotionally challenging as a vegan (e.g., family gatherings, eating out, or work situations)? How do you usually cope with them?	94	27.52	1–103
	If you have experienced or currently experience psychological difficulties or a mental health condition, has your vegan lifestyle influenced this in any way?	90	9.00	1–153

Analysis

Qualitative Data

All qualitative data was analysed using MAXQDA v.24 by GM and VSH, both female and trained psychologists. One researcher identifies as vegan and the other as omnivore. Data were analysed using inductive content analysis (ICA; Kyngäs, 2020; Vears & Gillam, 2022). ICA is a systematic, iterative method for identifying and organising patterns of meaning in textual data through inductive coding and category development. This approach was selected because the study aimed to provide a structured and practice-relevant description of participants' experiences rather than to generate a formal theory.

The analysis followed a multi-step, iterative process. First, all responses were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the dataset and to gain an overall understanding of the breadth and tone of participants' accounts. During this phase, initial notes were made regarding recurrent topics and patterns. Second, first-round coding was conducted to identify broad "meaning units" relevant to the research questions. Segments of text were grouped into preliminary content categories reflecting overarching areas such as relational experiences, emotional reactions, and perceptions of society. Coding was conducted independently during initial rounds, followed by iterative discussion and refinement of categories. Rather than aiming for statistical agreement, the analytic process emphasised conceptual clarity, transparency, and consensus through researcher dialogue. Codes were not mutually exclusive, and text segments could be assigned to multiple categories where appropriate. These initial categories were developed inductively from the data rather than derived from prior theoretical frameworks. Third, a second round of coding was undertaken within each broad category. During this phase, responses were coded line by line to develop more fine-grained subcategories. Codes were kept close to participants' wording wherever possible to preserve their intended meanings. Throughout this process, categories were continuously compared across participants and refined to ensure conceptual clarity and internal consistency. The coding framework was iteratively revised as new distinctions emerged. Categories were collapsed, reorganised, or further specified where appropriate. This comparative process ensured that the final content categories accurately reflected the range and complexity of participants' experiences. Finally, the refined categories were synthesised to produce a structured account of how participants described the psychosocial experience of becoming vegan. Interpretation remained grounded in the data while situating findings within relevant social-psychological frameworks.

Quantitative Data

Descriptive analysis and visualisation of the quantitative data from the semantic differential scales was performed using R (Version 4.5.2). Participants rated each adjective pair on a unitless 0–100 scale (e.g. 0 = 'healthy', 100 = 'unhealthy'); mean ± *SD* scores are

reported. The qualitative and quantitative components of the study served distinct but complementary purposes. Inductive content analysis constituted the primary analytic framework, aimed at identifying and organising categories of meaning within participants' written accounts. The semantic differential scales were analysed descriptively to contextualise evaluative perceptions of veganism. No inferential statistical comparisons between categories were conducted, and quantitative findings were not integrated into the qualitative coding process but were used to supplement and situate the qualitative results.

Qualitative Results

Positive and Negative Emotions

Participants most frequently described positive effects of veganism on their mental well-being, particularly in terms of increased psychological coherence and emotional relief. Many accounts emphasised that living in accordance with personal moral values reduced feelings of guilt and responsibility for animal suffering and fostered a sense of inner calm, clarity, and self-consistency. These positive experiences were more numerous across the dataset and often framed as a stabilising aspect of participants' well-being. At the same time, a smaller but salient set of accounts highlighted the emotional burden associated with heightened awareness of animal suffering and systemic injustice. Participants described feelings of sadness, frustration, and helplessness arising from their ongoing exposure to information about animal exploitation and from the perception that individual action has limited impact within a predominantly non-vegan society. Negative experiences were also linked to the emotional strain of difficult social interactions. One participant captured this ambivalence by explaining:

> Positive in the sense that I know I'm having a positive impact on the environment, that I'm not responsible for animal suffering, and that I myself live in a healthier and more conscious way. But negative because I see how easy a lifestyle without animal exploitation actually is, and yet several billion sentient beings are still unnecessarily tortured and killed every year.

This account illustrates the coexistence of moral affirmation and distress over the perceived gap between personal action and societal change. Similarly, another participant reflected:

> On the one hand, living vegan means I am at peace with myself; my values and my actions are consistent. On the other hand, the many reports, videos, and exposés about violence, exploitation, and abuse of animals are incredibly distressing, because you know that

> you can't really change anything. In most cases, the law protects the animal exploitation industry. You have to learn to look at these realities, but at the same time not let them get too close to you.

Here, participants describe not only emotional conflict but also the need for active regulation – maintaining moral engagement while limiting psychological overwhelm. Together, these accounts illustrate how veganism can simultaneously function as a source of psychological alignment and as an ongoing emotional challenge, requiring individuals to balance moral engagement with emotional self-protection.

Despite these tensions, replies consistently reflected affirmation and reinforcement of the decision to become vegan. Many participants emphasised strong conviction and satisfaction with their choice, describing veganism as a decision they would not reconsider. These statements often reiterated themes of moral alignment and personal clarity, underscoring the stability and durability of participants' commitment.

Sense of Belonging

Participants commonly described some changes in their relationships after adopting a vegan lifestyle. While some noted that relationships with non-vegan family members, friends, or partners occasionally became more challenging or required adjustment, these changes were not always described as overt conflict or rupture. However, participants also reported a marked loss of belonging within their existing social environments, which in several cases took the form of explicit social exclusion. In parallel, some participants described choosing to withdraw themselves from social situations to avoid repeated discomfort or marginalisation. In contrast, a pronounced and consistently reported sense of belonging emerged in relation to other vegans. Many found new friends and acquaintances and participants frequently described feeling an immediate connection with other vegan individuals, including people they had not previously known. As one participant noted:

> In general, it's always a good sign for me when new people don't eat meat either, or even live vegan. I immediately feel more comfortable and a bit more understood.

This sense of immediate recognition suggests that veganism functioned as a salient identity marker, facilitating rapid perceptions of shared values and mutual understanding. Interactions with other vegans were often characterised by ease and emotional safety. For example, one participant described how:

> […] a casual acquaintance revealed that they were also vegan and invited me to a vegan Christmas party. We all felt equal and connected right away.

Such accounts indicate that shared dietary practices symbolised deeper moral alignment, enabling feelings of equality and belonging. Time spent with vegan friends was frequently described as particularly meaningful and supportive. One participant reflected:

> One of these friends became vegan herself some time later, and that led to a very close sense of connection. We can now share our experiences, new insights, and feelings around this, but also simply cook together or try out new vegan restaurants.

Here, shared practices such as cooking and dining together reinforced relational closeness and normalised participants' lifestyles within a supportive social context.

While most participants refrained from engaging in active activism due to the social-emotional challenges of navigating existing relationships, some made incidental references to gradual changes within their immediate social circles. These observations were typically brief and embedded within broader narratives. Participants mentioned, for example, that family members or friends had reduced their consumption of animal products or chosen vegetarian options more frequently. Importantly, such changes were not described as the result of deliberate persuasion. Rather, they appeared as unintended or cumulative effects of everyday interactions, suggesting that social influence may operate subtly within close relationships even in the absence of explicit advocacy.

Online Communities

Participants frequently highlighted the role of online vegan communities as an important source of support after adopting a vegan lifestyle. These platforms were described as serving practical functions, such as providing information, news, arguments, and recipes, but also fulfilling a broader social role. In particular, online spaces helped participants feel connected to others who share similar values and experiences. This function appeared especially relevant for participants who reported having few or no vegan contacts in their offline social environment. One participant described this dual function of information and belonging:

> I now frequently visit vegan subreddits online to read opinions, arguments, news, or recipes, but also because it gives me the feeling of being part of a worldwide community or movement, since I know very few vegans in my offline life.

For these individuals, online communities helped reduce feelings of isolation and reinforced the sense that they were not alone in their lifestyle choice. Similarly, engagement with vegan groups on platforms such as Reddit or Facebook was described as reinforcing a sense of shared presence:

> Online, there are several Facebook groups – vegan shopping groups, vegan travel groups, many vegan cooking pages. It feels good to know that there are other people living vegan as well.

Emotional Experiences Across Social Levels

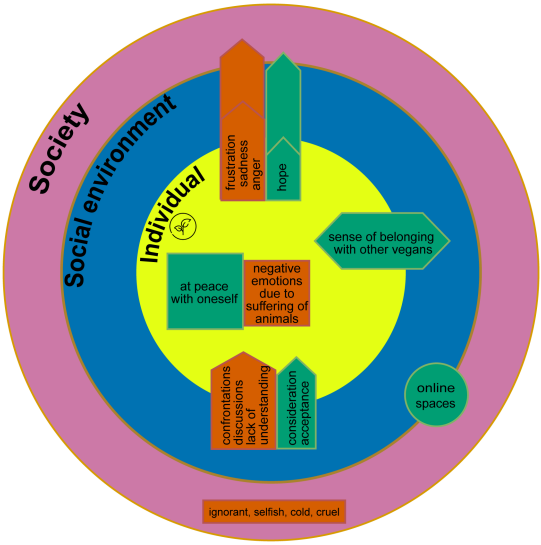
Participants' accounts revealed a clear differentiation in emotional experiences depending on the social level to which these emotions were directed. When reflecting on themselves and their immediate social relationships, participants more frequently described positive or mixed emotional experiences, including feeling at peace with themselves, experiencing acceptance, and maintaining a sense of belonging, particularly in interactions with other vegans. At the level of close relationships, negative emotions such as frustration or sadness were often accompanied by focusing on positive parts, such as acceptance coming from others.

In contrast, emotional responses became increasingly negative as participants referred to broader social contexts. Interactions within the wider social environment were often characterised by ambivalence, including feelings of frustration, anger, or sadness alongside occasional experiences of hope that the world is making changes in the right direction. At the most distal level, when participants described society as a whole, emotional responses were almost exclusively negative. Society was frequently characterised in terms such as ignorant, selfish, cold, or cruel, and participants did not report corresponding positive emotional experiences at this level.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that emotional experiences related to veganism vary systematically with social proximity. Positive and regulated emotional responses were more commonly described in relation to oneself and close others, whereas negative emotional reactions predominated when participants reflected on society at large. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 1. The figure depicts how participants' emotional responses differed depending on whether they referred to themselves, their immediate social environment, or society as a whole. Positive and mixed emotions were more commonly described in relation to the individual and close social relationships, whereas negative emotions predominated when participants reflected on society at large. The figure is intended as a conceptual summary of emotional patterns rather than a statistical inference.

Figure 1

Emotional Experiences Associated With Becoming Vegan Across Social Proximity (Vegan Individual, Social Environment, Society)



Note. green = positive emotions; red = negative emotions. Box size reflects the relative analytic salience of each emotion within the dataset, as determined through the coding process. Salience was based on the prominence and recurrence of emotional expressions across participants' accounts rather than on exact quantitative frequency counts.

Emotional Experiences Across Time

In addition to describing current experiences, long-term vegans frequently reflected on changes over time since adopting a vegan lifestyle. Many participants emphasised that aspects of living vegan had improved compared to earlier stages, particularly with regard to the availability of vegan products and options. Increased visibility of vegan food in supermarkets, restaurants, and public spaces was often described as making everyday life easier and reducing practical barriers. Participants also reported changes within their social environments, noting that family members, friends, or colleagues had become more accepting or accommodating over time. These reflections were often framed as a shift from initially negative or challenging experiences toward more manageable or supportive conditions.

At the same time, participants emphasised that such improvements were unevenly distributed across contexts. In particular, rural environments were consistently described as more challenging than urban settings, both in terms of social acceptance and access to vegan options. While urban spaces were perceived as increasingly supportive and

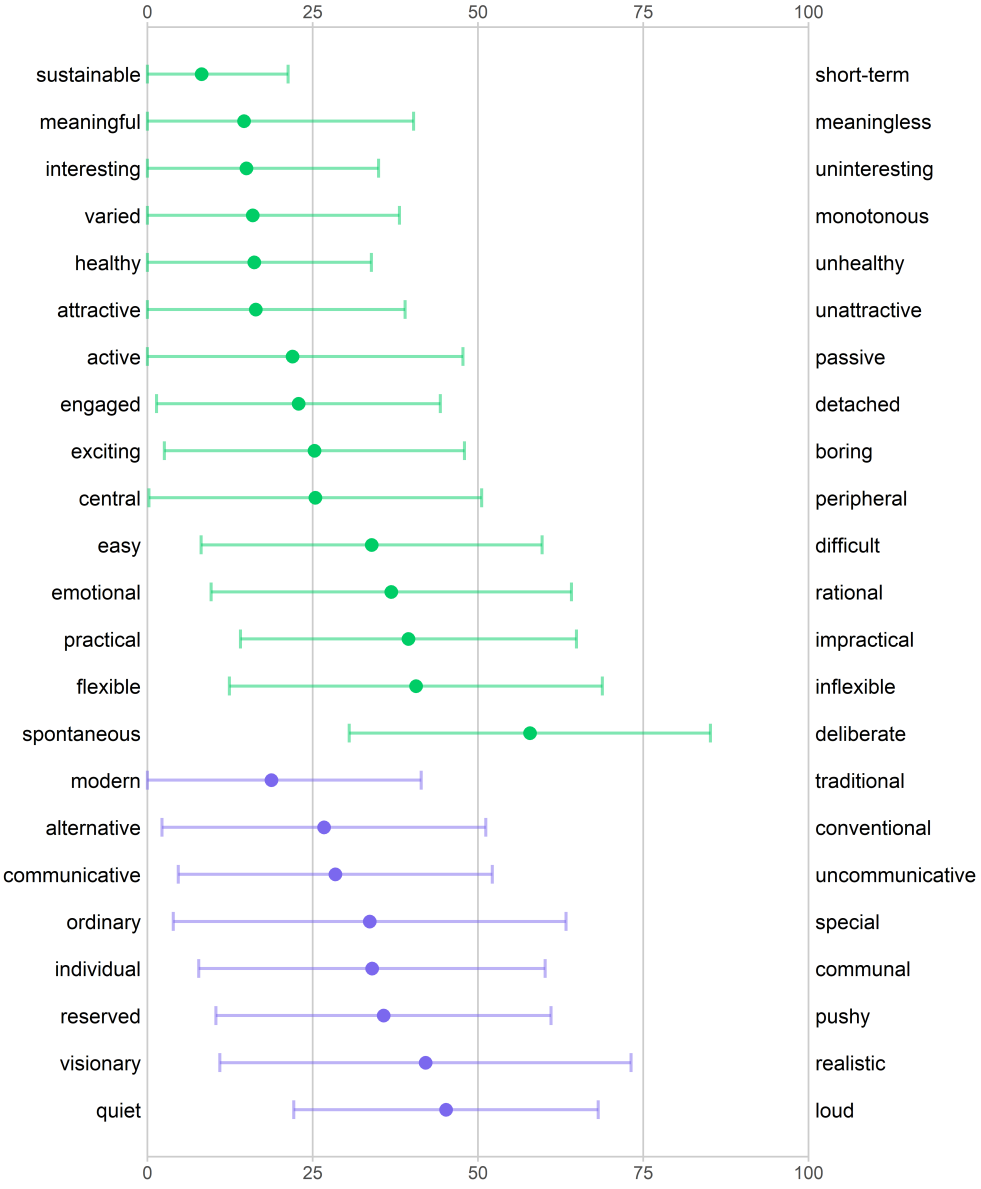
normalising of vegan lifestyles, rural areas were often portrayed as slower to change and more resistant to vegan practices.

Quantitative Results

Quantitative results from the semantic differential scales are presented in Figure 2. Adjective pairs were grouped according to their a priori classification as referring either to the individual experience of veganism or to societal perceptions of veganism. These ratings reflect evaluative perceptions rather than behavioural intentions or societal norms. At the individual level, veganism was most strongly associated with descriptors such as sustainable, meaningful, and interesting, followed by healthy, attractive, and engaged. In contrast, societal perceptions of veganism were most strongly linked to attributes such as modern, alternative, and communicative. The adjective pairs impractical–practical, spontaneous–deliberate, and visionary–realistic showed the greatest ambivalence, with mean ratings clustered near the midpoint of the scale. This pattern suggests that these dimensions may be less clearly associated with veganism, were interpreted too broadly, or may not constitute meaningful dichotomies for participants.

Figure 2

Results of Semantic Differential Scale Ratings



Note. Mean (± *SD*) ratings of 23 semantic differential adjective pairs on a unitless scale (0-100), describing how participants (n = 91) experience their life as vegans individually (green) and in relation to society (purple).

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the social and psychological experiences of individuals after adopting a vegan lifestyle, addressing a notable gap in the literature that has largely focused on motivations for becoming vegan rather than on post-transition experiences (Salehi et al., 2023). By examining emotional well-being, social relationships, and perceptions of society, the findings provide a nuanced picture of veganism as a lived moral identity that is experienced as both personally affirming and socially challenging.

Moral Coherence and Emotional Ambivalence

Consistent with prior research describing veganism as a moral and identity-based lifestyle (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2019; Vestergren & Uysal, 2022), participants predominantly reported positive effects of veganism on their own mental well-being. Living in accordance with personal ethical values was frequently described as fostering inner calm, self-consistency, and psychological relief. This finding aligns with theoretical accounts that conceptualise veganism as a form of moral alignment or integrity, in which behaviour and values become congruent (Greenebaum, 2012). Importantly, these positive experiences were more frequently reported than negative ones when participants reflected on their own sense of self. At the same time, participants' accounts revealed a clear emotional ambivalence. Heightened awareness of animal suffering, systemic injustice, and institutional protection of animal exploitation was associated with feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, and helplessness. This pattern resonates with recent conceptualisations of "vystopia," which describe the psychological burden experienced by vegans who perceive widespread moral disregard for animals (Veitch & Gregson, 2025). Thus, while veganism appeared to support psychological coherence at the individual level, it also exposed participants to ongoing emotional strain related to the broader social and political context. The strong sense of moral coherence and decision reinforcement described by participants may help explain why ethical motivations are associated with greater long-term adherence to veganism. Previous research has shown that ethical vegans adhere to a vegan diet for longer periods than individuals motivated primarily by health reasons (Radnitz et al., 2015). On the other hand, ethical vegans are perceived as more arrogantly overcommitted and less socially attractive by omnivores, which might add to the social strain (De Groeve et al., 2022).

Emotional Differentiation Across Social Proximity

A key contribution of this study lies in the differentiation of emotional experiences across social levels. Participants described more positive or regulated emotional responses when reflecting on themselves and their immediate social relationships, whereas emotional reactions became increasingly negative when directed toward society at large. This pattern was evident both in the qualitative data and in the semantic differential

ratings, which showed more positive evaluations of veganism at the individual level and more ambivalent or negative evaluations in relation to society. This differentiation suggests that emotional experiences associated with veganism are not uniform but might be shaped by social proximity. Close relationships appear to allow for nuance, adaptation, and regulation, whereas society as an abstract entity was described almost exclusively in negative terms. Such findings extend existing work on vegan stigma and social marginalisation (Cole & Morgan, 2011; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017).

Belonging, Exclusion, Relational Reconfiguration and the Importance of Online Communities

Consistent with previous research highlighting the relational challenges of veganism (Cherry & Asher, 2015; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019), participants frequently described changes in their social relationships following the transition to veganism. While not all changes involved overt conflict, many participants reported a loss of belonging within their existing social environments, including experiences of explicit social exclusion such as no longer being invited to gatherings. In some cases, participants also described withdrawing from social situations themselves to avoid repeated discomfort or marginalisation. In contrast, a pronounced sense of belonging emerged in relation to other vegans. Participants described immediate feelings of connection, shared understanding, and emotional safety when interacting with other vegan individuals, including those previously unknown to them. This finding aligns with social identity perspectives that emphasise the importance of ingroup belonging for individuals who hold counter-normative moral positions (Rothgerber, 2014). Vegan communities, both offline and online, appeared to function as important sources of validation and support, mitigating feelings of isolation and reinforcing a shared moral identity.

Online vegan communities played a particularly salient role for participants who lacked vegan contacts in their offline lives. These spaces provided not only practical resources but also emotional reassurance and a sense of collective belonging. This finding supports Cherry's (2015) argument that sustaining veganism requires access to cultural tools and communities that facilitate maintenance. It is important to note that participants were recruited primarily through online forums and social media, which may have increased the likelihood of capturing individuals already engaged in digital spaces. The prominence of online communities in the present findings may therefore partly reflect characteristics of the sampled population. At the same time, given the central role of digital platforms in contemporary lifestyle movements, online engagement is likely to represent an important dimension of vegan social experience for many individuals.

Emotional Regulation and the Navigation of Social Worlds

Taken together, the findings suggest that participants actively navigate emotional tension by regulating their engagement across different social contexts. In close relationships, participants often appeared to balance ethical commitment with strategies aimed at preserving social bonds, such as selective engagement or emotional distancing. This pattern aligns with Greenebaum's (2012) description of "face-saving" strategies employed by vegans to manage social tension and avoid alienation. In contrast, when reflecting on society as a whole, such regulation appeared less necessary, as participants did not depend on maintaining acceptance or approval at this level. This distinction may help explain why participants reported feeling psychologically better within themselves while simultaneously experiencing distress in response to the broader non-vegan world. Emotional regulation may thus be context-dependent, shaped by the perceived possibility of maintaining relationships and avoiding social isolation.

Notably, many participants explicitly distanced themselves from active vegan activism, a finding that contrasts with research suggesting that ethical vegans are typically politically motivated and oriented toward societal change (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2019; Kalte, 2021). Previous research has shown that greater collective efficacy, defined as the belief that vegans can make a positive difference, is associated with stronger engagement in vegan activism (Judge et al., 2022). In the present sample, participants frequently expressed scepticism toward activism and reported a limited sense of personal impact. Interestingly, these accounts contrasted with participants' casual references to small behavioural changes within their social environment. These incidental observations suggest that influence may occur in less visible and less intentional ways, and that participants may have limited awareness of the cumulative social effects of living according to their values. Taken together, these findings suggest that while individual vegans may experience their impact as minimal, the aggregation of many small, everyday influences across social networks may contribute to broader shifts in norms and practices. This discrepancy between perceived and potential influence may be particularly relevant for understanding feelings of frustration or inefficacy, as meaningful change may occur incrementally alongside, rather than only through, overt activism.

Limitations

A limitation of this study concerns the gender composition of the sample. This skew can be expected as previous research has found females tend to express more concern for animal welfare and are more likely to be vegetarian (Ruby, 2012). This imbalance has been linked to cultural associations of meat consumption with masculinity (Rothgerber, 2013). Moreover, online and voluntary surveys tend to attract disproportionately higher participation from women (Smith, 2008), which may have further amplified this skew. Consequently, while depicting the real-world composition of gender in veganism, the ex-

periences represented here may reflect the perspectives of women vegans more strongly than those of men. Future research would benefit from targeted recruitment strategies to ensure more balanced gender representation and to explore whether psychosocial experiences of veganism differ across genders. Another limitation concerns the relatively narrow cultural and linguistic scope of the sample. Participants were recruited primarily from German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland), with the majority residing in Austria. The findings therefore reflect experiences situated within a specific Western, German-speaking sociocultural context. Public discourse surrounding veganism, levels of social acceptance, and structural support for plant-based lifestyles differ across regions and cultures. As such, the psychosocial experiences described here may not be directly transferable to vegans living in different cultural, linguistic, or sociopolitical environments. Furthermore, some survey items included illustrative examples (e.g., "frustration," "hope," or specific social situations) intended to clarify the scope of reflection. While participants were free to respond beyond these prompts, such examples may have influenced the framing or salience of particular emotions and experiences. The wording of open-ended survey questions can shape the data generated, and future research may benefit from more neutral phrasing or alternative strategies to minimise potential anchoring effects.

Conclusion

By focusing on life after the transition to veganism, the present study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of veganism as a lived moral identity. The findings demonstrate that veganism can foster psychological coherence and a strong sense of belonging within vegan communities, while simultaneously exposing individuals to emotional burden, social exclusion, and moral distress in a predominantly non-vegan world. These experiences vary systematically across social proximity and over time, underscoring the complex interplay between morality, emotion, and social relations in the everyday lives of vegans.

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Data Availability: The dataset is available on OSF (see Mittmann et al., 2025).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, data is freely available (see Mittmann et al., 2025).

Index of Supplementary Materials

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