


“A football team with no midfield”: A qualitative analysis of anti-vegan stigma in Italy

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has demonstrated the prevalence of unfavourable attitudes towards individuals who adhere to a vegan diet and has provided empirical evidence to support the existence of an anti-vegan ideology. The present study aims to contribute to extant knowledge by examining the social perception of veganism and vegans in Italy. Italy is a nation characterised by a traditional culture of food that serves as a significant catalyst for collective identification and national pride. However, the country is experiencing significant changes that are precipitating a diversification of dietary habits and a transformation of the cultural identity of its citizens. A structured interview was administered to 156 participants (85 women) aged 19 to 68. A framework analysis of the interview data yielded three overarching themes: ‘Veganism as a deficit’, ‘Veganism as naturalness’, and ‘Veganism as a threat’. The analysis demonstrated the pervasive negative perceptions of the vegan diet as a deficiency and a potential threat to cultural identity, alongside a concomitant stigmatisation of individuals who adhere to a vegan diet. This stigmatisation is rooted in the normative perspective of carnism, even in a country whose diet is not meat-centric. Notwithstanding this predominantly negative perception, one of the themes presented in this study offers a positive assessment of veganism, centred on its naturalness. The present analysis illuminates and deepens the multifaceted and somewhat contradictory nature of the social perception of veganism within a context characterised by contrasting features and relevant social changes.

1. Introduction

The term ‘veganism’ refers to the voluntary abstention from animal food products, and a lifestyle characterised by a non-violent philosophy to safeguard animal welfare, the environment, and health (Nezlek et al., 2023). Furthermore, some authors place particular emphasis on the capacity of veganism to function as an anti-oppressive praxis, underpinned by a zoocentric cultural framework (Lopes & Minasse, 2024). This framework has the capacity to overcome the human-nature dichotomy, to repudiate the concept of a hierarchical distinction amongst species, and to acknowledge the inherent value of diverse forms of life, irrespective of their perceived instrumental value to humans (Esteves, 2021; Brugger, 2009). In this logic, such a culture is regarded as an alternative to a dominant anthropocentric paradigm, which has found its maximum expression in capitalism (Ferrigno, 2012; White, 2012). This is due to the fact that capitalism has intensified speciesist practices by removing prior cultural and material constraints, thereby enabling large-scale industrial animal agriculture and ecological destruction, including habitat loss and biodiversity decline (Jones & Sanbonmatsu, 2024).

Indeed, veganism is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond the realm of diet, encompassing the adoption of a vegan identity that influences behaviours and values following social identity norms (Vestergren & Uysal, 2022). The prevalence of veganism is increasing worldwide. In the United States, 4 % of the population identified as vegan in 2024 (Statista Research Department, 2025), the same percentage as the United Kingdom (Wunsch, 2024), where there has been a 350 % increase in the last decade of individuals identifying as vegan (Hodson & Earle, 2018). In Italy, where this study was conducted, the percentage of the population identifying as vegan was 2.3 % in 2024 (Eurispes, 2024).

2. The social perception of veganism

Veganism poses a symbolic challenge to speciesist ideologies that normalise animal exploitation and to the cultural centrality of meat consumption (Caviola et al., 2019; Cole & Morgan, 2011). In societies where meat is valued both nutritionally and culturally, vegans represent what Minson and Monin (2012) termed ‘morally motivated minorities’,

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whose lifestyle implicitly critiques mainstream consumption practices. However, this moral deviance gives rise to a paradox: although veganism is associated with compassion, health and environmental sustainability, and vegans are occasionally attributed favourable traits (Napoli and Ouschan, 2024), veganism is often stigmatised, being perceived as sanctimonious, extreme or socially difficult (Bresnahan et al., 2016; Branković & Budžak, 2024). Bresnahan et al. (2016) propose the concept of 'vegan stigma', whereby vegans are perceived as morally deviant and socially undesirable, resulting in social distancing. This perception frequently results in their marginalisation in various everyday contexts, including dining halls, workplaces and family settings.

The moral and identity-based challenges posed by veganism are further illuminated by the literature on the "meat paradox." Amiot and Colleagues (2020) theorise that humans experience cognitive conflict when empathising with animals while participating in their consumption, leading to psychological dissociation and moral disengagement. Veganism disrupts this dissociative process by confronting omnivores with the moral implications of their dietary choices, thereby eliciting defensive reactions to restore cognitive consistency. Piazza et al. (2015) identified the "4Ns" framework as a pervasive rationalisation schema that helps omnivores resolve the paradox without behavioural change. These justifications preserve the moral acceptability of meat eating whilst concurrently contributing to the stigmatisation of those who reject these rationalisations. Vegans are implicitly constructed as the outgroup who threatens to expose these inconsistencies. The resulting social tension reflects what Vestergren and Uysal (2022) describe as the intersection of moral conviction and intergroup processes: veganism functions in a dual capacity, as both an individual moral stance and a collective identity, thereby challenging the prevailing ideologies that privilege human supremacy and meat consumption.

MacInnis and Hodson (2017) provided some of the first quantitative evidence of bias against vegetarians and vegans, demonstrating that omnivores exhibit explicit and implicit prejudice toward these groups, often ranking them below other marginalised social categories. The perpetuation of stigma is also facilitated by media and cultural representations. Cole and Morgan's (2011) discourse analysis of British newspapers is seminal in its introduction of the term "vegaphobia", which was coined to denote the systemic marginalisation of veganism through derogatory media portrayals. It was found that mainstream media frequently portrays vegans as humourless, self-righteous, or irrational, and veganism as asceticism, an endeavour that is impossible to sustain and a fad. This has resulted in a public discourse that has undermined the legitimacy of vegan ethics and perpetuated hierarchical structures based on speciesism. Joustra, Alfaro, and Giacomani (2023) have expanded this analysis to digital culture, demonstrating how memes and social media representations caricature vegans as humourless or proselytising, reinforcing a socially shared script of ridicule in a country like Chile, where meat plays a central role in the food culture. Napoli and Ouschan's (2024) qualitative study illustrates how this stigma is expressed in everyday discourse. The photovoice methodology was employed to solicit visual depictions of participant perceptions, alongside a subsequent narrative reflection on their personal attitudes towards veganism. The analysis of these data revealed a recurring theme of non-vegans characterising vegans as alienating and socially disruptive, often associating them with behaviours that are perceived as "preachy" or "cult-like". De Groeve and colleagues (2021) corroborate this account, showing that vegans are often stereotyped as "moral rebels" and "dietary deviants." These labels, while acknowledging moral commitment, simultaneously frame veganism as a social transgression that violates shared norms, leading to perceptions of lower social attractiveness. It is important to note that these stereotypes serve a system-justifying function; that is to say, they maintain the legitimacy of omnivorous norms by positioning veganism as socially undesirable or extremist. Consequently, the social perception of veganism functions as a boundary-maintaining process through which dominant cultural

values are preserved.

From an intergroup relations perspective, these dynamics can be understood through the lens of social identity. The eating practices of a group constitute a fundamental aspect of its identity, and challenges to these practices threaten the symbolic integrity of the ingroup (Bagci et al., 2022). Guidetti et al. (2023) found that anticipated reproach predicts dehumanisation and social distancing between the two groups, especially among those with strong ingroup identification. These findings illustrate the self-protective nature of stigma: by constructing vegans as judgmental or extreme, omnivores can preserve a positive self-image and maintain moral equilibrium.

Empirical research indicates that the social stigmatisation of vegans is not merely attitudinal but ideological. Gregson, Piazza, and Boyd (2022) identify an emergent "anti-vegan" ideology, described as a reactionary cultural discourse that constructs veganism as a moral threat to human autonomy, masculinity and tradition. The ideological underpinnings of anti-veganism are intricately intertwined with the concept of carnism, a prevailing belief system that legitimises the consumption of animal products and stigmatises alternative dietary choices as aberrant (Joy, 2009). Carnism operates through mechanisms of denial, justification, and invisibility, making the exploitation of animals appear natural and necessary. MacInnis and Hodson (2017) demonstrated that the anti-vegan bias stems from perceived moral threat—omnivores feel judged by vegetarians' and vegans' dietary choices—and from challenges to traditional masculinity and cultural identity embedded in meat consumption. In many cultures, meat is symbolically associated with strength, power, and national identity. Consequently, abstaining from meat can be perceived as effeminate or unpatriotic. In this perspective, veganism is frequently linked to an eating disorder or a state of 'slow starvation' (Gregson et al., 2022), which can lead to osteoporosis, cognitive impairment and diminished libido. Adherents of a vegan diet are frequently depicted as naïve, unconnected to reality, uninformed, hypocritical, aggressive, and members of the hippie subculture (Gregson et al., 2022). Cross-cultural evidence further reveals the contextual roots of such bias. Branković and Budžak (2024) found that, in Serbia, vegans and vegetarians are described as making a "healthy yet unhealthy" choice: morally sound yet socially deviant. Serbian cuisine is distinguished by a prevalence of substantial meat-based dishes, which are frequently prepared and consumed during special events and family gatherings (Tomašević et al., 2023). The significance of meat as a source of sustenance and pleasure is further emphasised in Serbian folklore and literature, indicating its deep symbolic and cultural significance in Serbian society. The Serbian economy, in turn, is significantly influenced by meat production and consumption (Tomašević et al., 2023). In this context, the decision to abstain from meat consumption is viewed as a symbolic rejection of cultural traditions and shared identities. This interpretation aligns with the findings from Western societies, where veganism is regarded as a "symbolic threat" to prevailing dietary norms (Caviola et al., 2019; Piazza et al., 2015).

Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons indicate that the label of Western societies encompasses contexts characterised by divergent food cultures, where resistance to veganism may manifest in diverse forms. For instance, Polyportis et al. (2025) investigated this issue through focus groups conducted in two European countries, Greece and the Netherlands. In Greece, where the consumption of meat and dairy products is an integral part of national identity, as well as religious rituals and intergenerational family practices, participants anchored their resistance to collective rituals and traditions, thereby rooting it in culture. By way of contrast, the Netherlands has historically been distinguished by a more pragmatic approach to food, where dietary changes are often evaluated in terms of personal autonomy and functionality rather than cultural symbolism (Van Otterloo, 2000). In this context, the resistance demonstrated by Dutch participants was primarily rooted in pragmatic concerns and issues pertaining to autonomy. The authors of the study posit that this contrast enables an exploration of

the variance in anti-vegan rationalisations and their underlying meanings, which are distributed along a spectrum encompassing strong cultural roots and pragmatic resistance (Polyportis et al., 2025).

Anti-vegan ideology is not merely reactive but constitutes a distinct dietary identity. Linguistic and ideological analysis of online anti-vegan communities reveals that hostility towards veganism often intersects with broader authoritarian and social dominance orientations—psychological predispositions favouring hierarchy and the maintenance of intergroup inequalities (Gregson et al., 2022). Gregson and colleagues (2024) demonstrate that self-identified anti-vegans exhibit higher scores than both omnivores and vegans on measures of social dominance orientation (SDO), speciesism, male-role norms, and moral relativism. This is consistent with Dhont and Hodson's (2014) findings that right-wing adherents are more likely to endorse speciesism and engage in greater animal exploitation, suggesting that attitudes toward veganism are entwined with broader ideological belief systems. Guidetti et al. (2023) further show that omnivores with a high social dominance orientation tend to dehumanise vegans, perceiving them as less rational and more emotional, whereas vegans may reciprocally view omnivores as morally disengaged or complicit in harm. This mutual dehumanisation is exacerbated by anticipated reproach—the expectation that one's dietary practices will be morally condemned by the other group—thus fuelling intergroup defensiveness and polarisation. Expecting such adverse societal responses is a significant barrier to dietary change. Markowski and Roxburgh (2019) report that a significant number of individuals who contemplate adopting a vegan diet refrain from doing so due to fears of social rejection, ridicule, or relational strain, as encapsulated in the statement, "If I became a vegan, my family and friends would hate me." These findings emphasise the social embeddedness of eating practices, in which food functions as a medium of group belonging and moral signalling (Greenebaum, 2018).

Collectively, these research studies reveal a variety of adverse anti-vegan perceptions that are pervasive, multifaceted, and deeply entrenched in cultural norms. However, recent studies have indicated that non-vegans also recognise the alignment of specific values and principles associated with veganism with their own values and lifestyles, leading to a positive perception of veganism (Napoli and Ouschan, 2024; De Groeve et al., 2021). The findings of these studies suggest a more nuanced understanding of veganism in certain contexts, whereby the practice is simultaneously recognised and misinterpreted, respected and disparaged, valued and rejected.

2.1. Study aim

Individuals' consumption patterns and preferences are influenced by various cultural, symbolic, and social status factors (Lo Monaco & Bonetto, 2019). In light of this, the present study aims to investigate the social perceptions of veganism and of people who identify as vegan in Italy. The socio-cultural characteristics of this nation render it a compelling context for the investigation of this issue, as it is characterised by both deeply entrenched traditions and significant dynamics of change. With regard to the former, Italy has been observed to exhibit a distinctive association with its culinary heritage (Laroche et al., 1998; Lawrence & Tushman, 2020). Specifically, it has been highlighted that in Italy, one of the birthplaces of the Mediterranean diet (Baroni et al., 2024), food is intricately intertwined with concepts such as a sense of belonging, national identity, and a profound sense of pride (Lawrence & Tushman, 2020). This may serve as a stabilising factor in the eating habits of Italians, thereby engendering greater resistance to novel diets, such as the vegan one, than is observed in countries where the cultural identity is not so firmly associated with traditional foods (Torri et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, Italy appears to be undergoing a transformation with respect to its dietary habits. It has been observed that a hybridisation of food models has occurred in the Italian context, due to several factors (Mascarello et al., 2020). These include the globalisation of markets and

the arrival of significant flows of migrants, who have promoted the development of economic activities in the food and catering sectors, strongly linked to their countries of origin. Other notable changes include an increase in dining out, the widespread presence of take-out and street food, a more recreational attitude towards food, particularly among younger consumers, and an increasing demand for food variety among consumers (Mascarello et al., 2020). Furthermore, research indicates that the Italian youth demographic allocates more time to culinary pursuits in comparison to their counterparts in other nations, while concurrently demonstrating a penchant for culinary innovation (Dinnella et al., 2020). The integration of traditional elements with innovative practices is exemplified by the concept of "food polytheism," a term employed to delineate the contemporary landscape of food consumption in Italy (Scarpato et al., 2022). To provide a comprehensive understanding of the perception of veganism, it is necessary to consider other factors beyond the dietary issue. These primarily concern the recent approval of new regulations aimed at preventing animal exploitation. Italy has witnessed a notable improvement in its institutional framework regarding animal welfare in recent years. For instance, in 2022, the Constitution was formally amended to incorporate animal welfare, and national measures and plans on animal welfare were implemented, including the National Plan for Animal Welfare. Moreover, in recent years, the animal rights movement has become more organised and capable of developing communication strategies and targeted interventions (Basile et al., 2025). This advocacy work can influence changes in public opinion, regulation and commercial practices, as well as promote changes in attitudes and consumption.

The present study aims to contribute to the extant body of knowledge by examining the social perception of veganism and vegans in a context characterised by traditionalism, but undergoing significant changes that are triggering the diversification of food habits and the transformation of the cultural identity of citizens.

3. Methods

3.1. Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through convenience sampling, with advertisements on social media platforms utilised to explain the research's purpose, the participants' characteristics, and the methodology for participation. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were as follows: (I) age >18 years old; (II) not adhering to a vegan or a vegetarian diet; (III) having a good knowledge of the Italian language, enabling them to understand the purpose of the research and participate in the interview. No financial compensation was offered for participation.

3.2. Participants

The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. A total of 156 participants (aged 19–68; mean age: 34) were administered a structured interview, which lasted approximately 1 h. Of the total, 85 participants identified as women and 71 as men. The educational level of the participants was found to be medium to high, with 59.4 % holding a high school diploma and 40.6 % holding a bachelor's or master's degree.

3.3. Ethics

Ethics approval for the project was granted by the Research Evaluation Committee of the Psychology Department at the University of Milano-Bicocca (N. RM-2023-852). All participants provided informed written consent.

3.4. Data collection

The data were collected using a structured qualitative interview. The

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristic		
	n	%
Gender		
Female	85	54.5
Male	71	45.5
Age		
19-30	96	61.5
31-50	17	10.9
51-70	41	26.3
N/A	2	1.3
Highest educational level		
High school/some college	76	48.7
University or postgraduate degree	52	33.3
N/A	28	17.9
Employment		
Housewife	6	3.8
Unemployed	6	3.8
Student	50	32
Employed	80	51.2
Retired	4	2.6
N/A	10	6.4

interview grid was developed in accordance with extant literature and research aims. A preliminary trial was conducted with three students enrolled in a bachelor's degree programme in psychology. After receiving feedback, the grid was refined to enhance clarity and flow. The interview grid comprised three sections, each corresponding to specific objectives. The first section aimed to elicit attitudes and beliefs associated with the vegan diet, posing questions such as, 'Can you name three words that come to mind when you think of a vegan diet?' The second interview section aimed to identify the representation of vegan individuals and their motivations (e.g., 'Who might find it easier to follow a vegan lifestyle?'). The third section investigated the perceived acceptance of veganism, posing questions such as, 'What factors might be contributing to the limited availability of vegan menus in restaurants?' The complete interview grid is available in the supplementary materials. Sociodemographic data were collected after each interview.

The two authors conducted the interviews; one is a university professor of social psychology with research expertise in qualitative methodologies, and the other is a researcher with a Master's degree in social psychology, trained to conduct qualitative interviews. The interviewers were not acquainted with the participants prior to the commencement of the interviews. All participants were interviewed via Zoom after they had signed the consent form. This method is comparable to face-to-face interviews in terms of the richness of the data obtained, but it is more convenient and has a broader geographic scope (Hanna, 2012). All interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed in full.

3.5. Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted employing a specific form of thematic analysis, namely Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). This approach is distinguished by its high degree of adaptability, which allows it to be tailored to meet the specific requirements of each study. The template analysis is not linked to a particular epistemology (Brooks et al., 2015). This study adopts a subtle realist approach (Hammersley, 1992). This approach acknowledges that the researchers' perspectives inherently influence research. However, it advocates that phenomena exist independently of the researcher and can be understood through the research process (Brooks et al., 2015).

Following this procedure, the two authors independently read a subset of data (20 interviews) to become acquainted with the concepts and linguistic expressions relevant to the research aims. During this immersive reading process, the two authors took notes on their observations of the data. In a subsequent discussion, they shared their notes and discussed them to develop a mutual understanding of the texts.

Thereafter, they proceeded to inductively code the sub-data set individually to identify the most salient codes and quotations and to aggregate them into themes (Colucci and Montali, 2008). A series of meetings was arranged to discuss their choices, allowing them to develop a template. The second author then applied the template to the remaining database. Subsequent meetings were convened to share the choices made, discuss the new codes and themes identified at this stage of the analysis, and discuss the overall articulation of the identified themes. The results are reported according to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist.

4. Results

The analysis identified three themes that articulate the most relevant meanings of veganism: 'Veganism as deficit', 'Veganism as naturalness', and 'Veganism as threat'. (Table 2). The subsequent section will present these themes, their sub-themes, and some significant excerpts. Following each citation, the participant is identified by indicating their gender (M/W) and age.

4.1. Veganism as a deficit

This theme indicates an unfavourable attitude towards veganism, a predominant meaning in the interviews. Specifically, this theme encompasses the discourses of interviewees who portray veganism as a deficient diet due to its purported shortcomings, which would adversely impact the health of its adherents and, more broadly, the representation of individuals who are vegan in terms of physical, psychological, and behavioural traits.

4.1.1. A limited and insufficient diet

Specifically, the diet is described as deficient from a nutritional point of view ('The vegan diet doesn't provide adequate nutrition, first of all there isn't enough protein. Considering vegan proteins and animal proteins to be alike is a fairy tale. This, in turn, gives rise to imbalances within the body' M, 25; 'It's an incomplete diet. Given the absence of meat and derivatives etc. something is always missing, like a football team with no midfielder' W, 22) as well as a cause of undernourishment ('You're in a state of malnutrition resulting from inadequate consumption of proteins, fats, and vegetables' M, 57). In addition to the nutritional deficits that have been identified, the vegan diet has been criticised for its perceived limitations in terms of taste ('Given the

Table 2
Main themes and subthemes.

MAIN THEME	SUBTHEMES	EXAMPLES
Veganism as a deficit	A limited and insufficient diet	<i>The vegan diet doesn't provide adequate nutrition, first of all there isn't enough protein. Considering vegan proteins and animal proteins to be alike is a fairy tale.</i>
	A deficient person	<i>Obviously they have a skin complexion that is not bright as it is deficient in numerous foods, numerous, let's say, minerals</i>
Veganism as naturalness	A non-artificial dietary regime	<i>I certainly don't put processed foods in my perception of veganism</i>
	A lifestyle that respects nature	<i>Many in my opinion do it for the environment because the meat industry damages the environment and the vegan diet is seen as a solution to reduce these harmful emissions.</i>
Veganism as a threat	A cultural and identity threat	<i>It's very difficult to accept veganism here in Italy because we have a culinary tradition that rocks.</i>
	A menace to interpersonal relationships	<i>9 out of 10 people who go vegan are a big pain in the ass. If I have to get into an argument every time I sit at the table, you can go to hell.</i>

restricted range of ingredients available, everything always has the same taste and it tastes nothing' W, 45), of choice possibility ('You always eat the same things, it's limited, you can't really choose' W, 31) and of variability of the dishes ('In my opinion it's a bit monotonous after a while; you always eat the same things, you end up always eating broccoli, cabbage, celeriac, salad, radicchio and fennel, and the various legumes' W, 27). It is interesting to note that some responses convey a perception of veganism as being characterised by vegetable consumption only. This is not in accordance with the actual data regarding the diverse products that vegans consume (Macinnis & Hodson, 2017), suggesting that this negative perception may be partly due to a lack of understanding of veganism. The depiction of the vegan diet in deficit and negative terms is predicated on the implicit premise of the omnivorous diet as complete and adequate. The depiction of the vegan diet as deficient in some way is, in fact, a distinctive characteristic that is perceived negatively.

4.1.2. A deficient person

The nutritional deficits that are discussed in the interviewees' discourse and which, according to them, characterise veganism would also have an impact on the individuals adhering to a vegan diet, compelling them to rely on supplements to compensate for these deficiencies ('People who follow a vegan diet need supplements to be healthy in order to compensate the deficiencies of the diet' M, 24). Despite this, the diet is said to impact the outward appearance of the vegan person. The deficit dimension emerges here in terms of a lack of complexion, strength and fat – three 'visible' elements which the interviewees believe characterise vegan people. People who adhere to a vegan lifestyle are described as "pale" ('Obviously they have a skin complexion that is not bright as it is deficient in numerous foods, numerous, let's say, minerals' M, 25), weak ('An anaemic person who doesn't make it through the day, too weak' M, 22) and thin ('They are thin, tending toward anorexia' M, 57; 'The few vegans I know have anorexia, ugly to look at' W, 61). The negative connotations associated with this perception appear to be substantiated by the observation that these bodily deficiencies are configured, according to some of the participants, in pathologising terms, as evidenced by the references to anaemia, anorexia, and skeletal physique. Furthermore, in some cases, these deficiencies are accompanied by the utilisation of devaluing expressions directed towards the vegan physique, as illustrated by the judgment of ugliness.

Representing the vegan diet as limited also helps to understand participants' perceptions of some psychological characteristics they ascribed to vegan people: creativity, open-mindedness, and curiosity. Creativity is regarded as a means to compensate for the limitations of the vegan diet, enabling individuals to achieve a comprehensive diet, albeit with a reduced food selection ('It takes creativity to make complete meals without so many foods such as dairy, eggs, meat' W, 22). As vegan people adopt a distinct diet from the omnivorous diet typically consumed by most of the population and lead different lifestyles, our respondents consider them "open-minded", "ready to change themselves", and "curious" ('It's a world that is so different from the one we are used to, that people who are vegan need to be prone to stimuli or need to experience something new, so for sure they are curious people' W, 58). The implicit acceptance of the omnivorous diet as the norm is evident in the expression 'we are used to it', suggesting a universalisation of this way of life through an undefined subject. In other cases, the person who chooses a vegan diet is portrayed as hyper-controlling and rigid, and this is justified by the need they would have to take great care in avoiding animal-derived foods and focusing on a very limited diet.

4.2. Veganism as naturalness

A secondary meaning in the interviews is that of veganism as naturalness. This notion is elaborated through two sub-themes,

encompassing the relationship with animals and the broader relationship with the environment.

4.2.1. A non-artificial dietary regime

The vegan diet is regarded as "natural" ('Natural because it comes from nature' W, 52; 'I certainly don't put processed foods in my perception of veganism' W, 26) and this is associated with a positive perception of people who practice veganism that is expressed through the idea of a healthy complexion ('A beautiful person, with beautiful, natural skin. The picture of health' W, 52) and a healthy body ('Definitely healthy because they don't eat the processed foods anyway' W, 50), performant and of appropriate weight ('A person who is watchful of her figure and does sports' M, 22; 'From the physical point of view, a fit person' W, 23). The implication, therefore, is that adherence to natural dietary principles ensures favourable outcomes, which in turn is linked to a representation of nature as inherently beneficial. Notably, references to veganism as a conscious choice emerge exclusively within this positive depiction, as evidenced by the emphasis on abstaining from certain foods with negative connotations and the representation of the individual who is vegan as one who takes care of their body.

4.2.2. A lifestyle that respects nature

The second sub-theme revolves around the notion that the underlying principle of veganism is predicated on respecting nature. This means, for example, abstaining from the exploitation and killing of animals ('The people I know really care about the idea of not exploiting animals for our own gluttony or pleasure. So, they found, let's say, an alternative diet to the one we normally consume' W, 25). In other instances, this principle is affirmed by participants who claim that individuals who are vegan seek to contribute to environmental conservation ('Many in my opinion do it for the environment because the meat industry damages the environment and the vegan diet is seen as a solution to reduce these harmful emissions' M, 22). These values are perceived to have an impact on such diverse areas as self-care, including the choice of cosmetics and personal cleansing products ('Most cosmetic products now have the vegan symbol because that they are not used on animals, otherwise people who are vegan cannot use them' W, 24), the choice of clothing and footwear ('If you choose to follow a vegan lifestyle, it's not just the food, it's no longer taking a leather shoe and then the issue of clothes' W, 52) and the care of one's home ('I think there are even vegan detergents' W, 41). Such values are, therefore, perceived as the drivers of the choices people make in different areas. Indeed, they are regarded as so influential that they are even defined as "a way of life".

The association of veganism with environmental conservation elucidates the perception amongst our participants that the vegan lifestyle is more likely to be adopted by women. This is founded upon the stereotypical association between the feminine qualities of care and domesticity ('They are more typically female. Perhaps because women are more concerned with themselves, the planet, and other people' W, 52). Conversely, men are often associated with meat consumption ('I think it's something for women because men who don't eat the Fiorentina steak ... where can you find them?' W, 20). Indeed, meat is widely regarded as a symbol of virility and power, characteristics that are often ascribed to men (Ruby & Heine, 2011).

In the participants' discourse, the concept of veganism as a value system centred on environmental defence has been identified as connected to the portrayal of people who identify with vegan values as young. Accordingly, instances of social change are attributed to this category in light of contemporary values such as animal and environmental advocacy ('I imagine people who are vegan as young people motivated by a desire to create a world without pollution, they want to create a better world, characterised by improved environmental conditions' W, 53; 'I think people who are vegan as young. When I think of Friday for Future it's always the young people. That's why I imagine them that way' M, 23).

4.3. Veganism as a threat

The third theme portrays veganism as a perceived threat to Italy's historical and cultural identity, as well as to interpersonal relations between people who practice veganism and individuals who do not adhere to the same lifestyle. The concept of threat, which participants employ to elucidate, for instance, the scarcity of resources in Italy for vegans, facilitates an understanding of the stigma associated with them.

4.3.1. A cultural and identity threat

The perceived widespread rejection of veganism is explained as a threat to Italian culinary tradition ('It's very difficult to accept veganism here in Italy because we have a culinary tradition that rocks. And so veganism is seen as a series of sacrifices' W, 49). This assertion is further substantiated by the utilisation of the pronoun 'we' in the initial quotation of this theme, wherein the participant not only asserts her perspective but also generalises the significance of this Italian culinary tradition. Particularly in the Italian regions, where these traditions are said to be more deeply rooted, the alleged dietary restrictions associated with veganism would be perceived as an abandonment of culinary practices ('It is much less accepted, especially in the southern regions where the tradition of food is very strong, as a result of which one cannot conceive veganism' W, 57). As the above quotes show, the concept of Italian culinary tradition is invoked in the participants' discourse and is taken for granted to such an extent that its elaboration is considered unnecessary. Notably, none of the participants clarified which food would be characteristic of this tradition and incompatible with a vegan diet. In other interviews, the notion of the threat posed by veganism is imbued with a moral dimension; this phenomenon is regarded as being in direct opposition to a conventional *modus operandi* ('Veganism threatens that spirit of tradition, normality and tranquillity, something classical that has always been there' W, 41). As indicated by the preceding citation, the change associated with veganism is viewed negatively and perceived as a threat to the prevailing social order. Within this perspective, veganism is narrated as a challenge to the very comprehensibility of the world, with the hamburger, when produced in its vegan form, being cited as an example of absurdity ('I would just remove the restaurants with vegan cuisine. They are not necessary. If you want to be a person who is vegan, you eat what little there is without meat and derivatives, but what is a vegan hamburger? It's not a hamburger' W, 22). The application of the adjective 'vegan' to an object results in a transformation of its identity to the point of incomprehensibility and absurdity.

4.3.2. A menace to interpersonal relationships

In a different twist, some interviewees attribute veganism to being a potential threat to interpersonal relationships. Individuals who are vegan are often portrayed as zealous advocates, willing to engage in confrontations with family members who are non-vegan and acquaintances to persuade them to adopt a vegan lifestyle, leading to interpersonal tensions or the alienation of these individuals ('9 out of 10 people who go vegan are a big pain in the ass. If I have to get into an argument every time I sit at the table, you can go to hell' W, 61). Descriptions of people who practice veganism imply a tendency to pass judgment on others and to make those who do not adhere to the same dietary regime feel guilty ('She looks down on you when you order meat and eat it in front of her' W, 25). People who practice veganism are also described as insistent in their attempts to change the opinions and behaviours of others ('They tend to want to make their idea prevail and try to convince you not to eat meat' W, 22).

5. Discussion

The analysis yielded three themes that elucidate the multifaceted meaning of veganism: 'Veganism as a deficit', 'Veganism as naturalness', and 'Veganism as a threat'. These three themes also convey different

perspectives on this social issue: negative in the first and third, and positive in the second.

In the initial theme, veganism is characterised as a restrictive diet that can lead to malnutrition, which has a detrimental effect on the individual adhering to a vegan diet. The individual in question is described as lacking in complexion, strength, and fat, or depicted in a pathologising manner, as evidenced by references to anaemia or anorexia. This finding aligns with extant literature in this field (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Gregson et al., 2022). The depictions of veganism and its adherents are characterised by a cross-cutting element, namely, the reference to a normative conception of the ideal dietary regime that would be constituted by the omnivorous diet (Joy, 2009). It can be argued that the vegan diet can be considered deficient only if compared to the omnivorous diet. This aspect is regarded as its distinctive element, which is subject to negative evaluation. The notion that a vegan diet is limited has been identified as intertwined with interviewees' discourse on open-mindedness and curiosity as characteristics of individuals who are vegan. Indeed, the present study demonstrated that creativity and open-mindedness can be perceived as two essential characteristics that help people who practice veganism overcome the perceived limitations of the vegan diet.

In a similar negative vein, the third theme demonstrated how the perception of veganism can be explicitly associated with the concept of threat, as evidenced by recent research (Rosenfeld et al., 2024). The perception is that the threat in question is directed against the Italian cuisine tradition and the nation's historical and cultural identity. The notion of a unified Italian culinary tradition was regarded as a self-evident premise; furthermore, no mention was proffered of any comestibles from said tradition that would be incompatible with the tenets of vegan dietary principles. This omission appears to substantiate its ideological character. The concept that adopting a vegan diet constitutes a departure from the prevailing social order elucidates the perception of vegans as deviants and, by extension, as a potential threat (Napoli & Ouschan, 2024).

The issue of the potential threat posed by veganism is intertwined, in this theme, with the role of vegans, who are frequently depicted as irksome militants of their convictions, driven by a sense of moral superiority that compels them to attempt to persuade others to adopt a plant-based diet (Markowski, 2024). Consequently, daily interaction with these individuals is often characterised as exhausting and problematic, to the extent that it poses a significant threat to the viability of ongoing social relationships (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019).

When considered as a whole, these two themes indicate the presence of an anti-vegan ideology among the participants, characterised by a general aversion to vegan food and stigmatisation of individuals who are vegan (Gregson et al., 2022; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Cole & Morgan, 2011). Whilst corroborating extant literature, this result also contributes to extending it for some of the characteristics of the context in which the research was conducted. While Italy has a long-established culinary tradition, it is also one of the birthplaces of the Mediterranean diet, which is fundamentally based on the use of vegetables and fruit. From this standpoint, the vegan diet, which is the primary focus of the research participants' remarks, may be perceived as less intimidating than in other contexts where the significance of meat and its symbolic value are more prominent (Branković & Budžak, 2024). However, the data presented herein demonstrate that, even within Italy, perceptions are centred on negative contents, analogous to those that have also been identified in different contexts. Despite the varying cultural contexts investigated, the stability and homogeneity of these contents constitute a significant result in itself. This phenomenon indicates the spread and resistance to change of this ideological structure.

In contrast, the second theme delineates an alternative signification of veganism in its correlation with nature, thereby establishing a nexus with the articulation of favourable attitudes towards vegan individuals and their dietary regime. The vegan diet is considered a natural dietary regime because it is based on unprocessed foods and is free from

industrial production. This is associated with a positive image of the person who adheres to this diet, characterised by a healthy complexion and a well-balanced, healthy, and optimally proportioned body. In another sense, the concept of naturalness is employed to position veganism as a positive moral value oriented towards defending animals and the environment. This, in turn, positions veganism as a choice aligned with contemporary moral values. In line with the notion that veganism is associated with emerging sensibilities, our participants indicated that the practice is most prevalent among young people. This last observation may suggest that veganism has the potential for future diffusion. The findings of our study suggest a correlation between veganism and a range of positive attributes, alongside the negative themes considered above. This positive characterisation is less prevalent and less explored in the literature. The extant literature suggests that it is more prevalent among vegetarians (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). In the present case, however, the participants are all omnivores. Furthermore, extant research has demonstrated a correlation between a positive attitude and the concept of vegan morality (De Groeve et al., 2022). In the context of the present study, however, the positive association with nature is more directly relevant.

This positive nuance in the participants' discourse can be speculatively traced to specific characteristics of the context under investigation. As previously mentioned, the importance of a Mediterranean diet is evident. Additionally, the social changes in the Italian context mentioned in the introduction can be considered. These social changes are not limited to diet, but rather extend more broadly to the diffusion of novel sensibilities concerning the exploitation of animals. It can be argued that these changes, when considered in conjunction with the increasing prevalence of veganism, may have contributed to the enrichment and articulation of the perception of veganism through various content. In this regard, the model of social representations proposed by Bauer and Gaskell (2001) is worth recalling. The model demonstrates how social representations of novel and distressing concepts, in this case veganism, are subject to temporal shifts and should be examined longitudinally.

A notable absence in the results is any reference to the political dimension of veganism, in terms of a revolutionary political ideology of anti-capitalist liberation. This absence can be explained by the wording of the questions, which investigated veganism as a diet and a lifestyle, as discussed in the Limits section. Nevertheless, this phenomenon may also be ascribed to the absence of a movement within Italy that has thus far rendered this political orientation of veganism perceptible and pertinent in public discourse (Bertuzzi, 2022).

Despite the presence of gendered characteristics in the data, our analysis did not identify any discursive patterns that were exclusively gender-specific. The three meanings of veganism that emerged in this study – deficit, naturalness and threat – were expressed by both participants who identified as male and participants who identified as female. Moreover, the discourses of both genders coexisted within the identified subthemes. Furthermore, concerning the intensity of prejudice, the participants' answers included several comments that were critical of veganism and vegans. Respondents from both genders articulated these observations. Some studies in the scientific literature have indicated that individuals who self-identify as male tend to exhibit more negative attitudes towards veganism than those who self-identify as female (Judge & Wilson, 2019; Monteiro et al., 2017; Rosenfeld et al., 2024). This phenomenon can be explained by the notion that vegetarianism is incongruent with traditional masculinity (Thomas, 2016). However, other studies have identified only minor or insignificant gender differences in stereotyping (De Groeve et al., 2021; De Groeve et al., 2022; Guidetti et al., 2023). This result may be attributed to the emergence of novel conceptions of masculinity espoused by men who have eliminated meat from their diets and adopted veganism as a legitimate expression of masculinity, citing links to physical strength, rationality, courage, and discipline (Velzeboer et al., 2024). These novel expressions of masculinity, predicated on ecological values and

eschewing male archetypes associated with domination and exploitation of nature, are more prevalent among younger generations (Pulé and Hultman, 2021). The age of the participants may also have contributed to the absence of significant differences observed in the study, given that the majority of participants were young.

Moreover, research findings indicate that male participants who adhere to an omnivorous diet exhibited a more negative response than female participants who follow an omnivorous diet when evaluating males who follow a vegan lifestyle. However, no such differences in response were observed when the evaluation was directed towards women who adhere to a vegetarian or vegan diet (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). In the present study, the absence of gender in the interview grid questions suggests that the participants may have been influenced by the prevailing assumption that the archetypal vegan individual is female. This may provide a rationale for the absence of gender-related differences in our participants' responses, given that a recent meta-analysis has demonstrated that omnivores exhibit more prejudice towards vegan men than towards vegan women. (Velzeboer et al., 2024).

5.1. Limits and future perspectives

The present study has its limitations. In particular, the application of a qualitative methodology precludes the possibility of generalising the findings. Despite these limitations, the analysis enabled an in-depth investigation into the participants' perceptions. A further limitation of the study is that the participants were exclusively omnivores. This was because the investigation focused on how the majority group, which adheres to the prevailing culture regarding meat consumption, positions itself in relation to a minority whose proposals constitute a radical critical alternative. This choice did not permit the investigation of the social perception that people who have chosen a vegetarian diet have of vegans. This research topic is of particular pertinence and requires further investigation, as previous studies have indicated discrepancies in the social perception of veganism among vegetarians and omnivores (Nezlek et al., 2023).

Regarding age demographics, the majority of participants fell within the 19–30 age group. This outcome is attributable to the fact that the invitation to participate in the research was predominantly disseminated through the social media channels of students and alums. Notwithstanding this, approximately 50 % of the participants were over 30 years of age, thereby ensuring a diverse sample despite the imbalance in age distribution. Future research could focus on analysing the relationship between age and perception of veganism, as the results of existing studies on this topic are inconclusive. Some studies have indicated the presence of age-related differences in attitudes (Vandermoere et al., 2019), whilst others have demonstrated the existence of mixed attitudes (Bryant, 2019). It has been observed that older people tend to view certain aspects of veganism more positively, for example in terms of ease and practicality. However, these older people simultaneously considered veganism to be less healthy, less ethical and less aspirational than younger people (Bryant, 2019). A further limitation of our study is the medium to high average educational level of the participants and their residence in urban areas. Indeed, in rural communities or contexts where livestock farming and meat production are integral to the economic and cultural identity, veganism is often perceived as a threat to economic interests and values (Nye & Wheeler, 2023). This perception is articulated through defensive narratives and anti-vegan discourse. Further qualitative research with participants from diverse backgrounds has the potential to offer valuable insights, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within the broader Italian context. Finally, the formulation of the questions, which explored veganism as a diet and lifestyle, may have constrained the exploration of the political dimensions of veganism. It can thus be argued that the focal point of our research endeavours pertains to the social perception of strict vegetarianism rather than that of veganism. This issue is of particular relevance to the discourse within the vegan movement, where

it serves to emphasise a significant distinction. Nevertheless, the present study focuses on a different level of analysis, specifically public perception. This perception of veganism as a diet and lifestyle that obscures its political dimension is primarily influenced by the manner in which it is most commonly presented in communications on the subject, even by those who adhere to the most prevalent forms of contemporary mainstream veganism.

The dataset of the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Chiara Amicabile: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Lorenzo Montali:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Ethical statement

The manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct. The research has been approved by the Research Evaluation Committee of the Psychology Department at the Milano-Bicocca University (N. RM-2023-852).

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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