



HOW DOES THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND

'VEGAN' & 'VEGANISM'?

AND WHAT CAN THE
ANIMAL FREEDOM
MOVEMENT LEARN
FROM THIS?






Narrative Research Report

Corpus linguistic analysis of
internet discourse

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INTRODUCTION

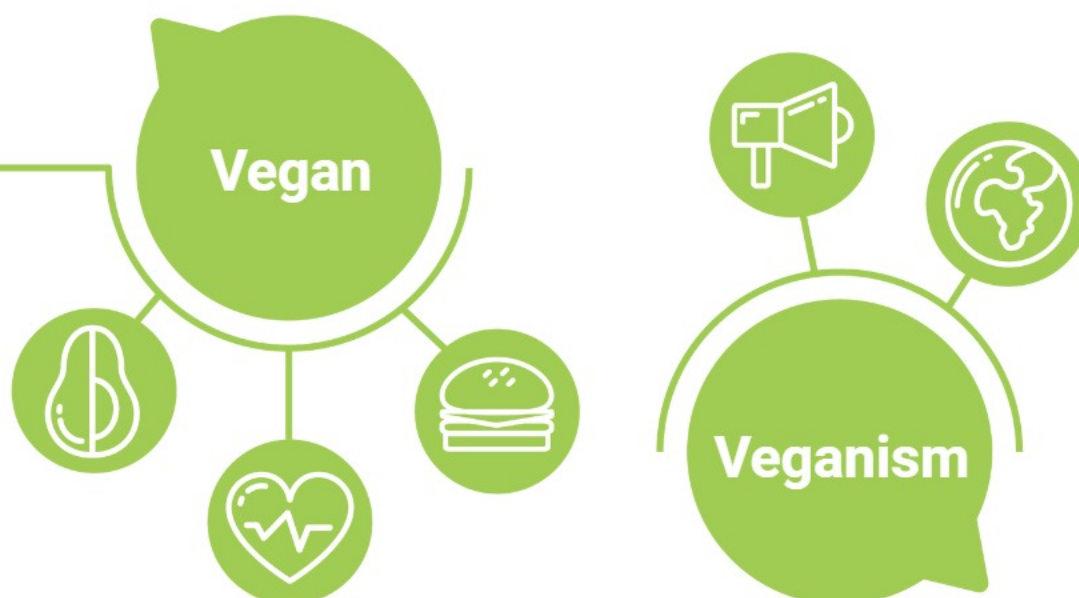


Purpose

The purpose of this research was to understand how vegans, vegan diets, and veganism in general are being discussed in public discourse, and how this might inform messaging created by the Animal Freedom movement.

Summary of findings

Where *vegan* is used (as the findings below will outline in detail), it tends to be found in contexts where diet and lifestyle are the focus. By contrast, *veganism* is much more strongly associated with social justice, and regularly appears alongside other nouns with the *-ism* suffix.

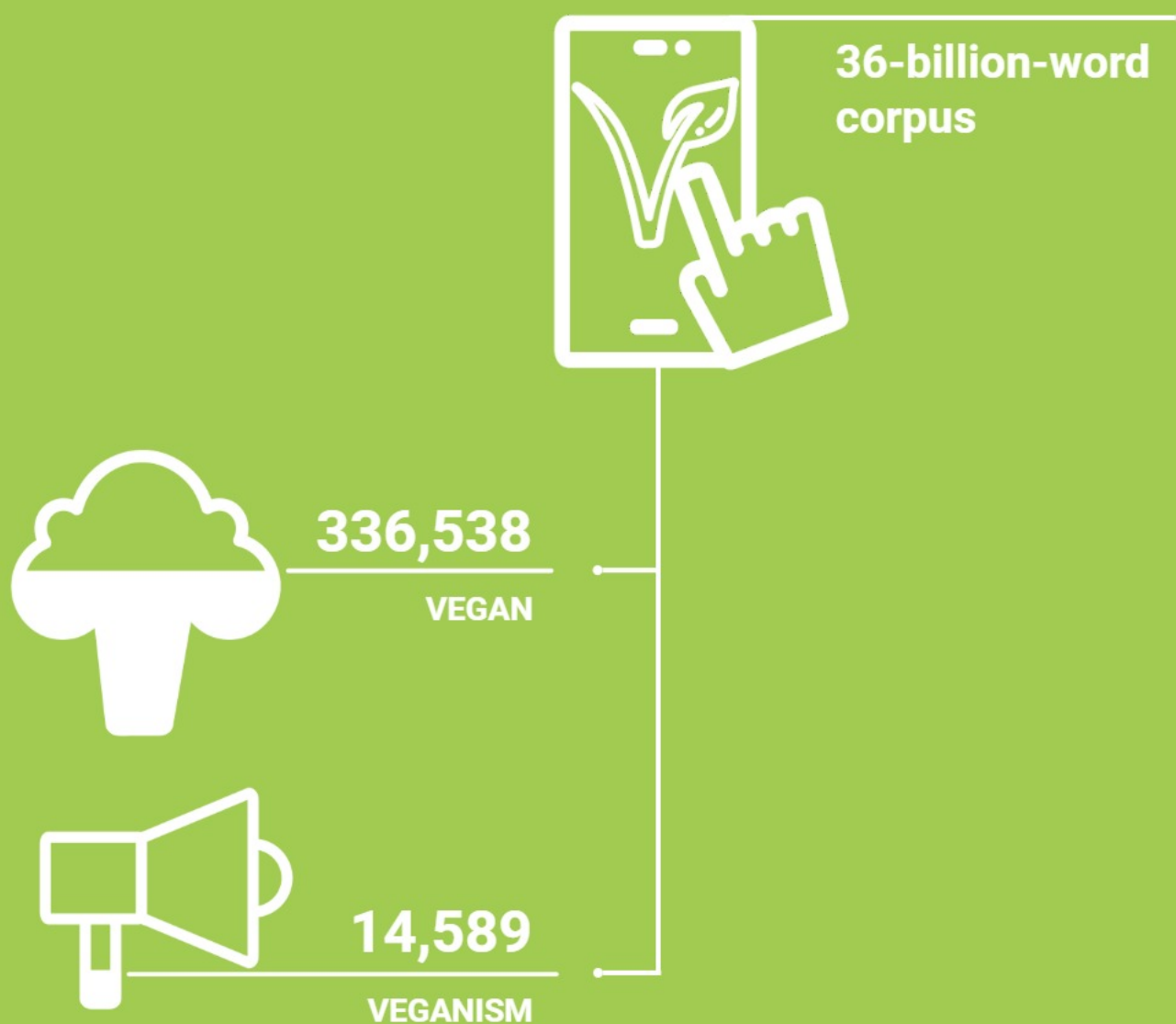


Method

The findings were reached using corpus linguistic research using a 36-billion-word corpus of text files from the internet between 2019 and 2021.

To explore public perceptions of veganism in internet discourse (in a contemporary, Anglophone context), the words *vegan* and *veganism* were entered as search terms and their usage explored. This was primarily achieved via collocation analysis (which ascertains which words a search term co-occurs with regularly).

Collocation analysis revealed a significant distinction between the way *vegan* is used and the way *veganism* is used, which indicates that *vegan* is being used in general discourse by those who believe in Animal Freedom and those who do not. The relative frequencies of these two words indicate this, with *vegan* being used 336,538 times in this 36-billion-word corpus, by comparison with only 14,589 times for *veganism*.



VEGAN



Go Vegan

The verb that collocates (co-occurs) most strongly with *vegan* is *go*. Examination of the context highlights that various forms of the verb *go* (e.g. *goes*, *going*, and *went*) all regularly appear alongside *vegan*. This tended not to be in the context of 'Go Vegan' as a slogan, but rather represents veganism as a choice rather than an ethical imperative. This is reinforced by the presence of *catered* and *diet* amongst the strongest collocates of *vegan*, and by its tendency to co-occur with nouns such as *decision* and *lifestyle*.

That *going vegan* is overwhelmingly represented as a choice akin to going on a diet may undermine arguments for ethical veganism as an ideological principle, and may also prompt further reflection on how the Animal Freedom movement's dominant message of Go Vegan may be misinterpreted by the general public.

Vegan

Go

'Goes'
'Going'
'Went'



Diet



Catered

?

Choice
'Decision'
'Lifestyle'

A dietary choice or an ethical imperative?

Many of the words that co-occur with *vegan* with the greatest statistical significance relate to **culinary processes or food consumption**. The appearance of culinary process verbs (such as *cooking, bake, whip, and mash*) among the collocates for *vegan* indicate that this is a word that frequently appears in the context of food preparation. This is corroborated by the appearance of food consumption verbs (such as *eat, dish, and snack*) in the list of high-scoring collocates for *vegan*, and by the presence of many food nouns (such as *hotdog, cupcake, curry, jerky, bread, sauce, and burger*), which are commonly modified by *vegan* (as in *vegan hotdog, vegan cupcake, etc.*).

The presence of such words in the list of high-scoring collocates for *vegan* gives the impression that *vegan* is represented as a dietary choice, with food consumption represented as a primary tenet of veganism. **This emphasis on food also contributes to the construction of veganism as one dietary choice amongst many others**, for example other high-scoring collocates such as *soy-free, dairy-free, gluten, gluten-free, kosher, paleo, halal, non-GMO* and *organic*.

While some of these other dietary descriptors do relate to ethics and belief systems, either directly or indirectly (e.g., *kosher* and *halal*), others are likely to relate to medical imperatives (e.g., *gluten-free, dairy-free*) or personal choice (e.g. *paleo, organic*). This is also highlighted by the co-occurrence of words such as *trend, abstain, and stay*, all of which are used in contexts that **represent veganism as a fad that it is difficult to sustain**.

Not only do these patterns of co-occurrence indicate that **veganism is primarily considered a diet or lifestyle choice rather than a belief system**, they also highlight the **primacy of human experience in predominant discourses** around the word *vegan*. This may indicate that *vegan* is not primarily being used by those invested in ethical veganism, but rather by others, such as commercial actors. This impression is further reinforced by the presence of several brand names in the collocate list.



Human experience as central to *vegan*

In summary, there are few indications from collocates of *vegan* that veganism is presented as animal-centric or as a moral stance. Rather, there is a clear emphasis on vegan food, and on processes of food production, sale, and consumption by humans. There is clear evidence of commercial actors using *vegan* regularly, and that *vegan* is associated with lifestyle choice rather than principles or ethics. By contrast, as will be explored in the following section, *veganism* is more associated with a moral stance and other ideologies and principles.



VEGANISM



Veganism as a moral stance

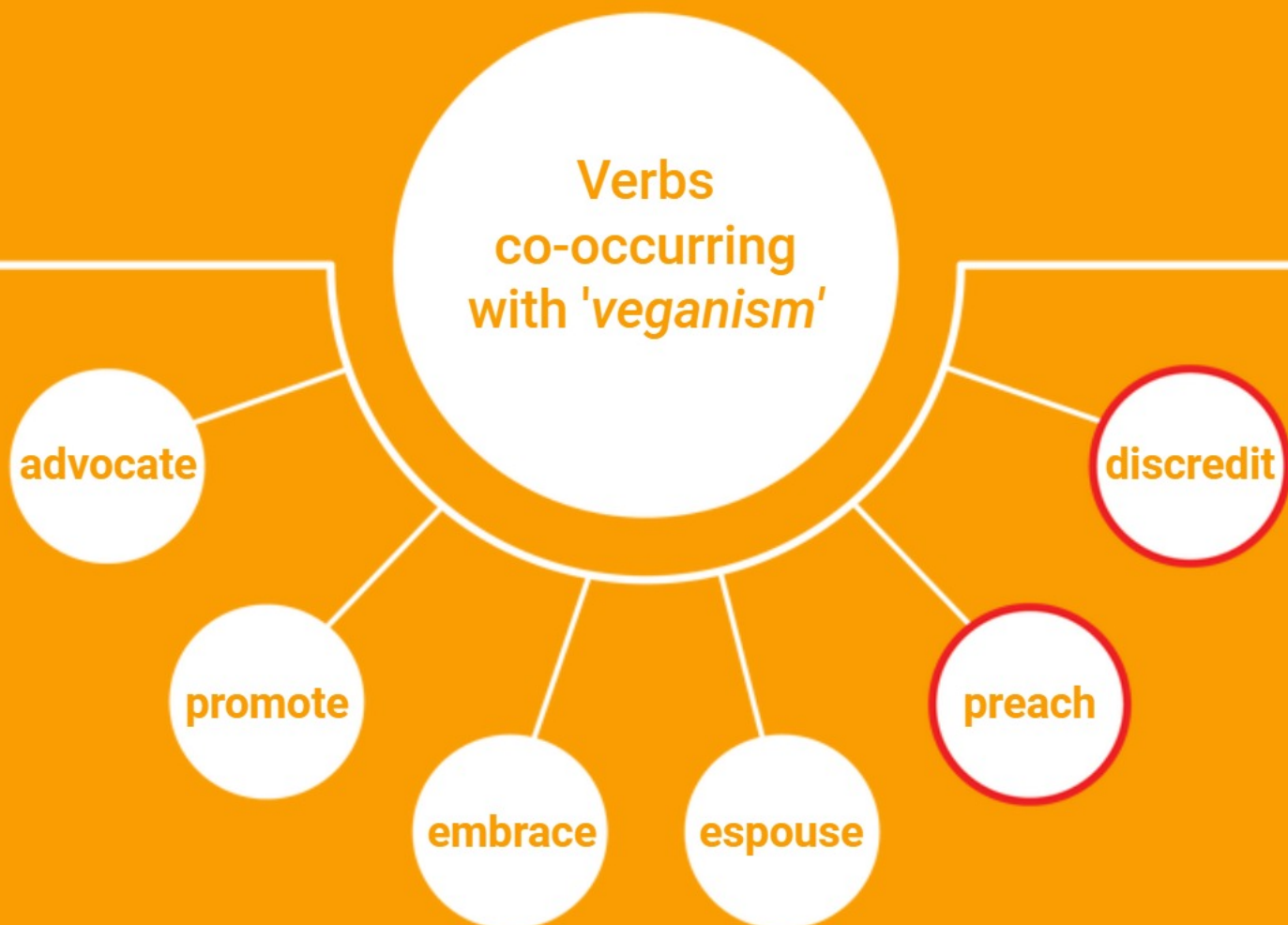
Unlike *vegan*, which co-occurs with words related to food, *veganism* collocates strongly with other words denoting moral stances, campaigns, or activism, such as *pacifism* and *environmentalism*. As the table below shows, nearly all the high-scoring collocates have the suffix *-ism*, which is strongly associated with **ideological beliefs or movements**.

Vegetarianism	1
Pacifism	2
Environmentalism	3
Activism	4
Feminism	5
Abolitionist	6
Fruitarianism	7
Anarchism	8
Foodism	9
Flexitarianism	10

This number of high-scoring collocates that share a suffix is a relatively rare finding. In stark contrast to *vegan*, *veganism* is commonly used to invoke moral principle. This is also highlighted by the presence of *ethical*, *welfare*, *belief*, and *movement* in the collocate list. Examination of the contexts in which these collocates appear also indicates that *veganism* is much more strongly associated with principles and ethics than *vegan*.

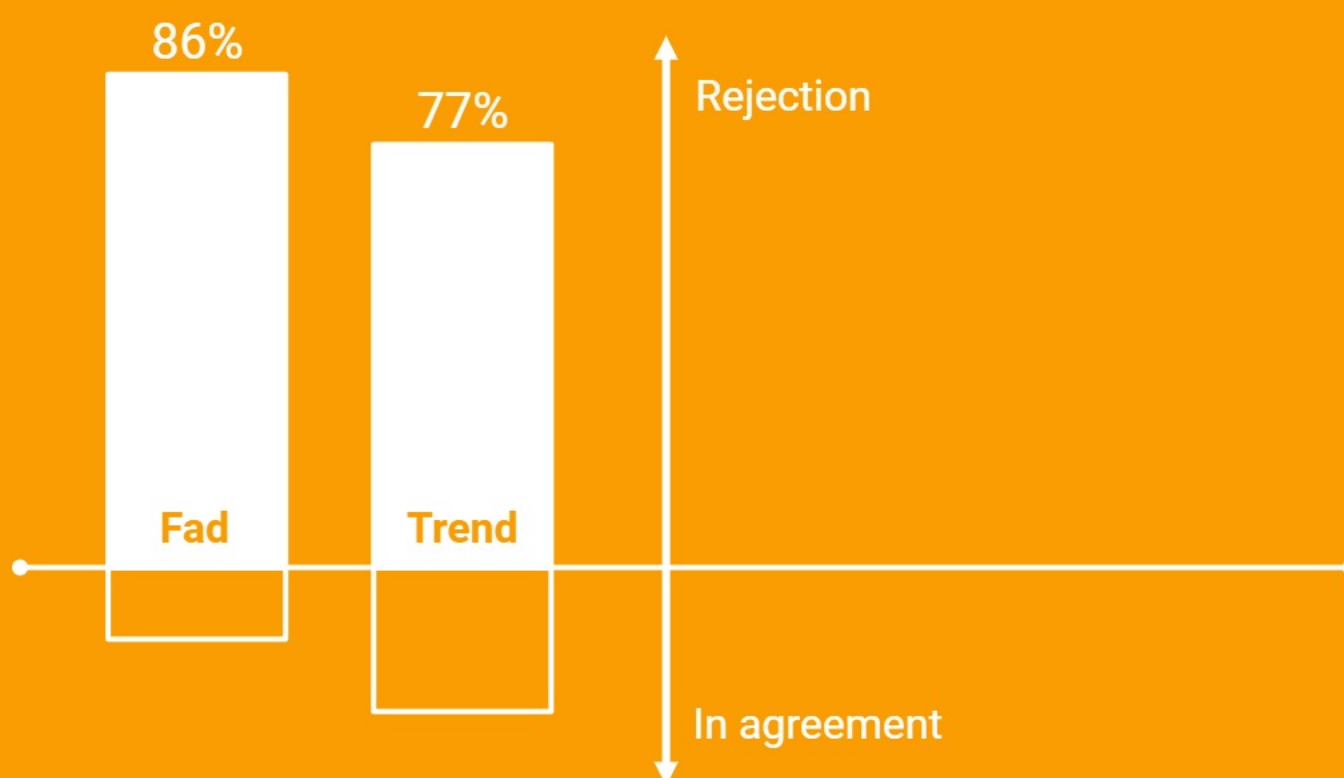
Veganism as agency

Another pattern discernible from the high-scoring collocates of *veganism* is its tendency to occur as a direct object of a verb. Those verbs that score most highly (for statistically significant co-occurrence) are *advocate*, *promote*, *embrace*, and *espouse*, which once again indicates that *veganism* is aligned with campaigning and activism. There are minor indications too that *veganism* is also used in negative contexts, for example *preach* and *discredit*. However, when combined with the findings from the previous section, the evidence of collocating verbs indicates strongly that *veganism* is presented as an ethical position that is frequently promoted and defended.



Challenging stereotypes

It is striking that, while there is overlap between the high-scoring collocates of *vegan* and *veganism*, closer analysis reveals these collocates to be used very differently. Whereas collocates of *vegan* represent veganism as a lifestyle choice, some of the same words in the collocate list for *veganism* are shown to function in entirely the opposite way. Out of 13 co-occurrences of *veganism* and *trend* in the English Web corpus, 10 (77%) are **rejections of the idea that veganism is a trend**. Likewise, out of 7 co-occurrences of *veganism* and *fad*, 6 (86%) are **rejections of the idea that veganism is a fad**. Likewise, although *diet* appears as a collocate for both *vegan* and *veganism*, there is significant **rejection of the idea that veganism is a dietary choice**.



CONCLUSION



These findings show a clear distinction between the way that the words *vegan* and *veganism* are used in contemporary internet discourse in English. Whereas *vegan* is associated with processes of food preparation and consumption, *veganism* is strongly associated with ethics and belief systems. These are preliminary findings that indicate that these words could provide fruitful ground for future research into public attitudes towards veganism.

On the basis of the findings reported here, it is possible to conclude that *vegan* and *veganism* function very differently, and that ***vegan* is overwhelmingly considered a dietary choice while *veganism* is strongly associated with moral stance.**

ONGOING RESEARCH



A question discussed at Animal Think Tank's recent messaging event with 52 other Animal Freedom communicators was **whether the dominant 'Go Vegan' slogan and narrative of our movement is being misinterpreted by the general public, who understand vegan as a diet and personal choice, rather than a moral stance. We also discussed whether our movement can - or should even try to - reclaim the meaning of vegan in a way that centers other animals rather than human experience.** Or whether alternative messages and narratives would be more persuasive in building public support for Animal Freedom.

These are just some of the questions furthering Animal Think Tank's long-term narrative research project.