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Abstract

This special issue explores how food discourse constructs cultural identities, ethical values and consumer practices across institutional, commercial and digital contexts. Through corpus-assisted, critical and multimodal discourse approaches, the contributions examine representations of traditional and novel foods, from Italian culinary heritage and gastronationalism to alternative proteins and sustainable consumption. Together, they reveal how language and visual communication negotiate authenticity, health, innovation and responsibility, shaping contemporary food cultures and perceptions of what constitutes desirable food.

Keywords Food discourse. Cultural identity. Multimodal communication. Food marketing. Sustainability.

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edited by

Daniela Cesiri, Michele Sala, Stefania M. Maci

Cultured Meat is (not) Vegan Meat Discursive Boundary-Making in User Comments

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Abstract The production of cultured meat is gaining regulatory approval in countries worldwide, with the global market being estimated to grow substantially over the next few years. However, its recognition as an effective technology in tackling issues concerning human health, the environment, and animal welfare has been received with mixed feelings across different countries. Given its defining principles, the issue is particularly relevant to the vegan community, which has embraced opposing perspectives on it. Based on these premises, the paper aims to explore the attitudes towards cultured meat within discussions of its vegan status in a corpus of YouTube comments posted in response to a documentary-style video. The analysis draws upon the analytical tools of Critical Discourse Studies, showing that cultured meat is predominantly accepted when veganism is framed primarily as an ethical commitment to reducing animal suffering, while it is rejected when vegan identity is grounded in health or dietary concerns, thereby contributing to the emergence of new ideological boundaries within the vegan community.

Keywords Social media critical discourse studies. Food discourse. Veganism. Cultured meat. Ideology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Theoretical Framework. – 4 Corpus and Method. – 5 Analysis. – 6 Discussion and Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

As the global population approaches 10 billion, a dietary shift towards plant-based diets is considered necessary (Willett et al. 2019); this need is driven by environmental motivations, as well as concerns about animal well-being and human health. From an environmental perspective, the agri-food sector plays a particularly significant role, among the sectors that pose the greatest challenges to sustainability. In particular, the animal-sourced foods sector, which “require[s] more resources and cause[s] higher emissions than plant-based alternatives” (UNEP¹ 2010, 79), has been shown to have a significant impact on climate change, biogeochemical flows, land-use change, freshwater use, and biodiversity loss (Godfray et al. 2018; Poore, Nemecek 2018; Bowles, Alexander, Hadjikakou 2019). As for ethical considerations regarding cruelty to animals, research has shown that “livestock species possess sophisticated cognitive capacities that are not yet sufficiently acknowledged in welfare legislation” (Nawroth et al. 2019, 11). Although animal abuse often remains socially tolerated, as it largely occurs out of public sight in slaughterhouses (Perry, Brandt 2008), an ASPCA² (2020) survey reports greater interest in animal welfare. Finally, as far as human health is concerned, excessive consumption of livestock products has been associated with a range of adverse human health effects, such as diet-related diseases, exposure to antibiotic residues and other pharmaceuticals in food, increased antibiotic resistance, the spread of foodborne illnesses, the risk of developing non-communicable diseases, and the risk of epidemics.³

Despite growing evidence of these impacts, the meat market has expanded to the point that one-third of the land used for crop production is now devoted to livestock farming (Hillier et al. 2011), thereby slowing down the transition to plant-based food. The main reason is that meat is considered a primary source of protein and nutrients (Fraeye et al. 2020), an element closely connected to cultural and culinary identity (Potts 2017), and is often seen as necessary, natural, normal, and nice (Piazza et al. 2015). In fact, the protein transition (Aiking, de Boer 2020) is being fuelled primarily by meat alternatives that emulate the taste and texture of actual meat; while these products can contribute to addressing the ethical challenge, they may have a significant environmental impact and

1 The United Nations Environment Programme.

2 The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

3 O'Neill 2015; Wolk 2017; Willett et al. 2019; Espinosa, Tago, Treich 2020; Qian et al. 2020; Rulli et al. 2021.

serious health consequences just like other ultra-processed foods (Estèvez et al. 2024).

Alongside these products aimed at reducing meat consumption, a new type of food was introduced more than ten years ago (Mead 2013), which, unlike other foods resembling meat, is actual meat at the molecular level. Cultured meat⁴ is developed in controlled laboratory or industrial environments through *in vitro* techniques that include cell isolation, proliferation or expansion, differentiation, harvesting, and final processing.⁵ The process currently relies on stem cells extracted via biopsy from live skeletal muscle, which are then cultured in bioreactors (Datar, Betti 2010) using a growth medium enriched with foetal bovine serum (Catts, Zurr 2014; Post 2014). The production of cultured meat is being increasingly allowed in countries worldwide, with the global market estimated to reach \$593 million by 2032 (MarketsandMarkets 2019). This “[m]eat that never died [...] and [...] never properly lived” (Wurgaft 2020, 2) can be seen as part of Agriculture 4.0 (Lezoche et al. 2020) and a “realistic and sustainable solution” (Böhm, Ferrari, Woll 2018, 211) which might have an impact on the environment, animal welfare, the well-being of workers in the meat industry, as well as human health (Evans, Johnson 2021).

The emergence of novel food technologies such as cultured meat is expected to influence culturally shaped perceptions of what food is and how it should be produced and consumed (Wurgaft 2020). The issue is particularly relevant to the vegan community, given the central role food plays in the construction of vegan identity, as well as veganism’s commitment to animal welfare. More specifically, while vegetarianism can be understood primarily as a dietary regime in which the consumption of animal flesh is forbidden while permitting the consumption of products of animal origin – such as honey and dairy products –, veganism extends to various aspects of a person’s identity and not just a dietary habit; in particular, it is founded on a major concern – the rejection of animal exploitation – and two correlated aspects – human welfare and the environment.⁶ Compared

4 This brand-new meat has been alternatively labeled as ‘biofabricated animal material’, ‘cultivated meat’, ‘(cell-)cultured meat’, ‘lab-grown meat’, ‘in vitro meat’, ‘clean meat’.

5 Ben-Arye, Levenberg 2019; Ong, Choudhury, Naing 2020; Wang et al. 2020; Li et al. 2021; Treich 2021.

6 “Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals” (The Vegan Society, s.d.).

with other groups, vegans have been shown to display their activist identity, play a major political role, be more active in animal rights, and have more positive experiences within their group (Stuart et al. 2013; MacInnis, Hodson 2017; Kalte 2021).

Against this backdrop, the way cultured meat is produced and consumed may prompt reflection and debate, especially when attempts to label it as ‘vegan’ are made.⁷ Recently, despite PETA’s (2023) explicit endorsement of ‘slaughterless’ meat, an opposing narrative has emerged from a share of vegans who criticise cultured meat for symbolically violating animal dignity (see Chauvet 2018). This division echoes broader tensions within the vegan movement regarding compromise and moral consistency (Wrenn 2016). This paper, therefore, aims to explore the attitudes towards cultured meat in discussions of its vegan status by analysing a corpus of 392 YouTube comments posted in response to the popular amateur video *VEGAN Tries Lab Grown Meat for the First Time*. The analysis draws on selected analytical tools of Critical Discourse Studies – including van Leeuwen’s (1996) social actor framework, Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory and van Dijk’s (2011) socio-cognitive framework – to address three research questions:

- RQ1: How are vegan identities discursively constructed in relation to the acceptance of cultured meat (focus: animal welfare, health, and environment)?
- RQ2: Do these discursive constructions contribute to the emergence of new ideological boundaries within veganism?
- RQ3: What attitudes are expressed towards these emerging vegan identities?

In so doing, the study aims to shed light on the diverging perspectives that shape the ongoing dialogue around cultured meat and the potential emergence of new boundaries between different constructions of vegan identity.

2 Literature Review

The aim of this section is to provide a brief overview of the growing body of research that has examined public discourse around cultured meat, with a particular focus on online comments and discussions on social media platforms.

Laestadius (2015) identified five key themes in U.S. online news blog comments about cultured meat: animal welfare, environmental

⁷ In this paper, single inverted commas (‘’) are used when discussing terms and expressions. Excerpts from the comments are reported in double inverted commas (’’’’).

sustainability, equity and fairness, naturalness in the food system, and the efficient use of resources. While benefits were framed in global or societal terms, concerns such as health risks and poor taste were mostly individual. Building on this line of research, Laestadius and Caldwell (2015) found that the overall tone of online news commentary was predominantly negative, focusing on the unnaturalness of cultured meat, the decline of traditional agriculture, and fears of corporate dominance. Positive reactions, though less frequent, echoed media narratives around environmental, health, and ethical benefits. Moving beyond the U.S. context, Ryyänänen and Toivanen (2023) analysed 662 Finnish online news comments to investigate the emerging meanings of cultured meat. Using qualitative content analysis, they identified competing public interpretations, namely necessity, characteristics, and societal impact. Overall, awareness of the phenomenon was limited and often accompanied by negatively biased perceptions. Guo and Wiwattanadate (2024) have shown that online comments on social media platforms in China often focused on price, tradition, taste, and even longevity. In contrast, animal welfare issues were mentioned less frequently. The product was also commonly referred to as 'artificial meat', revealing a general lack of knowledge about cultured meat.

Perceptions of cultured meat have also been analysed by Specht, Rumble, and Buck (2020) in a sample of 2,763 tweets, through which they showed that Twitter debate on cultured meat is news-driven and event-dependent. They identified eight recurring themes - legality and marketing, sustainability, acceptance, business, animal concerns, science and technology, health concerns, and timeline - and four main communities - news/tech influencers, vegan/animal-rights advocates, agricultural actors, and food/paleo-oriented individuals. Likewise, by analysing a corpus of 36,356 tweets, Pilařová et al. (2022, 1) identified three communicated characteristics of cultured meat, namely, 'clean', 'future', and 'sustainable' meat, and five communication topics:

- (1) clean and sustainable products, (2) comparisons with plant-based protein and the impact on agribusiness, (3) positive environmental aspects, (4) cultured meat as an alternative protein, and (5) the regulation of cultured meat. (Pilařová et al. 2022, 1)

More recently, a study based on social media data examined the influence of media framing on public attitudes toward cultured meat, by analysing over 23,000 Twitter posts and 38,000 user comments (Kouarfate, Durif 2023). While not focused on the analysis of comments, their findings suggest that ethical, informational, and intrinsic framing positively influence the acceptability of cultured meat.

Although these studies have attempted to advance the understanding of public discussions surrounding cultured meat, little attention has been paid to how online users discursively construct identities and negotiate group boundaries in response to its association with vegan ideals. The present study seeks to fill this gap.

3 Theoretical Framework

This section provides a brief overview of Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS) and Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), which constitute the theoretical framework underpinning the present study.

First, the study draws on van Dijk's (2011; 2012) conceptualisations of ideology, identity, and the role of attitude. Ideology, understood as a form of social cognition, is defined as a set of

socially shared beliefs that are associated with the characteristic properties of a group, such as their identity, their position in society, their interests and aims, their relations to other groups, their reproduction, and their natural environment. (van Dijk 2012, 8)

Ideologies are linked to ideological practices, which are grounded in specific mental models, through which we produce or interpret a text. When we act as members of a group, these mental models embody instances of its ideology. Discourse thus has the capacity to reproduce ideologies, and an analysis of its surface structures can therefore provide insights into their development and transformation. The same applies to identities, which van Dijk (2008, 70) conceptualises as “an interactional accomplishment”, emerging through the negotiation of the meanings associated with that identity within discourse; in this respect, Stibbe's (2015) definition of identity as “a story in people's minds about what it means to be a particular kind of person, including appearance, character, behaviour and values” (107) is also useful in informing the present study, as it highlights the narrative dimension through which identities are constructed and negotiated.

In addition, the analysis is informed by Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), which extends the principles of Critical Discourse Studies to digital environments by “implement[ing] the principal parameters of the CDS movement” (KhosraviNik 2022, 120) while accounting for “the specific mediation technology and its impact in terms of shaping discourses and power” (Esposito, KhosraviNik 2024, 7). In particular, this study considers online discourse as a space of affiliation, negotiation, boundary construction, and ideological stance-taking (Zappavigna 2012).

4 Corpus and Method

This section describes the corpus and the method adopted in the study. It explains the motivations for considering YouTube as a platform and selecting that specific video, outlines the criteria used to compile the corpus, and presents the analytical steps.

First, YouTube was regarded as well suited for an analysis aimed at identifying emerging ideologies and attitudes within groups with divergent perspectives. Zappavigna (2021) claimed that the large-scale unfolding of comments on YouTube applies “the notion of ‘community’ as a way of conceiving of the recurrent sharing of values, opinions and concerns in YouTube discourse” (23). Then, as regards the selection of the data, the video titled *VEGAN Tries Lab Grown Meat For The First Time*, published on 28 December 2022, in which U.S.-based content creator Merle Shane O’Neal (198,000 YouTube subscribers as of August 2026) tastes three types of cultured chicken, was selected. The video was considered well suited for the analysis because the content creator explicitly asks the vegan community for their views on the acceptability of cultured meat in the video description – *Those of you who are vegan/vegetarian I am especially curious if you think this falls within the “cruelty-free” or vegan umbrella* – and it is therefore reasonable to expect that the prompt encouraged discussion of this issue in the comment section. Comments were then extracted using the *Mozdeh* software. The comments were then exported from *Mozdeh* using the software’s export function, which stores the retrieved comments in the ‘raw’ folder as an Excel file. At the end of the extraction process (Date: 8 August 2025), the corpus comprised 898 comments and 33,798 tokens. The data were treated as publicly accessible, since online discussions on news and magazine websites and their related social media pages are openly available. To protect commenter privacy, all identifying details and pseudonyms were removed from the dataset during anonymisation. The analysis followed a theory-driven, deductive approach, whereby the analytical categories were drawn from the theoretical frameworks adopted in the study rather than inductively derived from the data. Specifically, the analysis relied on van Leeuwen’s (1996) socio-semantic inventory of social actor representation, van Dijk’s (2011) semantic and formal structures of discourse, and Martin and White’s (2005) system of Attitude. The analytical procedure involved the following stages. First, the initial corpus was lexically filtered in Excel in light of the research questions to include only those comments containing at least one of the terms ‘vegan’ or ‘veganism’, resulting in a final corpus of 392 comments and 22,372 tokens. These comments were then manually screened to identify cases in which vegan(ism) was categorised in a certain way in relation to cultured meat. Occurrences in which ‘vegan’ or

‘veganism’ did not involve categorisation were excluded, resulting in a final analytical dataset of 257 comments. Given the study’s understanding of ideology as socially shared, only types of social-actor categorisation that occurred at least three times in the analytical dataset were retained for detailed analysis and discussion. Thus, the analysis did not include a categorisation type unless at least three instances of the same type could be identified across the dataset. This recurrence threshold was adopted to avoid basing the identification of broader discursive patterns on isolated occurrences. All comments included in the final analytical dataset were systematically coded using the same analytical procedure. First, the representation of vegan social actors was analysed according to van Leeuwen’s socio-semantic inventory to examine “the ways in which social actors can be represented” (van Leeuwen 1996, 32) and how “social practices [are] transformed into discourses about social practices” (35). The same comments were then examined for the semantic and formal structures identified by van Dijk (2011) and, to account for the evaluative dimension, the study drew on Appraisal Theory (Martin, White 2005). In particular, the Attitude system provides a framework for categorising the language of evaluation into three subsystems: AFFECT, referring to personal emotional states; JUDGEMENT, associated with the social or ethical appraisal of others’ behaviour; and APPRECIATION, concerned with the evaluation of phenomena. As regards the coding procedure, Attitude resources were annotated using *UAM CorpusTool 6.2* through its Annotation function and the Appraisal layer, focusing exclusively on the Attitude system relevant to the present study. Social actor representations and semantic and formal discourse structures were instead coded manually in Excel. To enhance analytical reliability, the author coded the dataset twice, about one year apart. The first coding was conducted in preparation for a conference presentation in September 2025, while the second was carried out during the preparation of the present article, using the same theory-driven analytical categories. Cases for which the coding remained ambiguous were recorded separately and subjected to a third round of analysis, after which a final coding decision was made.

5 Analysis

The following subsections (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4) present representative comments illustrating the main findings of the analysis. The selected comments were organised into four (out-)/(sub-)groups.⁸

5.1 Vegetarianism

The following comments (1-8) share a common thread: they all invoke vegetarianism.

1. I mean... it is indeed meat. It tastes and looks like meat, because it is animal tissue. So it is definitely not plant based. I wouldn't say either that it is cruelty free, since you have to 'extract' the stem cells somehow from an animal. On my kindest guess maybe I would say vegetarian... (not sure on that tho). I guess it works for people who is vegan for the climate but not for those vegans for the animals.
2. Don't think I'll ever eat this but I'm definitely not going to cancel you 🙄 I think that by consuming this though puts a person as a vegetarian more than a vegan.
3. If it's vegan. It's not plant based. But definitely vegetarian. No animals died for your food. Animals were not harmed (if I understood it correctly). It's not vegan but has the same value towards animals. I think. I'm vegan by the way. I would not be mad if you eat this and still call yourself a vegan. 🙄
4. Personally, I think you could make the case that this is vegetarian, but not vegan. Vegetarian because the animals aren't killed in order for you to get the product. Not vegan because you still had to extract something from an animal for personal pleasure. Like honey, or eggs.
5. I would classify cultivated meat in the vegetarian category. You are eating animal cells, not plant cells so I don't see how you can

⁸ Due to space constraints, when a categorisation occurred in a large number of comments, only a selection of excerpts was included in the article in order to avoid redundancy. Preference was given to comments providing sufficient contextual and argumentative information, while highly similar instances, comments consisting primarily of the relevant label, and comments presenting substantially the same argument as an excerpt already selected were not reproduced.

call this vegan. Even vegetarian is a big of a stretch. That being said I have no problems with it from an ethical perspective.

6. I would consider this meat vegetarian and not vegan, it still comes from an animal...
7. I'm guessing this was pointed out already, but anyway, by definition this would not be vegan because it still technically comes from an animal. However it could fall under vegetarian. On a different note though, as a cook I think this is quite intriguing and would love the chance to use it.
8. Please shut up. Being vegetarian still contributes to multiple forms of animal suffering. There is a clear definition of veganism for a reason and I'm not about the 'baby steps' shit. It takes cells from animals, it is still animal exploitation. It's reducetarian, not vegan. Tell the chickens and cows not to get hung up on definitions when you pay for them to be exploited and slaughtered for your selfish taste pleasure. No, sorry fuck vegetarians, go vegan.

In comment 1, by asserting the animal nature of the product – “it is indeed meat [...] it is animal tissue” – and excluding it from the plant-based category – “So it is definitely not plant based” –, its ethical nature is also denied – “I wouldn't say either that it is cruelty free”. Although the expressions “indeed” and “definitely” produce a dialogic contraction, the commenter still leaves room to position the product within the vegetarian category, albeit with marked hesitation (“On my kindest guess”). In the final part, however, the comment also extends to vegans, albeit only to a specific subgroup (“works for people who is vegan for the climate but not for those vegans for the animals”). A similar positioning emerges in comment 2, where, without particular argumentation, the product is defined as “as a vegetarian more than a vegan”. Here, however, the accompanying ‘face blowing a kiss’ emoji also conveys a more positive attitude towards both cultured meat and the influencer. In comment 3, an even more conciliatory stance appears: the author marks their own belonging (“I'm vegan by the way”) and attributes a positive evaluation to cultured meat in terms of animal welfare (“No animals died” and “Animals were not harmed”). This allows them to bring it closer to a status similar to veganism in terms of respect for animals (“It's not vegan but has the same value towards animals”), while still technically categorising it as vegetarian because of its non-plant-based nature. Also in this case, although a boundary is maintained, a positive attitude emerges through the negation of negative emotional states (“I would not be mad”), reinforced by the ‘beaming face with smiling eyes’ emoji,

as well as through the attribution of positive qualities to cultured meat. In comment 4, a similar line of reasoning is adopted, based on the distinction between ethical and technical aspects. In addition, the vegetarian classification is supported through analogies with products traditionally excluded from veganism, such as honey and eggs. Cultured meat is therefore assimilated to animal derivatives, even if not technically identical. A positive property is attributed to cultured meat (“animals aren’t killed”), while at the same time highlighting the motivation underlying its existence, namely “personal pleasure”, a reference to human self-interest. The use of “Personally” functions as an epistemic hedge, signalling the commenter’s awareness of the sensitivity of the issue and mitigating their commitment by avoiding any claim to expertise. A similar logic is found in comment 5, where the distinction is drawn at a more granular level, namely on the type of cells being consumed (animal cells vs plant cells), which would classify the product as vegetarian. At the same time, however, its ethical dimension is acknowledged, and the overall attitude appears to remain positive. In comment 6, the technical aspect is made explicit through the recognition of the animal component: “it still comes from an animal”. The same pattern emerges in comment 7, with the addition of “technically”, which frames the discussion in purely technical terms, excluding the ethical dimension (“it still technically comes from an animal”). The expression “by definition” invokes an authoritative source to support the commenter’s position, thereby closing down the dialogic space. At the same time, “as a cook” explicitly foregrounds the commenter’s professional identity, legitimising their interest in cultured meat from a culinary perspective. This positive positioning is further reinforced by the AFFECT resource “love”. In one case, the discourse becomes more radical. An oppositional construction appears in comment 8, where vegetarians are framed as direct accomplices in animal exploitation and suffering for mere “taste pleasure”, for which they are also openly offended (“fuck vegetarians”). Vegetarianism is therefore seen as unable to promote the same vegan values and as part of the problem, especially when this happens through “baby steps”, a way of approaching vegetarianism commonly defined as ‘reducetarianism’. A strong granularity is found in describing the acts of violence committed by humans against animals through words belonging to the same semantic category – “contributes to multiple forms of animal suffering”, “animal exploitation”, “exploited and slaughtered” – which are the main vehicle for attributing negative moral traits to the vegetarian community. Very strong assertiveness and absolutism emerge through the use of imperatives (“Please shut up”) and emphatic repetitions (“still contributes” and “still animal exploitation”). A rhetorical question with ironic intent, such as “Tell the chickens and cows not to get hung up on definitions”,

personifies chickens and cows by attributing to them the human capacity to understand and care about linguistic definitions. This ironic move highlights the perceived absurdity of the arguments advanced by supporters of cultured meat and of their reliance on semantic distinctions. Vegetarians are consequently positioned as an outgroup to vegans, with dialogic space effectively closed through the attribution of negative JUDGEMENT to the principles underlying their dietary practices.

5.2 (Un)ethical Veganism

These comments (9-20), though with different nuances, share a common thread: they distinguish veganism motivated by moral reasons (reducing exploitation and animal suffering and respecting the environment) from that guided by other motivations, such as personal health, dietary preferences, and spiritual purposes.

9. Depends on if the vegan diet is doing it for morals or nutrition. Morals, I'd say mostly vegan. But other's doing it for health reasons, wouldn't.
10. I've come back to this, and one thing I'll add is - you shouldn't be asking 'is this vegan?' In the same vein, it's not 'technically' chicken, it literally IS chicken. They didn't 'sneak in and switch it with 'actual' chicken.' It is literally, 100% chicken. People are getting hung up on the idea that it's somehow not 'real' chicken because of the way it was produced. But this is no more 'not-really-chicken,' than a plant grown in a greenhouse from cultivated seed is somehow not-really-plant.' Asking 'is this vegan' only muddies the waters and confuses the definition without cause. It's meat, and it is meat derived directly from an animal, therefore no, it is not vegan. Instead of quibbling over technicalities around that label, we should address what actually is relevant - which is: does it work toward the goal that most iterations of ethical veganism advocates for? And the answer is, yes it does.
11. I would eat it. I'm vegan for ethical reasons, but I do like the taste of meat, and especially while travelling, I feel like food is such a big part of cultures and I'm missing out on immersing myself in that. I hope that this type of meat becomes commonplace, so we can sustain taste and culture, and harm less animals
12. I think its still vegan for ethical reasons not for dietary

13. I wouldn't say it a vegan diet but I would say it's ethical eating
14. It depends on your reasons for being vegan. If you are vegan for the health of the earth and animals then this is not 'cheating'. If you are vegan for personal health reasons then it would be cheating, since within your body it is still processed just like meat.
15. If you are vegan for health related reasons or don't like the taste of meat, I don't think this will help. But if you are vegan for ethical reasons, this is a great way to eat what you like without feeling guilty.
16. I agree that cultivated meat is fine for some people who are ethical, and realistic, vegans. But it does make me wonder whether it would be cannibalism if it were possible to cultivate human cells for food.
17. Ethically, I'd say this is still vegan. I personally would be afraid to try it because I don't know if my stomach can handle meat anymore, but I'm so glad this is happening and I hope it can become widespread very soon.
18. I would say it's vegan in the sense that it's doing the least amount of harm and exploitation to animals but isn't plant-based. For me, it doesn't matter that it's meat since I'm in it for ethical and environmental reasons and this just seems like the way to go for the majority of people, at least once it becomes more readily available at a reasonable price. The future is cultivated meat!!
19. I could see cultivated meat fitting into a lot of vegan/vegetarian lifestyles pretty well. Really depends on why the individual has that diet. If it's for ethical or environmental reasons, then cultivation address a lot of those issues. I'm excited to see more products like this so I can incorporate it into my cooking.
20. I think it's ethically vegan. It probably wouldn't pass for spiritual vegan purposes, like abstaining from flesh and its facsimiles out of reverence of other animals. But as far as alleviating pain and suffering and manufactured death and eating your cake too, I think it's great.

The distinction between ethical and nutritional motivations, albeit articulated in different ways, emerges in comment 9 ("morals or nutrition" and "health reasons"), comment 12 ("vegan for ethical reasons not for dietary [reasons]"), comment 13 ("vegan diet" and

“ethical eating”), comment 14 (“the health of the earth and animals” and “for personal health reasons”), comment 15 (“health related reasons” and “ethical reasons”), and comment 17 (“Ethically” and “my stomach”). In comment 15, cultured meat is positively appraised as “a great way to eat what you like without feeling guilty”. Similarly, comment 17 contains the positive AFFECT resources “glad” and “hope”, both associated with the wider adoption of cultured meat, despite the presence of the personal negative AFFECT marker “afraid”. In the more articulated comment 10, an integrated view emerges: on the one hand, the vegan nature of the product is denied (“It is literally, 100% chicken [...] therefore no, it is not vegan”), but on the other hand, its value in pursuing the goals of ethical veganism is acknowledged. The expressions “technically”, “actual”, “real”, “not-really-chicken”, and “not-really-plant” are enclosed in single inverted commas to foreground these lexical items, drawing attention to the role of language in avoiding conceptual confusion and highlighting the importance of terminological precision. Based on ethical veganism, membership does not depend on what one eats but rather on the impact of the product on the goals of the cause – reducing animal suffering and environmental sustainability. This produces a semantic movement of exclusion/inclusion and, at the same time, an ideological redefinition of the group from within. In comment 11, the ethical dimension of cultured meat is recognised (“harm less animals”), combined with the possibility of experiencing food as a cultural element, even when it is animal-based. A positive attitude is conveyed by the positive AFFECT marker “hope”. Comment 16 uses hypothetical reasoning and produces an implicit *reductio ad absurdum* involving cannibalism to highlight the fragility of the moral boundaries of cultured meat. Comments 18 and 19 also support cultured meat as vegan but not plant-based, in line with the values of vegans motivated by ethical and environmental reasons; in comment 18, cultured meat is positively framed as “The future”, while comment 19 expresses a positive affective stance through the marker “excited”. Comment 20 introduces spiritual motivations as possible factors guiding the choice to adopt a vegan lifestyle. Two denominations are thus distinguished (ethical vs spiritual), where cultured meat could satisfy the ethical dimension but not the symbolic-religious one. The presupposition is that spiritual veganism regards the mere ‘simulacrum of meat’ – explicitly referred to as “facsimiles” – as equally morally problematic. At the same time, it is taken for granted that the primary aim of ethical veganism is the reduction of pain and death (“alleviating pain and suffering and manufactured death”). The comment is not phrased assertively but is instead mitigated through the repeated use of “I think”. Like the remaining comments, comment 20 displays a positive attitudinal positioning realised through the APPRECIATION resource “it’s great”.

5.3 Fake Veganism

Another category is represented by ‘fake vegans’ (21-23).

21. Your A Fake Vegan Now O’Neal How could you? Merle O’Neal, in my opinion, you have now become a disgrace to the Vegan community. Cultivated meat is still meat. I am so disgusted with your promotion of and consumption of cultivated meat that I am seriously considering canceling my subscription to your channel. I can and will no longer consider you a vegan. What is next for you? Honey. Leather. Eggs. Animal based cheese. Shrimp on the barbe. Sad to see you start down the slippery slope of starting to consume animal products and contributing to their exploitation. We do not need to eat meat to live a healthy life. True and real vegans know this.
22. Fake vegans smh
23. Merle the fake vegan

In comment 21, the negative other-presentation conveyed through “disgrace” and the negative APPRECIATION of reaction expressed by “disgusted” are accompanied by references to “Honey. Leather. Eggs. Animal based cheese. Shrimp on the barbe”, namely products associated with vegetarian rather than vegan lifestyles, which are rhetorically linked to cultured meat. The strong assertiveness – “I can and will no longer consider you a vegan” – is reinforced by the use of the interlocutor’s surname instead of the first name. This choice marks social distance between the two and clearly identifies the agent responsible for the betrayal and the slide toward animal oppression. Nomination through overdetermination is also evident in comment 21 with the use of both “O’Neal” and “Merle O’Neal”, foregrounding the individual as a salient social actor. The comment further conveys negative AFFECT through the expression “Sad to see”, while the JUDGEMENT “contributing to their exploitation” morally condemns the consumption of cultured meat by framing it as incompatible with vegan principles. The same label, ‘fake vegan(s)’, reappears in comments 22 and 23 without any substantial supporting argumentation, functioning instead as a delegitimising nomination. In comment 22, the abbreviation “smh” (shaking my head) expresses a negative APPRECIATION of reaction, signalling disapproval, while comment 23 reinforces the personalised nature of the criticism through the nomination “Merle”.

5.4 Novel Veganism

The following comments (24-31) share the tendency to propose or discuss new subcategories within veganism, arising from the confrontation with cultured meat. Unlike earlier cases, where consumers of cultured meat were positioned within pre-existing groups, here the idea is that entirely new subgroups may emerge due to the inadequacy of current categories.

24. It's non-plant-based-vegan
25. I would say you did break your vegan diet. I guess there needs to be a new type of diet for people who are vegan + eat lab grown meat...
26. In my opinion, I think that cultivated meat shows the individuals that are really committed to being vegan and those so called vegans that just want a excuse to eat meat.
27. I think you raise a really good question on whether you're still vegan if you eat cultivated meat. I think there's going to be a whole new name for it. Like how we have pescetarian for vegetarians who eat fish. Maybe cultivated vegans is the new name or cultivators or C-veg. Haha
28. There doesn't need to be a new name. It's NOT vegan and I'm getting frustrated with the folks in comments saying it is. There shouldn't be any question there. This stuff is meat. Real, actual, verifiable meat. Therefore it is NOT vegan and it never will be. There are plenty of people in the world who are neither vegan nor vegetarian but do their damndest to eat ethically sourced meat. They don't have a special name. This doesn't need a special name. It's literally just ethically sourced meat. It's perfectly okay for vegans who want to embrace this to just say that. That they stopped being vegan when ethically sourced meat became accessible. Or something like 'I eat vegan most of the time but if lab-grown meat is available I'm willing to eat it.'
29. Thank you so much for doing this! It was so interesting. I've been vegan (for the animals) for more than 10 years, but I do like the taste of meat. Always have, always will, but I love animals more than I love eating them. Lab-grown (or cultivated) meat does present a unique dilemma for us vegans, so either the definition of 'vegan' will have to change or we'll have to come up with a new term. But it's just words. The most important thing will always be saving the animals.

30. Longtime vegan here – I support lab grown meat for all of the harm reduction reasons you stated. If we can't get people to stop eating meat I'd rather they eat this. At the same time, I wouldn't feel comfortable eating it or calling it vegan because it still originates from animals and I feel that it perpetuates the idea that they're here for our consumption. Ultimately, I think it's something that each person will have to figure out for themselves. Maybe in 5-10 years there will be some new term for people who eat plant-based diets and lab grown meat. It could be the start of a whole new food movement that couldn't have existed until now. Thanks for making this video and for everything you do!
31. Honestly, this is the best thing that we can do in this moment to not only reduce harm to animals, but reduce harm to our environment as a whole. Pollution, land destruction, overfishing, the whole lot... reduced by almost 100%?! If that's not the most vegan thing ever, I don't know what is! My spouse and I are ethical vegans (and I was easy to convince since I never liked the taste of meat, anyway) and were talking after this video about how we would even define "vegan" if this and other cultivated animal products obliterated food-based animal cruelty. Like, everyone would be vegan, right? We'd have to find alternatives to leather and other animal byproducts, but those are already up and coming and would find a much bigger market share if factory farming went away. Then there'd be us, the vegans-because-meat-is-weird vegans, who would be... "plant-based vegans"?! I don't know, but man, I'm all for this kind of identity crisis. 😂 Glad you tried it!! Is cultivated milk next on the list of things to try? (Oh, and if they ever come up with cultivated eggs and scallops, game over, I'll be all over that shit. 🤪)

Comment 24 introduces the hybrid label 'non-plant-based vegan', lexicalising a concept that had already emerged implicitly in previous comments but had not yet been explicitly named. This enables a reformulation of vegan identity based on the technical characteristics of the product: it is not plant-based, yet it satisfies some of the ethical criteria associated with veganism.

Others hypothesise a new type of diet for those who combine veganism with cultured meat. In comment 25, for example, the stance is less accommodating ("you did break your vegan diet"), framing consumption as a violation of the norm. The proposal of a new label ("a new type of diet") thus marks alterity with respect to the vegan group, in a discursive re-bordering that nevertheless retains the term 'vegan', despite the accusation of transgression.

A more explicitly negative denomination appears in comment 26, where vegans who consume cultured meat are portrayed as unable to adhere to vegan ethics and as using cultured meat as an excuse to eat meat. The binary opposition (“really committed” vs “so-called”) thus constructs a ‘pure’ subgroup against a ‘corrupt’ one, splitting the community internally.

In comment 27, the need for a new term is emphasised to describe those deviating from the vegan norm, though not with an entirely negative attitude. The assumption is that dietary categories are fixed and clearly bounded, and that every deviation requires a distinct name – recalling the case of ‘pescetarians’. The proposed labels (“cultivated vegans”, “cultivators”, “C-veg”) function as identity markers for an internal subgroup, yet remain separate from ‘true’ veganism. The closing “Haha” makes the comment less aggressive and more ironic.

Comment 28 highlights the confusion and threat to identity clarity caused by calling cultured meat ‘vegan’. Starting from the presupposition that ‘vegan’ excludes animal products, it stresses the animal origin of meat with expressions such as “Real”, “actual”, and “verifiable”. The commenter therefore rejects the need for newly coined categories, arguing that “ethically sourced meat” is a more appropriate label. Distance is marked from the “folks in comments” who misapply the term ‘vegan’ and are blamed for creating confusion. This is expressed through the dissatisfaction marker “frustrated”. While denying group membership to these consumers and the necessity of a new name, the comment nonetheless suggests a discursive redefinition that maintains the use of ‘vegan’ (“I eat vegan most of the time but if lab-grown meat is available I’m willing to eat it”).

In comment 29, explicitly positioning themselves as “vegan (for the animals)”, the commenter aligns with an ethical-animalist subgroup and introduces the need to redefine ‘veganism’ or to coin a new term, given the novelty represented by cultured meat, described as “a unique dilemma for us vegans”. With an inclusive stance, they not only accept cultured meat but also acknowledge the need to redefine the boundaries of veganism, while relegating these semantic distinctions to a secondary role relative to animal welfare. A positive reaction (APPRECIATION) is expressed by way of “interesting”.

In comment 30, the author self-identifies as a “Longtime vegan” signalling both membership and discursive authority, and reiterates the distance from the ‘vegan’ category when applied to consumers of cultured meat, which “still originates from animals”. They attribute a negative ideological trait to cultured meat (“perpetuates the idea that [animals] are here for our consumption”), through which they reinforce the same paradigm of exploitation that veganism seeks to dismantle. Thus, the issue is not only the absence of animal suffering but also the ideological implications. The comment ultimately

envisioning the future possibility of a new term for a food movement not necessarily tied to veganism. The overall attitudinal positioning remains favourable, as reflected in the positive AFFECT resource “support”, directed toward the collective benefits of cultured meat. At the same time, the commenter expresses personal insecurity in the statement “I wouldn’t feel comfortable eating it”, revealing a distinction between support for the technology in principle and willingness to consume it personally.

In comment 31, listing the environmental benefits of cultured meat, the author defines themselves as an ‘ethical vegan’ and describes cultured meat as the “most vegan thing ever”, overturning the narrative that it is ‘non vegan’. The presupposition here is that the mission of veganism is to reduce animal cruelty and environmental harm; cultured meat is therefore framed as consistent with vegan ethics. The use of intensifiers and hyperboles (“almost 100%” and “game over”) reinforces the sense of inevitability about this future. At the same time, the comment acknowledges that cultured meat creates a vegan identity crisis, but evaluates it positively in light of the benefits it brings. This favourable positioning is realised through the positive APPRECIATION resource “best thing”, which evaluates the phenomenon in terms of quality, the positive JUDGEMENT of propriety in “reduce harm”, and the AFFECT resources of inclination in “I’m all for this kind of identity crisis” and “Glad”, both expressing support for the broader implications of cultured meat. This crisis could lead to the emergence of two subgroups: “the vegans-because-meat-is-weird vegans” and “plant-based vegans”.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to analyse the discursive construction of veganism and the related identities when associated with cultured meat on the assumption that the symbolic meanings of these novel foods will increasingly be “constructed and negotiated in both public discourses and people’s everyday encounters with the subject” (Ryynänen, Toivanen 2023, 593). Drawing on analytical tools of Critical Discourse Studies, including van Leeuwen’s (1996) inventory of social actors and Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory, the study adopted van Dijk’s (2011) ideological framework as its primary analytical lens to address three research questions.

- RQ1: How are vegan identities discursively constructed in relation to the acceptance of cultured meat (focus: animal welfare, health, and environment)?
- RQ2: Do these discursive constructions contribute to the emergence of new ideological boundaries within veganism?

- RQ3: What attitudes are expressed towards these emerging vegan identities?

As for RQ1, ethical considerations make cultured meat acceptable from a vegan perspective, but not for those who adopt veganism for health or dietary reasons, because of the technical aspects that still define it as meat. Many of these comments therefore view the current method used to produce cultured meat as ethically acceptable, aligning with the claims made by Chauvet (2018) in a study grounded in ethical theory and conceptual analysis, where the author concludes that there is no violation of animal dignity in consuming cultured meat and therefore “no possibility for creating an us and them by eating cultured meat when this consumption is grounded in animal rights” (408). However, some commenters support the opposite perspective, although less frequently, arguing that it is ethically wrong because it still symbolically violates the animal. Indeed, the use of foetal bovine serum is costly, ethically controversial, and subject to contamination risks – factors that are pushing research toward serum-free alternatives (Gottipamula et al. 2013; Garrison, Biermacher, Brorsen 2022). In response to these limitations, scientists are also exploring the development of genetically modified immortal cell lines, which would only require a one-time extraction from animals (Genovese, Desmet, Schulze 2017), thereby drastically reducing the overall use of animals in cultured meat production (Soice, Johnston 2021).

Beyond this perspective, among the strongest critics of vegans who accept cultured meat are those who argue that it could represent a step towards cannibalism. In contrast, others claim that vegans who accept it are merely using it as an excuse to eat meat. Although the study does not pursue quantitative aims, negative identity representations are considerably less frequent. In fact, with reference to RQ2, within the macro-label of categorisation, processes of classification are frequent alongside processes of differentiation (van Leeuwen 1996). This suggests a tendency to recognise the identity value of the label ‘vegan’ and to identify out-groups by assigning them specific labels. Indeed, vegans tend to internalise their way of being as a significant part of their moral identity (Chuck, Fernandes, Hyers 2016), as they often make deliberate decisions to deviate from carnist norms for moral reasons (Rosenfeld, Burrow 2018). Furthermore, the label ‘vegan’ can foster a sense of group pride, aid in the establishment of cooperative groups, and function as a means of moral identity-signalling (Feinberg et al. 2019). The analysis has shown that cultured meat provides a site for the construction of ideological boundaries between distinct representations of vegan identity, particularly in relation to whether its consumption is considered compatible with veganism. The most straightforward

opposition is between true and fake vegans, where the legitimacy of those willing to consume cultured meat is openly challenged. It should be noted that the adjective 'fake' is also frequently used in relation to cultured meat (Hallman, Hallman, Hallman 2023), attributing to it the traits of something artificial and unnatural (a negative connotation when it comes to food); as a result, the same adjective is echoed here to identify those who decide to consume it. This is reinforced by the fact that the influencer herself uses the term fake in the video. At the same time, the traditional divide between vegans and vegetarians is reinforced, as cultured meat is frequently compared to products such as milk, honey, or eggs rather than to conventional meat. Beyond these established oppositions, cultured meat also appears to foster new internal divisions based on different interpretations of veganism. Some commenters promote a spiritual understanding of veganism, rejecting cultured meat on religious or spiritual grounds. In contrast, others adopt a narrower definition of ethical veganism, restricting the label to those primarily motivated by animal welfare and environmental concerns. With the introduction of cultured meat, ethical veganism becomes a useful marker to distinguish more clearly between a form of veganism grounded in the reduction of animal suffering and other forms motivated by health or dietary reasons, which instead tend to reject it. Rather than creating this distinction *ex novo*, cultured meat appears, within the discourse analysed, to bring to the fore an already documented tension between forms of vegan identity grounded primarily in ethical commitments and those more closely associated with health or dietary motivations (see Nacchia 2025; Bagci, Rosenfeld, Uslu 2022; Pabian et al. 2023). Finally, some users try to accommodate these differences by proposing new identity labels, suggesting a reconfiguration of the movement rather than simple exclusion. Turning to attitudinal positioning (RQ3), the analysis shows that Attitude resources are relatively limited across the corpus. This suggests that, although commenters display a clear tendency to construct distinct identity groups and ideological boundaries, this process does not generally rely on the strong evaluative polarisation. With only a few exceptions, the construction of competing identities is achieved more through classification and labelling than through highly attitudinal language. This finding also differs from that of Laestadius and Caldwell (2015), who reported that negative comments predominated in online discussions of cultured meat. In the present corpus, by contrast, explicit attitudinal language remains relatively limited and strongly negative evaluations are rare. Although the two studies examine different online contexts, this may suggest that discussions taking place within, or explicitly addressed to, the vegan community are not necessarily characterised by highly negative evaluative language.

The main limitation of this study concerns the difficulty of determining commenters' group membership. Although it is possible to infer their ideological position from the content of their comments, it cannot be established with certainty unless they explicitly self-identify (e.g., "I'm vegan for ethical reasons", comment 11). For this reason, given the limited number of cases of explicit self-identification, the analysis should be regarded as reflecting an unspecified audience, which may not be directly involved in vegan communities. A second limitation concerns the nature of online comments, which are inevitably shaped by the specific content to which they respond. While this represents a methodological advantage, as it grounds interpretations to a clearly identifiable communicative stimulus, it also limits the generalisability of the findings. The discursive patterns identified here should therefore be interpreted in relation to the specific video analysed. Finally, a third limitation lies in the restriction of the corpus to comments containing explicit references to ideological categories. While this criterion is consistent with the aims of the study, it may exclude other relevant positions that engage with the same issues without explicitly assigning individuals to a particular ideological category. Future research could address these limitations by analysing larger corpora and/or multiple case studies, where recurring users across multiple discussions and platforms may provide stronger evidence of their ideological positioning and community affiliation.

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