



Food out of its usual rut. Carnavalesque online veganism as political consumerism

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ABSTRACT

Food is a profoundly political issue, with themes such as environmental sustainability and ethics becoming increasingly important. These concerns have given rise to a new kind of mobilization around vegetarian and vegan eating in recent years. In-depth analyses of the characteristics of this new wave of veganism are needed. Our study explores how the new forms of carnivalesque and carefree veganism are negotiated with the older aims of veganism as political consumerism. Moreover, we aim to understand how new forms of digital food communities are built and take momentum. With these aims, we analyze a social media community for vegan food, a Finnish Facebook group called “Sipsikaljavegaanit,” Crisps and Beer Vegans (CBV). The group celebrates indulgent veganism, and by confronting several contemporary concerned food discourses related to, e.g., health, body, and gender, it has broadened the public image of veganism. We analyze indulgent veganism as a form of carnivalesque and political consumerism, taking Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of the carnival as our analytical framework. Our analysis shows how veganism is reconfigured through various *mésalliances*, detaching it from previous stereotypes, and how profanation of the stereotypes differentiates between variously motivated vegans. The carnivalesque spirit is maintained through rather heavy-handed moderation practices online, in contradiction to the idea of free communication in a public sphere. We claim that the political appeal of the new-wave veganism is in the cultivation of vitality and joy, placing serious societal concerns into the Bakhtinian genre of the serio-comical.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an unprecedented mobilization around veganism (Jallinoja et al., 2019; Lundahl, 2020), primarily motivated by climate and other environmental concerns. Veganism has long roots in food-related political consumerism (Iacobbo & Iacobbo, 2004; Gregory, 2007), but until recently, it has been a poorly known diet and lifestyle with a typically negative public image in Europe and North America (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Jallinoja et al., 2019; Lundahl & Henkel, 2017). Veganism and vegetarianism have been perceived as unpleasant and strange by most consumers, with a stereotypical media image of vegans as radical young women questioning unsustainable Western lifestyles (Pohjolainen & Jokinen, 2020). In official dietary guidance, veganism has been, until recently, recommended only with caution (Santaoja & Jauho, 2020).

Since the mid-2010s, the above-described situation has changed: the public image of veganism and vegan foods has become significantly

more positive, with, for instance, many celebrities praising their vegan dietary experiments (Doyle, 2016). One key feature of the recent vegan movement has been flexible negotiation of ethical and political concerns (Jallinoja et al., 2019). Another key feature is its carnivalesque character, emphasizing indulgence and mocking previous vegan stereotypes. This vegan trend has been constituted by several actors and platforms, such as consciousness-raising campaigns, vegan bloggers, pledges and festivals, and new vegan foods that portray veganism as delicious, flexible, fun, and suitable for everyone (Jallinoja et al., 2019; Verón, 2016). The internet and its food communities were, from the start, a central infrastructure for the new mobilization around veganism (Jallinoja et al., 2019; see also Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), reflecting the broad changes in how, where, and by whom we represent, consume, and share food (Baker & Walsh, 2020).

Within this setting, it is clear that vegans do not form a homogenous group. They contain variously motivated sub-groups, such as those concerned with ethical or environmental issues and those more self-

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regarding and pursuing health, pleasure, or distinction (Janssen et al., 2016; White, 2018). A part of vegans interprets veganism as a diet, avoiding all foods of animal origin. In contrast, others see it as a broader lifestyle and an ethical and activist position that also critiques capitalist production structures. In addition to vegetarians and vegans, a variety of “plant-based” diets have emerged recently, such as part-time vegans, redudetarians, and flexitarians, aiming to reduce the consumption of animal products (Herzog, 2019; Morris, 2018).

Our aims in the paper are threefold. First, we aim to understand better the current mobilization around veganism with its multiple motives and presentations. Second, we will analyze how the new forms of carnivalesque and carefree veganism fit with the older aims of concerned veganism and veganism as political consumerism. Finally, our analysis provides a new understanding of digital food communities. We analyze how the virtual group is built, how it gains momentum, how interaction within the group is governed, and how the virtual interaction intertwines with changes elsewhere, such as in the food supply of supermarkets.

For the analysis, we chose one group of vegans who represent several of the above-described features of the new-wave veganism: a social media community for vegan food and eating, a Finnish Facebook group called “Sipsikaljavegaanit,” Crisps and Beer Vegans. The group celebrates indulgent veganism and represents the recent mobilization around vegetarian and vegan eating. The Crisps and Beer Vegans group provides an interesting case study for several reasons. First, the group has grown into a community of over 62 000 people, making it the largest vegan social media group in Finland. Second, the group has had a crucial role in changing the image of vegan eating in Finland. It has been constituted by several food-related societal developments - both vegan and non-vegan. Third, The Crisps and Beer Vegans (from here on CBV) phenomenon has spread beyond the confines of social media, starting to affect the offer and availability of new vegan foods in the supermarkets.

Indulgent, heavy eating presented in CBV is commonly associated with an omnivorous diet. An example of meat-based indulgence is the YouTube channel Epic Meal Time. Large quantities of high-fat, high-sugar, and highly processed foods are prepared and consumed, in stark counterpoint to clean, sustainable or healthy eating (Lupton, 2020). Food is depicted for its value as a spectacle. Within the recent vegan trend, veganism is also represented as indulgence and a spectacle, in contrast to concerned health and environmental discourses. Carnivalesque veganism is portrayed as easy and fun, full of opportunities to indulge in one’s favorite treats. The image of veganism as a marginal ethical position and asceticism is shown to be outdated.

In the following sections, we provide background on the CBV Facebook group, the current vegan boom, and our theoretical approach. We then present the materials and methods used in the study before moving on to the empirical analysis of the case and finally conclusions.

1.1. The Crisps and Beer Vegans Facebook group and the vegan boom

The CBV Facebook group was founded in September 2015 by Terhi Heimonen, a resident of Sotkamo, Northern Finland, as “a counter-strike to the health fascism and one-sided image of a good body we are being fed” (Kulosaari, 2016). Heimonen had become a vegan herself in 2012. At the time, there were almost no vegan convenience foods available, so vegans had to learn to cook vegan food themselves. Initially, the term “crisps and beer vegan” was used to mock those vegans uninterested in the health aspects of their diet (Heimonen et al., 2017). Establishing the Facebook group, Heimonen took ownership of the term and turned it into a self-ironic nickname for food-loving vegans, carnivalizing the way of eating.

The group was first founded around one product, “vihis,” a vegan version of a deep-fried meat pie (“lihisi”), a typical Finnish “junk food” snack. Heimonen described how she encountered the pie for the first time in her local supermarket and her joy in realizing that the pie was vegan. As she got home, she created the CBV group on Facebook and

invited some of her vegan friends to join. The word spread quickly, and it soon became clear the idea had hit a nerve. A year after being established, the group had approximately 30 000 members, and it has continued to grow, having currently over 62 000 subscribers.

The Crisps and Beer Vegans phenomenon spread beyond the confines of social media. An independent television channel picked it up for an 8-episodes series titled “Crisps and beer vegans” (Sipsarit) (MoonTV, 2016). The Crisps and Beer Vegans organized local gatherings, and a VihisFest celebrating the “vihis” pie was held in Helsinki. The Finnish animal protection association Animalia awarded the group the ProAnimalia prize for mainstreaming veganism and rattling the vegan stereotypes. Furthermore, The Crisps and Beer Vegans was chosen as the social media phenomenon of 2016 by a Finnish lifestyle magazine Image, the term “sipsikaljavegaani” (“crisps and beer vegan”) became used as a lifestyle descriptor in the Tinder dating app, and the Finnish language authority included the term in its dictionary of novelty words.

The CBV phenomenon coincided with a broader vegan boom in Finland and many other countries, constituted by many actors, new product launches, growing environmental concerns, and social media activity (Jallinoja et al., 2019). For example, in 2013, a Meatless October campaign (Pohjolainen & Jokinen, 2020), launched by two men, one vegetarian, and the other omnivore, portrayed vegetarianism and veganism suitable for all and encouraged people to leave the meat for a month. Likewise, the Vegan January Pledge has been organized in Finland by an animal rights NGO since 2013. At the time the CBV group was established, there was at least another general Finnish Facebook group on vegan foods (Vegaaniset kasvisruuat). That group also benefited from the overall vegan boom, with now 44 000 members, but the CBV group distinguished itself by focusing on indulgent vegan food.

The vegan boom has seen many product launches in Finland, and the vegan market has grown from a marginal niche to one of the fastest-growing food trends. In 2016, two new kinds of vegan protein foods were launched, “pulled oats” and “härkis,” oats and fava bean-based meat substitutes. In 2016, the K-chain, one of the two largest retail chains in Finland, reported a 25% annual growth in their sales of vegan products, with the growth of even 50% in the sales of given products such as plant-based milk. Between 2016 and 2018, the sales of prepared vegan and vegetarian meals tripled in the K-chain and doubled in the S-chain (Yle, 2018a). Isotalo et al. (2019) have verified a correlation between social media discussions on veganism and the sales of vegan products. Partly due to the group, vegan product shelves were often empty in the supermarkets before the food industry caught up with the trend. Today, many supermarkets choose to profile themselves through an extensive vegan offer.

The Finnish vegan boom was also noticed internationally. The global hamburger restaurant chain McDonald’s decided to pilot its McVegan hamburger in Tampere, Finland, in October 2017, before launching it more broadly. All these product launches featured prominently in the CBV group, but not always unproblematically, as discussed below.

1.2. Political consumerism and the carnivalesque

Analyzing the Crisps and Beer Vegans phenomenon, our interest is in the intersection of the political and the carnivalesque. Veganism is a form of political consumerism, intending to use the market as an arena for politics (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012; Jallinoja et al., 2019). Micheletti and Stolle (2008) have distinguished three types of political consumerism: boycotting, buycotting, and discursive political consumerism that takes advantage of market vulnerabilities in communicative actions. Later, Micheletti (2016) added a fourth type of political consumerism: a lifestyle change for ethical or political reasons. Jallinoja et al. (2019) found boycott and buycott too narrow characterizations for recent mobilization around vegan eating and claimed that discursive and lifestyle political consumerism together capture better its new images and communities.

The concepts of carnivalesque and spectacle seem promising tools for

further analyzing indulgent veganism. Spectacular environmentalism pays attention to the spectacular nature of current mediatized phenomena: the centrality of visual grammars and emotional registers (Goodman et al., 2016). Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) studied the carnivalization of literature, aiming to determine the influence of carnival – defined as diverse, primordial festivities – on literary genres. Previous studies have used carnivalesque as a general characterization in analyzing the food consumption of gamers, and drinking behavior of hipsters (Cronin et al., 2014), and the portrayal of indulgent eating in YouTube videos (Lupton, 2020). We adopt Bakhtin’s theorization of the carnival as an analytical framework, as it provides conceptual lenses to understand the controversial and political character of new-wave online veganism. Bakhtin (1984) analyzed the literary genre of serio-comical, which treats a serious issue in the present reality, mixing it with the joyful relativity of the comical. For Bakhtin, this carnivalesque sense of the world possesses “*a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality*.” Analyzing carnivalesque veganism, we aim to create an understanding of its transformative potential towards sustainable food culture.

Bakhtin (1984) described the carnival as ritualistic, syncretic, and sensuous pageantry that can take different forms, from mass actions to individual gestures. Carnival is neither contemplated nor performed, but its participants live in it – carnival is “*life drawn out of its usual rut*.” Bakhtin distinguished four categories of the carnival sense of the world: 1) free and familiar contact among people, who in their everyday life may be separated by impenetrable barriers of class or other factors, and new modes of interrelationships between people, 2) eccentricity, a violation of the usual and the generally accepted, allowing latent sides of human nature to express themselves, 3) carnivalistic *mésalliances*, bringing together dualisms such as the sacred and the profane, the wise and the stupid, and 4) profanation, as a system of carnivalistic debasing of power and bringing down to earth.

In addition to the carnivalistic categories, another aspect of the Bakhtinian carnival is carnivalistic acts, most importantly the mock crowning and de-crowning of a carnival king. The carnival acts and categories are different aspects of the carnival, and the categories permeate the acts of, e.g., mock-crowning the carnival king.

Where the carnival takes place is also important. Bakhtin (1984) wrote how carnival also invaded home, but the main arena could only be the streets and the square, as, by its very idea, the carnival belongs to all the people. The internet and social media have been discussed as the contemporary public square, where people come together, and communicative action leads to joint action. Social media has shown its power in mobilizing political protests; the revolution in Egypt in 2011 is a widely discussed example (e.g., Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Several authors carrying out empirical studies on social media have concluded, however, that the discussed potential of social media as a public sphere in Western capitalist states has mainly been idealistic and theoretical (e.g., Iosifidis, 2011; Kruse et al., 2018). The scholars have identified several issues, including problems in access and inclusiveness, corporate control of social media, and overall lack of dialogue and willingness for critical discussion, that prevent social media from becoming an actual public sphere. We will discuss the CBV group in terms of the public sphere and the potential of the Facebook group in facilitating public action at the end of the paper.

2. Material and methods

We have used a combination of online and offline methods to triangulate social media data with other data sources, aiming to present a rounded and detailed discussion of the case (Reid & Duffy, 2018). We take data collection as a “constructively exploratory act” (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Social media seems to provide “naturally occurring” data, but a degree of familiarity with the platform is necessary for understanding it contextually (Kosinski et al., 2015; Kozinets, 2010). Along the lines of netnography, we have followed the CBV group almost since

its formation. The case provides a longitudinal analysis of social media connectivity and the development of the group.

Our research materials consist of the material published in the CBV Facebook group, including the group rules and the group members’ posts. Due to the size of the group, it was not possible to take all the group contents under analysis by qualitative research methods. We browsed the contents, noting differences and developments over time. We classified the contents of the posts into four categories: images of home-cooked meals, restaurant meals, new vegan products, or alcohol. We then sampled the contents given months each year to pinpoint changes over time. Additionally, we searched the group contents with keywords such as “fat” (“*läski*” in Finnish) to find content that is central for understanding how, e.g., body positivity is constructed in the group. Finally, we picked for a closer analysis a selection of discussion chains, where the group’s rules and other themes central to our analysis were discussed in detail.

The second set of materials consists of digital media coverage concerning the group, collected through a web search using “*sipsikaljavegaani*” as the search term. This includes newspaper articles and blog posts mainly from 2016, when the CBV phenomenon became established and grew exponentially. Through the media coverage, we were able to track different ways the phenomenon has expanded beyond the Facebook group and the evolving meaning-making on the group. In 2017 the founder of the group with two other members published a book, “*Sipsikaljavegaanin kirja*,” “The Crisps and Beer Vegan’s Book” (Heimonen et al., 2017), which tells the history and ideology of the group, and provides vegan recipes. We included the book in our research material.

Third, the first author conducted semi-structured thematic interviews with four of the group moderators in 2019. The interviews touched upon the personal histories of the moderators as vegans, how they became involved in the group, its moderation practices, and the CBV philosophy on food. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We refer to the interviews as [I1]–[I4]. The interviews and other materials were in the Finnish language, and the authors have translated the quotations. Finally, we received statistical data on the group demographics from the group moderators.

The CBV is an open Facebook group. The group contents can be browsed without being a member, but it is a semi-private space for the members, and the posts are aimed at like-minded fellows. They cannot be used for research without ethical consideration (e.g., Moreno et al., 2013). We did not make our presence in the group known as researchers. While contacting the group moderators for interviews, we explained our research aims and acquired their consent. In the article, we characterize the group contents on a general level. We do not include direct quotes from posts, even translated, as they could be traced back to individual members. We do not disclose the identities of the interviewees but refer to the founder of the group, Terhi Heimonen, using her name as we refer to her media presence.

3. Findings

Next, we will describe some characteristics and the core rules of the CBV group. We then analyze the carnivalesque aspects of the phenomenon, organizing our analysis following Bakhtin’s categories. We left out eccentricity as an analytical category; we think the CBV group is by definition eccentric, “*a violation of the usual and the generally accepted*,” in extending the image of veganism. We included the analysis of the eccentric aspects of the phenomenon under the other categories. Under each subsection, we also discuss the phenomenon in terms of political consumerism, reflecting it against the key long-term trends in food culture.

3.1. Characteristics of CBV Facebook group

According to CBV group statistics (January 2020), 79% of the

members are women, 20% men, and 1% other. Women are over-represented in the group compared to overall Facebook use – in Finland, 53.8% women and 46.2% men (Statista, 2020). The activity within the group follows the membership statistics so that, for instance, women post to the group proportionate to their numbers. Not all the thousands of members are active in the group. Many follow the group passively, and it has different meanings for the members.

The group members are divided by age as follows: 25–34-year-olds (35%), 18–24-year-olds (21%), and 35–44-year-olds (16%). Less than a percent of the members belong to either the youngest (13–17 years) or the most senior group (65 + years). The demographics of CBV reflect studies showing that women follow plant-based diets more often than men, and youth and young adults more often than older age groups (Allès et al., 2017; Bradbury et al., 2017). Approximately two-thirds of the members come from the biggest cities: Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Oulu, and Jyväskylä, with the rest coming from all around the country.

The CBV group currently has nine moderators of different genders and ages and from different parts of Finland. During the busiest growth periods, the moderators accept hundreds of new members a week. The group only accepts posts with an image of food, with some accompanying words on, e.g., where the product may be found or how the plate was prepared. The posts need to portray indulgent vegan food – for instance, falafel with mashed potatoes is not “junk” enough. People violating the rules may be banned from the group. The group is nationwide in its scope, so the moderators direct posts referring to a given region to local vegan groups.

In the wake of the success of the “vihis” pie, many companies wanted to collaborate with the Crisps and Beer Vegans community to develop their vegan products. Advertising in the group is allowed only with moderators’ permission [I4]. However, the companies realized that if a product is picked up in the group, they do not even need to advertise, as the word spreads between consumers [I2]. Grocery shop owners started to join the CBV group also, and when they see a product picking up interest, they may quickly make it available in their store.

The most common type of post is a photo of a home-prepared dish. The second-largest category contains vegan novelty products, such as meat substitutes and ice creams. Both categories depict savory more often than sweet foods. The third category includes posts on restaurant dishes, again more often main courses rather than desserts. The boundary between home-cooked dishes and novelty products is fuzzy, as the products are often not depicted as such, but they are somehow “pimped” in the CBV style. For instance, toppings are added to a vegan frozen pizza. Most of the restaurant food posts show vegan fast food such as hamburgers, and also in the fine-dining type of dishes, emphasis is on the quantity and heaviness of the meal, rather than aesthetic display. While review-type posts – after trying a new product – are common, the group members are not often satisfied with eating, for instance, a hamburger. Instead, they may buy a six-pack or pile several burgers into one mega-burger. This kind of humorous innovation is appreciated in the group, the most popular posts getting thousands of “likes.”

Despite its name, the CBV group has little alcohol-related content. “Beer” in the group’s title, however, carries meaning, too. The Finnish language has two words for beer: “kalja” and “olut,” the latter being the literary word. “Kalja” refers to either a home-brew or, in spoken language, to any standard, cheap, off-the-market-shelf kind of beer. Hence, the CBVs distinguish themselves from “sophisticated” small-brewery ales and portray a relaxed and democratizing attitude towards drinks. A bottle or glass of beer is sometimes placed to accompany a meal in the posts, and sometimes potato chips and beer are posted in homage to the group name.

Shortly after being established, the Crisps and Beer Vegans inspired another smaller Facebook group, “the Wine and Cheese Vegans” (Viinijuustovegaanit; ca. 3000 members). According to the interviewees, some people more interested in the quality than in the quantity of food found the crisps and beer veganism somewhat vulgar. The Wine and Cheese Vegans group further highlights the diversity of vegan diets and

lifestyles and participates in reconfiguring the public image of veganism as enjoyable. The group represents fine dining type of vegan eating; the members discuss, e.g., wine pairing to vegan dishes. The group also functions as a platform for peer learning, pointing out how not all “plant-based” products such as wines are vegan, as animal products are used in the production process, and how there are competitive vegan alternatives for products previously perceived to be available only in animal origin, such as cheeses. The two groups have partly overlapping memberships, but the Wine and Cheese Vegans seem to target a somewhat different sub-group of vegans, without the carnivalesque of Crisps and Beer Vegans.

When the CBV group grew and started to self-organize, had several moderators and written rules, the founder, Terhi Heimonen, left the group and Facebook. The group had gone from a handful of friends to a community of tens of thousands of people, changing the image of vegan eating in Finland. Heimonen wrote in the Crisps and Beer Vegan’s book “my job was done” (Heimonen et al., 2017).

3.2. Mock crowning of indulgent vegan food as the carnival king

The primary carnivalesque act in all carnival-like festivities, for Bakhtin (1984), is the mock crowning of a carnival king. The crowning captures the essence of the carnivalesque sense of the world, as the ambivalent ritual contains the immanent idea of de-crowning. The one who is crowned is not a real king but rather a jester, a fool. The description of the CBV group points to the carnival king:

We are a body- and food-positive group oriented towards vegan junk food. Everybody is welcome despite their diet, as long as the contents of the group stay vegan. We focus on “traditional stodge” and gourmandism. Raw cakes and –bakery etc., do not belong in this group. Salt, sugar, and fat are not banned, and the more processed, the better!

The CBV group was founded around one product, the “vihis” pie. In the beginning, the contents focused around that particular product: the group filled with vihis hunting stories, reports of group members losing their “vihis virginity,” and memes such as “Scream in front of an empty vihis shelf,” referring to Edvard Munch’s famous painting. The legitimate carnival king was the “vihis” pie and later indulgent vegan food more generally. For the CBV group and indulgent veganism in general, de-crowning does not seem to be in sight. Instead, the group still keeps on growing.

The crowning of the carnival king was also personified. In the TV program on the Crisps and Beer Vegans, the first guest was the CEO of HoviRuoka Ltd, the company that brought the “vihis” pie to the market. HoviRuoka is a small company, and the success of the “vihis” pie came unexpectedly to them. In the program, the CEO told how he had been in the food business for 30 years and had never seen a product being picked up by consumers like the “vihis” pie. The company had thought it would take several years to launch their line of vegan products properly and was taken by surprise with the empty “vihis” shelves in the supermarkets. The CEO realized the pie had answered a demand that had been bubbling under. The reception of the “vihis” pie revealed the versatility of vegan eating, and soon other companies followed in launching their vegan products.

The carnival king is crowned in contrast to the “real king.” Here the real king is vegan or vegetarian food that follows the values of health and sustainability. The somewhat stereotypical image of a health-conscious vegan has a long history. Already the health reformers of the 19th century recommended vegetarianism, a wholesome diet, and abstention from alcohol (Iacobbo & Iacobbo, 2004; Whorton, 1982). This image is still present in contemporary media (Cole & Morgan, 2011), with, e.g., celebrities reporting their “going vegan,” motivated by “spiritual or physical cleanse” and health aspects (Lundahl & Henkel, 2017).

In this cultural surrounding, the discursive power of indulgent veganism lies in contrast to the stereotype. The carnival provides a cultural frame allowing to critique “eating right.” By showing there is a

vegan alternative to all favorite treats and shamelessly indulging in heavy vegan foods, the carnivalesque online veganism makes veganism accessible also to people whom the image of veganism as complicated may have previously alienated (Sneijder & Te Molder, 2009). In the CBV group, the members sometimes comment sarcastically, “*it is so hard being a vegan when you cannot eat almost anything*” on an image of a towering hamburger or an over-the-top cake. Still, the crowning of the carnival king is mock crowning, a carnivalesque exaggeration. The group does not seriously promote crisps and beer veganism as an everyday diet but as a carnivalesque part of eating - *food out of its usual rut*. As an interviewee put it: “*I do not think anyone thinks of crisps and beer veganism as a diet, but it is a place to celebrate certain kinds of foods and things.*” [I4]

3.3. Veganism reconfigured through carnivalistic *mésalliances*

Carnival works through dualisms. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque category of *mésalliance* meant that “*things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a non-carnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations*” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 123). The first *mésalliance* in the CBV carnival was to associate veganism with indulgent eating: processed, heavy foods are not banned but, on the contrary, cherished. This alliance made some vegans concerned, as an interviewee explained:

In the beginning, some people said, how can you do something like this. Soon everybody will be having heart attacks and having their arteries blocked, and blood pressure skyrocketing. However, that has diminished all the time since this has been so huge a phenomenon. I guess people have understood that the idea is not to have chocolate for breakfast, pizza for lunch, and candies every hour. That it is more the attitude. [I3]

Indulgent eating is generally associated with a reckless disregard of the health effects of food. In *mésalliance* with indulgent eating, carnivalesque veganism shows how vegans can be reckless, too.

Curiously, several of the group moderators are public health nurses by occupation. In the interviews, they joked how they need to follow the official dietary guidelines for a healthy diet in their day job, but they have a dark side moderating the CBV group [I2]. Seriously, though, the moderators did not perceive their day jobs and the CBV as contradictory. As the interviewees pointed out, an indulgent vegan diet is likely to be healthier than an indulgent omnivore diet (also Armitage, 2020). Regarding body positivity, they thought the group is even doing a favor to public health, expanding the notion from physical to mental health: “*Obesity is a risk for public health; there is no denying that. However, we think it is more important that people are comfortable in their bodies, also for mental health issues.*” [I2]

The Crisps and Beer Vegans emerged in a food culture landscape where fatness is often treated as a moral failure, and “clean” eaters are depicted as physically and morally superior (Baker & Walsh, 2020). Clean eating and meatless diets are typically perceived as feminine practices. Normative idealized femininities are associated with eating salads, highly controlled eating, and constant dieting, whereas dominant ideals of masculinity are associated with favoring red meat and fast food in large quantities (Lupton, 2020; Roos et al., 2001). Allying “feminine” veganism with hyper-masculine representations of indulgent eating allows the CBV to reclaim veganism and eating from the gendered stereotypes. While the group description does not outspokenly proclaim feminism, the interviewees referred to the feminist aspect of the group, associating it with a relaxed attitude towards food, body positivity, and self-determination regarding food choices [I2, I3].

The group rules explain the concepts of food and body positivity

By food positivity, we mean that foods are not commented on negatively, even if you do not like the food. If you have nothing positive to say, do not comment. The aim of the group is not to share opinions but to cherish the gospel of heavy food. Body positivity means that we do not discuss weight, calories, or losing or putting on weight in the group. It means accepting your body as it is. There is no need to feel guilty when treating yourself with food!

The CBV body positivity is peculiar: bodies are almost invisible in the

group, and the contents focus on food. Body positivity is implemented in the group through food positivity. Commenting negatively on foods or their health effects is not permitted, and nobody should be made feel ashamed for what they eat. While social media reproduces normative ideals on the body, it is often used to resist and reframe bodily norms, too (Lupton, 2018). With the commercialization of social media, Cwynar-Horta (2016) writes, however, how the body positivity movement has ended up reproducing the ideologies it initially rejected.

The CBV group goes against the grain of social media as a performance of the ideal self (e.g., Baker & Walsh, 2020). The chosen non-visibility of bodies may be read as the kind of radical body positivity called for by Sastre (2014), which “*rejects any regulated engagement with the body’s physical and ideological construction.*” In not subjecting bodies to sexualizing, objectifying, and evaluating gaze, the body positivity enacted in the group is inclusive. All bodies have the right to enjoy indulgent vegan food without health and weight concerns. This reading is supported by the fact that the members occasionally post testimonies on the therapeutic effects of the group, telling how they have struggled with disordered eating and how the CBV has allowed them to develop a healthier and more relaxed attitude towards food.

In addition to an elitist drinking culture discussed above, the indulgent veganism distances itself from an elitist “foodie” culture. The distancing takes place through particular aesthetics in the group. The visibility of the posts is almost the opposite of food bloggers’ “instagrammable” photos, where the food, the plate, and the overall surroundings are presented as a harmonious whole (Jallinoja et al., 2019). Instead of aiming at “instagrammable” images, in the CBV group, there is a purposeful aesthetics of “the ordinary,” heaviness, or even ugliness. Instead of aiming at a portrayal of “an ideal self,” the aesthetics of the ordinary highlight the inclusive and democratizing aim of the carnivalesque group. The aesthetics make the socio-economic playing field more even: in the CBV group, it brings the members fame rather than shame if they discover, for instance, bargain frozen pizzas. According to the interviewees, students, who may be struggling to make ends meet, seem to post heavier foods than other group members.

Misallying ways of eating that were previously thought of as unfitting the CBV perform cultural jamming, which Micheletti and Stolle (2008) define as a type of confrontational discursive political consumerism. Culture jamming aims at spectacular consciousness-raising, and by drawing in both “ordinary” consumers and politically inclined people, it ultimately aims at value change in society. Making the *mésalliances* requires variegated cultural literacy from the group members and moderators, as the group confronts several intersecting, concerned discourses related to food, health, and bodies. At the same time, the group may construct cultural capital related to veganism (Onorati & Giardullo, 2020), allowing consumers to identify with the new kind of easy, indulgent vegan eating.

3.4. Heavy-handed moderation for a safe carnivalesque space

In a carnival, people separated by barriers such as social status, age, or economic position come into free and familiar contact with one another (Bakhtin, 1984). In the carnivalesque spirit, the CBV Facebook group is open to anyone accepting the rules, the main ones being 1) only posts with images, 2) only vegan content, 3) only posts on indulgent and not just any vegan food, and 4) to behave oneself. While the group portrays veganism as accessible, there are rather strict rules for communication. The group functioned first as an information channel on where to find the “vihis” pies, but when it grew, all kinds of “noise” increased in the group [I2]. The moderators crafted rules, and anyone wanting to be a member first has to read and accept them. The introduction of rules annoyed some group members, who, as a result, established yet another Facebook group called “Rule-free Crisps and Beer Vegans” (Sääntövapaat sipsarit), now with some 2000 members.

In the CBV group, the moderators remove any posts in violation of the rules. For instance, if the food depicted is not considered “junk”

enough, the post is deleted without questions. This way, the moderation practices create a different profile for the group from other vegan social media groups. If there is any conflict building up, the moderators quickly delete all traces of it. The group is thus moderated quite heavily-handedly. According to the interviewees, the group members are active in reporting posts in violation of the group rules, which eases the task of the moderators. Therefore it seems the heavy moderation is not a tyranny of a few, but the rules are implemented collaboratively.

Another group rule even the moderators feel ambivalent about is “no questions.” The CBV group is often the first contact to the vegan scene for a wannabe-vegan since the group is widely known. Therefore, an interviewed moderator thought it would be nice if new members could ask questions in the group, as it would help them begin their vegan path. Now the new group members are supposed to know which foods are vegan and which not, without asking for advice. In the moderator’s view, the situation is difficult as questions, especially on ethical issues, have also been banned in many other vegan groups. While the CBV group would not be as fun anymore if the newcomers flooded it with questions, the moderator also felt a responsibility to help newcomer vegans [14].

Through moderation, the group spirit is actively constructed and maintained as carnivalesque, light, and joyful. At the same time, another moderator missed “the good old times” when one could freely joke in the group. The contents are all about food and eating, and the funny business has moved to other groups [13]. The contradiction is intriguing: the fun and lightness are gone but simultaneously form the group’s core. The moderation of the group is rendered as a careful balancing act, aiming at inclusiveness. The group rules seem to solidify the carnival into a specific form, losing the element of surprise. However, in Bakhtinian reading, the contradiction is at the heart of the carnival. The CBV carnival is polyphonic, dualistic, and ambivalent. It has a distinct visual symbolic language, and the carnival is lived in repeating the ritual act of posting images on indulgent vegan food.

In addition to negative food and body talk, an ethical discussion is also banned from the CBV group, be it about animal rights or the environmental impacts of food. An example of an issue that keeps on re-emerging is palm oil products and their environmental impacts [12]. The moderators remove all related comments. In online and social media communication, political discussions are often avoided in fear of being targeted, and tolerance for differing opinions seems low (Kruse et al., 2018). From this perspective, avoiding ethical discussion seems counterproductive for the group’s functioning as a public space and promoting veganism. However, a different reading is possible. The group follows one strict ethical principle: that of veganism. Leaving out further ethical discussions related to food signals that it is enough to commit to one ethical principle at a time instead of carrying multiple intersecting ethical problems on one’s shoulders.

It may be asked whether veganism as political consumerism will facilitate a lasting political change if open discussion on the politics and ethics of veganism is not permitted. The democratic but regulated communication in the group sets limits for its functioning as a public sphere. Compared to the Greek polis or a village carnival, a Facebook group is a narrow niche for a certain kind of speech for a specialized public. Nevertheless, as Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 158) wrote, also the Greek polis, as an ideal of the public sphere, needed boundaries:

It is as though the wall of the polis and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself.

While the group’s rules may limit free expression, they may also be the condition for the group’s continued existence. The rules construct a safe space, making the carnival possible. At the same time, the “polis” of online veganism is broader, including blogs and various social media platforms that allow the expression of various viewpoints.

3.5. Profanation juxtaposes differently motivated veganisms

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque category of profanation works through blasphemies and parodies that debase power. The main target of CBV profanation is “healthism,” as articulated by the founder of the group. Consequently, the indulgent vegans are also mocking differently motivated veganism concerned with the health aspects of food. Furthermore, misallaying veganism with modes of eating that were previously considered unfitting, such as indulgence in processed foods, indulgent veganism incidentally mocks more politically oriented veganism, revealing distinctions among vegans.

The interviewed moderators lamented how, in some vegan groups, there is a constant quarrel about who is a “real vegan” [12]. Indulgent vegans laugh at health vegans or raw food vegans “*who live on water vapor and goji berries*” [12]. Another group the CBV makes fun of is elitist vegans “*who buy new vegan shoes every week and do not participate that much in these groups. For them, veganism is some kind of status symbol.*” [12] Due to the rules and moderation practices in the CBV group, this kind of quarrels are not allowed to surface. A quarrel on who is an actual vegan would defy the inclusive purpose of the group. Still, some of the group moderators find it challenging to accept anyone into the group, despite their diet or motivations for veganism:

Now the trend is that we should not be asking who is really a vegan. It is a bit hard for me since I am an animal rights vegan. And it pains me when somebody says they are vegan but can have a bit of milk. So I think, how can you betray the animals that way [laughs]. So this kind of tolerance is a bit hard for me, even if I know that it would be better for the animals if everybody is almost vegan than if just a few are entirely vegan. [14]

While comical is how The Crisps and Beer Veganism shows outside, there is a serious side to the serio-comical indulgent vegan carnival. After all, veganism is originally a radical proposition, seeking to exclude all forms of animal exploitation (e.g., White, 2018). For those who are vegans for ethical reasons, it may be difficult to accept others’ self-centered motivations or only trying veganism or “light-veganism” instead of committing to it. This discussion renders visible the difference between veganism as an all-encompassing identity and veganism as a set of practices that may or may not be applied – depending on the situation (Jallinoja et al., 2019). In a similar vein, White (2018) has discussed “activist” and “lifestyle” veganism. For the activist, ethical vegans, veganism is both an identity and a practice: it is who they are and on what basis they make different choices in their lives. The CBV group promotes veganism as an accessible practice, which may become integrated into various lifestyles, but does not require adopting vegan ethics as part of one’s identity.

Some long-term vegans see indulgent veganism or “burger veganism” as ethically problematic, as some of the companies that produce vegan foods are also part of the animal food industry. Ethical vegans do not want to be in any way associated with unethical animal production and environmental harm [13]. The CBV group has taken a position where all vegan products are considered a step in the right direction, and further ethical concerns are not discussed. It seems this relative position is accepted more widely than before in vegan politics, as even the animal rights movement has started to apply similar discursive strategies of political consumerism, celebrating the ease and joyfulness of vegan eating (Jallinoja et al., 2019).

In the light of the discussion above, we may ask whether the spectacular veganism distracts and diffuses the differently motivated veganisms and the vegan cause, or does it raise interest and awareness to the point of effective societal change (also Goodman et al., 2016). The CBV group has been praised as the best thing that has happened to veganism in Finland (Image, 2016). However, the carnivalesque veganism may also be polarizing differently motivated veganisms in blurring the principles of vegan ethics. The profanation of vegan stereotypes and the mocking of the yesteryear image of veganism as requiring superhuman self-control and effort have made veganism more accessible. If the ethical and health vegans were previously considered to stand a moral

high ground, the carnivalesque self-irony of indulgent veganism shows veganism suitable for all, leaving fewer excuses not to go vegan.

In the beginning, the political consumerism of CBV was to facilitate fellow vegans to find new products. With the growth of the group, the members realized it could have a broader societal impact. One of the moderators reasoned their involvement in the group:

We, moderators, do this (act as sheriffs) because we think this group is excellent for promoting veganism. Because of this, it is crucial to keep the group as initially thought. I consider this as a kind of light activism where I can, with a small effort, participate in making new vegans and increasing a positive attitude towards veganism.

Stories of “making new vegans” and “converting” others into veganism by showing that vegans are not missing out on anything render many group members food activists. The political target setting of CBV is done apart from ideological purity. Consumer activists seek to alter the meanings of consumption and quality of life through the Bakhtinian carnival: “life drawn out of its usual rut.” As one moderator put it, instead of a diet, the CBV group is a place to celebrate the joyous side of life. In this, the group may serve long-time ethical vegans as well:

People who have been vegans for a long time are very conscious of all kinds of wrongs, to the extreme. Then it is fun that there is the joy of discovery and such. I often hear, for instance, from people participating in the Vegan January Pledge, how they have never liked being in the kitchen and have never cooked, and now they cook a lot and try a new recipe every week and stuff. So they find joy, a kind of joy of discovery, and joy of feeling comfortable in the kitchen and experimenting with new things. I think this happens a lot as well through the CBV group. People see what others have done and get the idea that I could do that as well. [14]

If the different levels of commitment to vegan ethics diffuse vegans, it seems the carnivalesque joy in the CBV group provides a unifying platform, at least for part of vegans and those experimenting with a vegan diet. In contrast to concerned food discourses and the history of veganism as abstinence, emphasizing joy is a rebellious notion. To allow finding joy, the carnival has to have boundaries: it is not arbitrary indulgence and excess but takes place in regulated pockets (Cronin et al., 2014).

In the Western food landscape of both abundance and concerned discourses, finding food joy may be difficult. Indulgent eating, without limits, often results in guilt. Indulgent veganism, however, may be broadly appealing as it seems to allow the ultimate fantasy of self-indulgence within an ethical frame (Lupton, 2020).

4. Conclusion

As a type of political consumerism, the new-wave veganism has carnivalesque characteristics. This led us to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) theorization of the carnival, which we found a fruitful framework for the analysis of the Crisps and Beer Vegans. The CBV Facebook group promotes shameless indulgence in vegan food and the joy of eating, ridiculing the former stereotypes of veganism as difficult and ascetic. Soper (2008; 2020) has termed this type of new hedonist imaginary alternative hedonism. The CBV seemed to answer a demand that was bubbling under – eating that is ethically and environmentally conscious but easy and enjoyable. There are similar social media groups for indulgent veganism internationally, such as the What FAT Vegans Eat Facebook group preceding the CBV. Yet, the group and movement are contextually and culturally specific. In Finland, the Crisps and Beer Vegans emerged at a specific moment when it was able to gain momentum from several simultaneous social and cultural developments.

The Bakhtinian concept of *mésalliance* highlights how indulgent online veganism reconfigures veganism. Reclaiming both “feminine” veganism and “masculine” indulgence in heavy foods, indulgent veganism has broadened the image of who can be a vegan. We believe indulgent veganism is appealing to many because it addresses food from several angles: as a corporeal, ethical, aesthetic, class, and gender issue. Indulgent veganism engages critically with these dimensions of eating,

and its message is even liberating: indulgent veganism allows addressing these multiple intersecting issues simultaneously while being easy and fun. The transformative potential of indulgent veganism may lie in that it functions as a stepping stone in changing dietary practices. While people may try vegan products and reduce meat initially for environmental, health, or self-concerned reasons, broader ethical thinking and commitment to veganism may follow suit.

However, the concept of profanation revealed possible trade-offs in promoting carnivalesque, indulgent veganism. Long-time vegans identifying with strict vegan ethics may find it difficult to accept the blurring of the principles of vegan ethics and including people who have different motivations for trying out veganism. Another trade-off to keep the group spirit light and carnivalesque is that questions are not permitted in the group, even though experienced vegans would like to help newcomers. As discussion on vegan ethics is not permitted, it may be asked whether indulgent veganism can make lasting societal changes. The group administrators believe that the vegan cause is best promoted to larger audiences through carnivalesque rather than with ideological purity in the long run.

Regarding to CVB as a new digital food community, there are few conclusions to be made, too. The group that started around one vegan product has broadened its scope, has lasted now for six years, and is still growing. However, social media campaigns are often short-lived (Cronin et al., 2014; Poell & van Dijck, 2015). The reasons for the longevity of CBV are the growing interest in vegan eating, the ongoing discussions on the sustainability of food, and the group’s openness to different interpretations. Hence, the openness of the posted photos allows the participants to associate CBV with many of the current food discourses around health, weight, animal rights, and environment (Warde, 2016).

In other ways, too, indulgent online veganism has different meanings for people. For some, the group may be a way to amuse themselves; for others, it is part of their identity or a way to express food positivity. For some, posting photos on a popular social media group is demonstrating one’s creativity, declaring participation in a trendy phenomenon (Jurgenson, 2019; see also Sontag, 1978/2019). The CBV group forms a loose online community, where the crossing of the usual social barriers may allow powerful temporary experiences of togetherness (Cronin et al., 2014). While the underlying rationale is individualistic, participating in a shared interest network can be seen as a form of online civic engagement (Haider, 2016). Thus, social media platforms may facilitate individuals and looser groups to take responsibility for societal developments (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013; Micheletti, 2016), as shown in the case analyzed here.

The CVB goes against the grain of the overall tendency of social media to present ideal selves and bodies. Social media has been criticized for causing anxiety as users compare their lives to the representations of other people’s seemingly perfect lives (Lovink 2019; Miles 2021). Indulgent veganism claims body positivity, but curiously in the Crisps and Beer Vegans group, bodies are almost not at all visible. Body positivity is implemented through food positivity, in presenting eating without concern. Not placing bodies under the scrutiny of social media users implicitly suggests that the body is not a matter of concern.

A central issue in our analysis is the commercial platform where CBV operates – Facebook. The price of online food activism is submitting one’s data to commercial social media companies. Regarding the future of the online vegan movement, our interviewees brought up the possibility of people leaving Facebook due to privacy concerns, which could invert the growth trend of groups such as CBV. In spring 2018, 58% of Finnish Facebook users were concerned about their privacy, with older age groups reporting more concern than younger ones (Yle, 2018b). Still, in the first half of 2019, the number of Facebook users in Finland decreased by just 2–3% (Niemi, 2019). Eventually, the appeal of Facebook among the youth will continue to fade, probably leading to changes in the CBV community, too.

Van Dijck and Poell (2015) have argued against one-sided interpretations of social media’s potential to function as a public sphere.

According to them, analyses must account for both how the rise of social platforms threatens the democratic character of public space and appreciate the space of agency afforded to citizens and public institutions in actively shaping the platform society. We agree with their analysis: CVB, just as any Facebook group focusing on commercial products, is unavoidably a part of consumer capitalism – but might still have the potential for its criticism.

Finally, what is the take-home message for those promoting sustainable food transformation? We suggest that a promising tool for sustainability transformation is using enabling instead of restricting discourses, promoting joy, and placing serious societal concerns into the genre of serio-comical. *Lyytimäki (2018)* believes environmental protection can be forwarded by studying how people use humor in informal communications. According to him, humor that shakes prejudices and provokes thoughts may be an essential addition to evidence-based decision-making. Instead of stereotypes that create societal divisions, humorous understandings connecting different views and promoting collective action are needed (*Lyytimäki, 2018*).

Connolly (2013) has written of the fragility of things – of ethics, ecosystems, and our social-technological-economic lives. In the face of concerned environmental, health, and other discourses, he emphasizes the cultivation of vitality: strengthening fragile life forces that may offer an alternative basis for sustainable futures. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque sense of the world possesses “a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality.” According to Connolly, vitality may be cultivated by new radical, pluralist assemblages and alliances between multiple minorities. As we interpret it, indulgent online veganism is this kind of pluralist assemblage that found a crack in the system and emerged as a renegade flow to reorient common life.

Data availability statement: The corresponding author can provide all original data for review if necessary (in Finnish language).

Ethics approval statement: In carrying out this research, we have followed the guidelines on responsible conduct of research as well as the ethical principles of research with human participants, issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019; available at: <https://tenk.fi/en/ethical-review>). For the research reported here, it was not necessary to acquire a statement from a human sciences ethics committee, as the research is based on public information and we do not handle personal data. We have reflected on the ethical aspects of the study in the 2. Material and methods –section of the article.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Minna Santaoja: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Piia Jallinoja:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing - review & editing.

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.

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