



Empirical: Single or Multiple Studies



The Vegan Dystopia: Understanding the Psychosocial Experience of Vystopia

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Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations, 2025, Vol. 4, Article e17679, <https://doi.org/10.5964/phair.17679>

Received: 2025-04-13 • Accepted: 2025-08-01 • Published (VoR): 2025-09-03

Handling Editor: Chris Hopwood, University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland

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Supplementary Materials: Code, Data, Materials, Preregistration [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

While most often explored in fictional contexts, the ability to imagine alternative worlds (i.e., utopias and dystopias) may play a critical role in shaping human morality, justice, and social change. In the present study, we investigated ‘Vystopia’ a form of dystopian thought experienced by ethical vegans. To examine the psychosocial characteristics of vystopic vegans, we used a battery of computerized text analytic tools to analyse both behavioural and linguistic data from the *r/Vystopia* Reddit community ($N_{\text{posts}} = 14,542$). Several themes emerged as characteristic of vystopic discourse, including strained interpersonal relationships, philosophical pessimism, animal commodification confrontation and systemic carnism. Relative to controls, vystopic vegans used significantly more linguistic references to morality, negative emotion, mental health, and death. Taken together, our findings highlight the psychosocial consequences of dystopian worldviews, while also underscoring their adaptive potential to inspire moral reflection. This research offers foundational insights into how dystopian thinking and ethical identities intersect.

Keywords

dystopia, veganism, moral psychology, online communities, vystopia



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Non-Technical Summary

Background

Humans have a unique capacity to imagine alternative possibilities, such as utopias or dystopias. This ability can shape our morality and motivations for social change. While dystopian thought has typically been examined in fiction or in terms of possible future events, some groups experience the current world as dystopian. One such group is a subgroup of ethical vegans who experience “Vystopia”, “an existential crisis experienced by vegans, arising out of an awareness of the trance-like collusion with a dystopian world”. Despite the terms growing popularity, there is little empirical work on the subject.

Why was this study done?

In this study we aimed to investigate the psychosocial characteristics of people experiencing Vystopia. Specifically, we wanted to answer three key questions:

1. What does Vystopia mean to vegans?
2. Who subscribes to a Vystopic worldview?
3. What linguistic markers differentiate Vystopic vegans from others?

By exploring these questions, we sought to understand how perceiving the world as a dystopia impacts mental health, relationships, and motivation for collective action among ethical vegans.

What did the researchers do and find?

Using Reddit data, we collected and analyzed over 14,500 posts from the *r/Vystopia* community, comparing them with posts from general vegan and neutral Reddit communities. We used computerised text analysis to uncover key themes and linguistic patterns.

The study identified four major themes in Vystopic discourse:

1. **Interpersonal Relationships:** Vystopic vegans often experience conflict with family and friends, leading to feelings of isolation. To help combat this some users found comfort in vegan communities and activism.
2. **Philosophical Pessimism:** Many posts expressed existential despair, antinatalism, and at times suicidal ideation, seeing human existence as fundamentally harmful.
3. **Confrontation with Animal Commodification:** Users described an initial awakening and recurring distress when witnessing society's treatment of animals.
4. **Systemic Carnism:** Vystopic vegans feel trapped in a society that normalizes animal consumption, perceiving it as an inescapable, unjust system.

Analysis of subreddit activity showed that *r/Vystopia* users engaged deeply with vegan-related context, this was a central feature of their online identities. Alongside this we found further support for Vystopic vegans endorsing philosophical pessimism through participation in *r/antinatalism*.

Compared to controls, Vystopic Vegans use language that contains more frequent references to morality, negative emotions, mental health, and death than control groups.

What do these findings mean?

The study reveals that experiencing the world as a dystopia has profound psychological impacts. Vystopic vegans report strained relationships, existential distress, and pervasive feelings of isolation. Their worldview not only shapes their online behavior but also contributes to negative mental health outcomes, including discussion of suicidal thoughts.

The research also provides nuance to the ongoing conversation about the relationship between plant-based diets and mental health. While some earlier research has linked vegan diets to poorer mental health, this study indicates that such distress may partly result from moral frustration and existential concerns, rather than from dietary factors alone. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of supportive environments – such as vegan communities and activism—which can help individuals sustain their commitment to plant-forward diets by providing moral validation and social connection. These insights can inform future strategies to promote sustainable dietary transitions and support individuals in maintaining plant-forward lifestyles.

Further research is needed to explore how dystopian worldviews develop, how they affect activism, and what protective factors (such as community belonging) might mitigate their negative effects. Understanding Vystopia can provide insights for supporting ethically driven individuals and for fostering resilience within social change movements.

Introduction

Representing Possible Worlds

The ability to imagine alternative futures and engage in counterfactual thinking is thought to be a uniquely human trait (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). This imaginative capacity is often seen as adaptive, underpinning our sense of morality, justice, and motivation for social change (Fernando et al., 2020; Mannheim, 1991). While often applied to interpersonal ethics, this same ability can be used to evaluate society as a whole. At a systemic level, people can envision worlds that are either morally ideal (utopias) or morally degraded (dystopias) relative to current norms. Such thinking provides a critical lens through which we assess the contemporary moral environment.

Common usage in the arts often creates temporal distance between the current state of affairs and the dystopian counterfactual. Yet, utopian and dystopian thinking may not only apply as distant future alternatives but are often used to describe current society (as dystopian) relative to an ideal (a utopia). In his speech to the British parliament, English philosopher John Stuart Mill (Mill, n.d.) coined the term “dystopia”. He used it as an antonym of utopia to imply that the current political situation was an undesirable state of affairs, relative to his own political ideals.

Since the term’s origin, it has inspired a great deal of literature depicting dystopian worlds. Some popular examples include: *A Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1985) and *Nineteen-eighty four* (Orwell, 1949). These classic texts often cover storylines of op-

pression, technologically enabled authoritarianism, environmental catastrophe, and the suppression of individuality. Such recurring themes suggest that dystopian literature may reflect fundamental psychological patterns, as proposed by psychoanalytic theorists (Vandermeersch, 2001). Thus, we might expect dystopian thought to attract attention in contemporary cognitive research.

Indeed, early empirical work on the psychological functions of imagined alternative societies has found that dystopias are perceived as psychologically closer than utopias. This effect was particularly strong in low-system justifiers, namely political liberals (Panayiotou, 2020). The role of system justification supports the idea that dystopian thoughts are more readily available when people are not satisfied with the current state of affairs. As proposed by Badaan et al. (2020), this makes dystopian thought a potential catalyst for inspiring social change. Indeed, Daysh et al., (2024) found that both utopian and dystopian thinking motivated pro-environmental collective action but via different emotional pathways - utopian thinking increased collective action intentions by inducing *hope* whereas dystopian thinking does so by inducing *fear*.

Though dystopian thinking may bolster prosocial intentions and behaviours, this is not without personal cost. Being immersed in dystopian realities by fearing both the current and future possible states of the world, such as anthropogenic climate change, has been found to be strongly associated with significant challenges such as depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, lower self-referred mental health, and reluctance to have children (Boluda-Verdu et al., 2022; Ogunbode et al., 2023). Given these potential consequences, it is crucial to better understand those immersed in dystopian thought. Understanding these experiences has implications for ethically driven groups such as environmentalists, AI pessimists, and animal rights activists. These groups offer us a unique opportunity to study the psychological antecedents and consequences of dystopian worldviews as lived experiences rather than mere abstract concepts.

Vystopia: The Vegan Dystopia

One contemporary form of dystopian thought, experienced by vegans, is known as Vystopia. The term “Vystopia”, originally coined by psychologist and existential psychotherapist Clare Mann, is defined as follows: “an existential crisis experienced by vegans, arising out of an awareness of the trance-like collusion with a dystopian world.” (Mann, 2018). Consistent with previous research on dystopian thought, Vystopia is believed to be associated with an array of psychosocial difficulties, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, self-admonishment, feelings of guilt, persistent nightmares, misanthropy and feeling alienated or disconnected from friends and family (The Vegan Society, 2023). Reflecting this growing recognition of Vystopia’s psychosocial significance, social psychologists have begun to study the phenomenon empirically; most notably, Trenkschuh et al. (in press) recently developed and validated the first quantitative scale to measure Vystopia and its effects.

Previous work has focused on the negative personal consequences of viewing the world as a dystopia, making vegans who experience Vystopia a key group to research, in order to understand the psychology of dystopian worldviews more broadly. Furthermore, ethical vegans have previously been identified as a group that use utopian feelings to inspire radical action (Panayiotou, 2020), making those experiencing Vystopia a theoretically important group to understand if we hope to deepen our knowledge about those who immerse themselves in aspirations of alternative states of affairs.

Understanding the psychological antecedents and consequences of Vystopia may also inform the growing psychological literature concerned with the pursuit and maintenance of plant-forward diets. Compared to omnivorous diets, plant-forward diets are less resource-intensive and could therefore help to address major global issues like climate change (Carey et al., 2023). Accordingly, scholars and NGOs advocate for reducing animal-based food consumption in favor of plant proteins (Willett et al., 2019). Yet, adoption remains low (Bryant et al., 2022) with a commonly cited barrier being the anticipation of negative social consequences, for example denigration and ostracism (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). Research with practicing vegetarians and vegans corroborates many of the *projected* concerns of omnivores. Plant-forward eaters find themselves the target of prejudicial stereotypes (Aloni et al., 2024) and social coordination issues (e.g., exclusion from mealtimes) with close others (Gregson & Piazza, 2025). These negative social costs are key drivers of dietary abandonment (Anderson & Miyakawa, 2022) and may also lead to, or be confounded by experiences of Vystopia.

The Present Research

In the present study, we sought to investigate the lived experience and psychosocial antecedents of dystopian thought. Critically, we seek to study the psychological impacts of viewing *current* society as dystopian, relative to one's ideal state of affairs. This diverges from previous research, which typically examines dystopian thought as future-oriented. In contrast, our focus is on the absence of temporal distance - where dystopia is not a distant possibility but an immediate, perceived reality. Using social media data from the popular platform Reddit, we identified individuals who self-subscribe to a particular form of dystopian thought, Vystopia. Here, we adopted a novel approach to understanding the Vystopian experience, utilising computerised text analytic tools to analyse the public discourse of *r/Vystopia* users. Our research was guided by a series of pre-registered questions and analyses (see Veitch & Gregson, 2024)¹. All available data and scripts can be downloaded (see Veitch, 2025).

1) A fourth research question was pre-registered. All analyses that we ran were inconclusive and to avoid “the file drawer problem” these results are reported in Supplementary Materials D (see Veitch & Gregson, 2025).

Research Questions

RQ1: What does Vystopia mean to vegans?

RQ2: Who subscribes to a Vystopic worldview?

RQ3: What linguistic markers differentiate Vystopic-vegans from controls?

Method

Sample Overview

For this research, we developed a custom pipeline utilizing the RStudio package *RedditExtractorR* (Rivera, 2023) to collect data from the subreddit *r/Vystopia*—a community who define themselves as: “a support group for vegans struggling with this phenomenon”. At the time of writing *r/Vystopia* has approximately 7,200 members. We collected all available posts, including both “submissions” (i.e., posts that users made to the forum: text or other content) and “comments” (i.e., posts made in response to other users’ posts). The final database included a total of 14,542 posts, made up of 991 submissions and 13,551 comments produced by 1,022 unique users. Each post represented a unique data point and was associated with the language content of the post, the date and time the post was made and the username of the account which made the post. To better understand *r/Vystopia* users, we additionally tallied the frequency of posts that each user made across all other publicly available subreddits. For means of comparative analysis we collected equivalently sized samples from *r/AskReddit* ($N_{\text{posts}} = 11,996$) and *r/Vegan* ($N_{\text{posts}} = 13,760$). We utilised a variety of text analysis methods for quantifying the text data from *r/Vystopia*, ranging from well-established word counting methods to topic modelling and corpus linguistics (see Supplementary Materials A for detailed descriptions of each method used, Veitch & Gregson, 2025).

Results

RQ1: What Does Vystopia Mean to Vegans?

To understand the topics and issues that *r/Vystopia* users discuss within their community, we conducted a MEM analysis on the language data generated within *r/Vystopia*. Specifically, we analysed submissions with a word count ≥ 50 ($N = 12,663$). We then performed a PCA with varimax rotation on the binary word output generated using the MEH. Varimax rotation was used to align with the best practices for PCA for language data, which often recommend that each extracted component (theme) is rotated to be statistically independent from each other (Markowitz, 2021)². This is done to enhance

the interpretability of themes in the corpus (in this instance *r/Vystopia* posts). The diagnostic Bartlett's Sphericity Test ($\chi^2 = 30166.28$, $p < .001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (KMO = 0.684) indicated that a component type model was an acceptable fit for language data. Typically, evaluating component fit in PCA for language data utilises the "greater than one approach" which retains all components with an eigenvalue above one (Markowitz, 2021). This approach could not be applied to our data without undermining the interpretability of our themes as 64 components met this requirement. Consequently, based on inspection of the scree plot at the elbow bend we adopted a more conservative approach requiring components to have an eigenvalue of ≥ 2 . This resulted in a 4-component solution being selected as the best fit for our data. Together the 4-components explained 7.78% of variance in the data which is within the expected range for language data (see, e.g., Ikizer et al., 2019; Kilimnik et al., 2018³). The 4-component solution, including word loadings, is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

The 4-Component Solution and Word Loadings

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4
	Interpersonal Relationships	Philosophical Pessimism	Animal Commodification Confrontation	Systemic Carnism
friend	.457	harm .313	torture .363	eat .502
find	.375	human .303	cow .349	product .481
time	.310	suffering .298	kill .342	diet .427
group	.309	sense .298	die .334	vegan .421
hard	.308	exist .290	murder .333	meat .398
year	.299	mean .290	animal .331	food .384
family	.297	wrong .281	love .297	veganism .352
talk	.294	action .276	day .275	base .334
hope	.288	case .274	told .271	plant .329
activism	.276	suffer .271	death .270	buy .311
start	.258	moral .266	abuse .269	health .256
share	.252	problem .266	pain .251	issue .226
deal	.241	society .265	hate .247	option .213
mental	.239	continue .265	farm .247	said .204
community	.232	imagine .251	life .246	
work	.227	reason .249	live .237	

2) The unrotated solution and scree plot is available on OSF.

3) Kilimnik et al. (2018) explained 10.4% of variance with nine components, and Ikizer et al. (2019) 8.79% with five. Our four-component solution (7.78%) explains more variance on average per component.

Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4		
Interpersonal Relationships	Philosophical Pessimism	Animal Commodification Confrontation	Systemic Carnism		
better	.222	right	.242	hurt	.223
bit	.221	change	.236	body	.220
best	.213	point	.233	watch	.219
struggle	.211	future	.226	care	.214
social	.211	child	.223	evil	.202
alone	.210	idea	.222		
post	.206	consider	.220		
learn	.203	decide	.219		
thought	.202	matter	.216		
		nothing	.211		
		simply	.210		
		long	.203		
		fact	.203		

To interpret each of the four components, we selected a sample of the 10 highest-scoring unique submissions for each component. Our analysis revealed four distinct themes of discussion pertaining to: 1) Interpersonal Relationships, 2) Philosophical Pessimism 3) Animal Commodification Confrontation, and 4) Systemic Carnism. The quotes that we present in the following subsections were taken from these samples and are intended to be most representative of the component.⁴

Interpersonal Relationships

The first component captured discourse around interpersonal relations, encompassing two elements: (1) navigating strained interactions with non-vegan individuals (e.g., family and friends), and (2) seeking connection with like-minded others. This is reflected in the word loadings: *friend*, *find*, *group*, *community*, and *activism*. Many *r/Vystopia* users described negative experiences arising from difficult conversations with close others. These strained interactions formed a substantial part of Vystopian experience. One user, when describing a conversation with a friend, noted that simply identifying as an ethical vegan could provoke hostility: “*just openly existing as a vegan can start a debate, snarky comments, whatever.*” This hostility was associated with feelings of social isolation—“*I didn't realize how much it impacted me to be an alone vegan. I've ended up losing friends*”; “*it only alienates me*”.

⁴ It is worth noting that quotes may be altered or paraphrased to maintain user anonymity whilst maintaining the sentiment of the post. All edits or redactions are indicated with squared brackets.

In anticipation of criticism, some users reported self-censorship: *“I don't want my other family members to start [to criticise me] for [being vegan]. I'm not even trying to get others to change, as much as I would like to.”* Here, the user expresses a desire for moral alignment with close others but suppresses their views out of fear of conflict. Another user similarly shared that they avoid conversations about veganism with loved ones to prevent damaging relationships: *“I never do explicit activism for my close [others]. It ruins trust and only alienates me.”* This perceived moral disconnect from non-vegans not only strains relationships but also induces anxiety about future interactions. One user, reflecting on dating, wrote: *“[as part of a larger post about dating] Naturally, that created doubts about which sort of person I can relate with.”* These anticipatory and lived social tensions appear to cause genuine distress for Vystopic vegans, contributing to feelings of isolation and anxiety.

In response to these challenges, many *r/Vystopia* users sought connection with like-minded communities and reported improved wellbeing as a result. Engaging in animal rights activism was one way users found hope and purpose: *“You never know who's heart you can touch when nobody is looking.”* Simply being surrounded by others who shared their values offered comfort: *“Last week I travelled to a vegan meet [...] It felt completely amazing to be surrounded by people who eat [...] and live like I do, who love animals and know how they're treated in the food industry.”* This sense of belonging seemed to ease emotional distress: *“For the first time in [...] months I didn't feel like an extreme, emotional [person], who [was mistaken to care] so much about animals. I felt completely understood as a logical person [...] who loves animals.”* These excerpts highlight the potentially protective role of community in helping individuals manage dystopian thought and its emotional consequences.

Philosophical Pessimism

The second component focused on existential concerns and the moral implications of existence, with key terms including *harm, human, suffering, sense, exist, and mean*. Much of the discussion centered around antinatalism and philosophical pessimism more broadly, emphasizing life's perceived futility and the belief that non-existence may be preferable. As one user put it: *“I know this is antinatalism, rather than veganism but I feel its similar [for humans as well as animals] that this world, if it is anything, is hell.”*

Users showed thoughtful engagement with complex philosophical ideas: *“The non-identity problem seems to imply that the barren empty void of a world is no better than a world full of joy, meaning, autonomy, [etc.] ... and minimal suffering. This makes sense from the perspective of [...] the potential beings who can't miss the second world”* and *“I don't place any ethical weight on the future potential for feeling of that person.”* These views were often underscored with misanthropy: *“we are needlessly exploiting other sentient creatures, in industrial quantities, and altering the [...] course of nature and life, for*

absolutely no reason other than our own pleasure [...] no other species has caused as much destruction and suffering as humans. we have no place on this planet in my eyes”.

Suicidal ideation was discussed and, for some, framed as a logical conclusion: *“I’d rather reach the terminal goal of sentience (which is looking like suicide for me)”.* Some users expressed frustration with mental health support that failed to acknowledge the philosophical basis of their distress: *“But dear god for me it [therapy] was so useless [...] that was when I first realized that my suicidal ideation was not born of ignorance or illness, but completely rational sensible awareness. [...] absolutely no one was going to accept that”.* The frequency of suicide-related discourse should not be understated as many submissions across themes were often prefaced with trigger warnings, highlighting the need for greater understanding and support for those experiencing dystopian worldviews.

Animal Commodification Confrontation

The third component captured *r/Vystopia* users struggling with the 1) initial and 2) recurring confrontation with animal commodification. Initial confrontation refers to the personal perspective shift from viewing animal products as food to viewing such products as the remains of sentient beings. Recurring confrontation often comes in the form of being reminded of this new perspective due to the actions of others and the world around them. Hence, the word loadings: *torture, cow, kill, die* and *murder*.

In the initial stages of confrontation with animal commodification some users describe an uncomfortable transformative process (*“[I am] violently plunged into this new worldview, suffering ideological whiplash”*). One user likened this confrontation to a moment of realisation or awakening: *“a switch was flipped in my brain, and suddenly my entire worldview was changed; ideological sympathy with vegans was transformed into full agreement in a matter of hours”.* This realisation can arouse feelings of moral outrage (*“Since then, my utter, visceral discomfort with the world around me has grown daily”*) and isolation (*“I feel like I’m the only one who sees dead flesh everywhere”*).

Instances of recurring animal commodification confrontation seemed to be primed by social interaction, and made particularly challenging by displays of perceived moral hypocrisy from non-vegans: *“you can’t love someone and pay people to murder them! I don’t understand how that doesn’t compute with most people. I get frustrated with [non-vegans] and their hypocrisy”.* This perceived hypocrisy is particularly salient for *r/Vystopia* users when non-vegans display empathy towards animals whilst engaging in animal product consumption: *“I was watching a nature documentary with my mom. Now I want to cry. A [predator] ate a fish. [...] My mom said, Oh, poor fish! I wanted to cry or scream or hit something. She just ate a piece of flesh from a creature that spent its entire life on a factory farm [...] abused from birth to death”.* These perceptions highlight that Vystopic vegans are forced to confront animal commodification each time a non-vegan other demonstrates meat-related cognitive dissonance.

Systemic Carnism

The final component highlights the difficulty of striving for ethical consumption in a culture that largely systemically endorses the ideology of Carnism. Carnism, as Joy (2020) describes, is the prevailing ideology that justifies consuming animals, framing it as both natural and necessary. Some *r/Vystopia* users regard this system as irredeemably unjust, declaring “*there is no true ethical consumption*” or asking “*are we constantly picking the lesser of multiple evils*”. Whilst others express frustration at the lack of supportive cultural norms: “[I] would have given anything to have someone[...] in my life spurring me [towards veganism], instead of everyone telling me not to be vegan”.

Further frustration arises when even self-identified vegans display internalized carnism. One user seeking a vegan therapist wonders: “*Is there a way of finding actual vegan therapists and not just some plant based diet [so-called] vegan who eats [Meat] every Monday...?*”. Similar anger is aimed at former vegans who quit over health concerns without expert input: “*It’s so difficult to see many people who quit... at the same time I don’t think most doctors are well educated about veganism*”. Despite these frustrations, users recognise the complexity of attempting to be vegan in a non-vegan world: “[We shouldn’t] judge the ones who did not continue if they were dealing with legitimate health issues that were caused by eating a [vegan] diet. We do not know their stories. [It would not be fair] to cast a judgemental eye on them without knowing everything”. The perception that carnism is systemically maintained contributes to a feeling of inescapability and powerlessness which defines a large part of feeling Vystopic “*Don’t you [believe] that small “innocent” cultural elements can be to blame for carnism? Carnism is a pervasive issue that infiltrates various aspects of society, not only [existing in the dietary realm via people’s plates] but also stemming from [otherwise]harmless sources*”. Ultimately, many Vystopic vegans express feeling trapped in a society that embodies the antithesis of their moral sentiments, this makes day-to-day living a challenge and creates the perception that they are living in a dystopian reality.

RQ2: Who Subscribes to a Vystopic Worldview?

In the absence of standard demographic data, we used a behavioural approach, analysing the subreddits frequented by *r/Vystopia* users to infer their interests and psychosocial characteristics. We compared these patterns to control groups: a neutral control group (*r/AskReddit*) and a dietary control group (*r/vegan*). The former offers a baseline due to its broad and neutral content (as used in Gregson et al., 2022), while the latter helps isolate characteristics specific to dystopian worldviews from those associated with veganism. Among the users sampled, only 2.34% appeared in both *r/vegan* and *r/vystopia*, and just 0.03% overlapped between *r/vystopia* and *r/askreddit* indicating sufficient independence between samples.

We employed a two-step analysis: first identifying the top ten subreddits most frequented by *r/Vystopia* users, then calculating %DIFF values to measure effect sizes in

subreddit activity across groups. Positive %DIFF values indicate higher engagement in *r/Vystopia* than in the control groups, while BIC thresholds ($BIC \geq 2$) were used to assess statistical significance (Gabrielatos, 2018). The Bayesian Information Criterion here is calculated using the log-likelihood value (a measure of how likely the observed frequency difference is under the null hypothesis) and the combined size of the two corpora being compared, using the formula: *Bayesian Information Criterion* \approx *log-likelihood* – *log(corpus size)*. Gabrielatos (2018) argues that while p-values are traditionally used to determine statistical significance, they are highly sensitive to corpus size and are often misinterpreted as indicators of how "important" or "relevant" a word or subreddit is. The p-value does not directly reflect the probability that a frequency difference is due to chance. Instead, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) provides a more interpretable measure of evidence against the null hypothesis. BIC offers a graded scale: values above two indicate positive evidence, above six strong evidence, and above ten very strong evidence that the observed difference is not due to chance.

Results are detailed in Table 2 (see Supplementary Materials B for subreddit descriptions, Veitch & Gregson, 2025). *r/Vystopia* users showed strong engagement in vegan-related communities, including *r/vegan*, *r/ShittyVeganFoodPorn*, *r/vegancirclejerk*, and *r/DebateAVegan*, indicating that veganism (their ethical ideal) plays a central role in their online identities. The diversity of these subreddits—ranging from advocacy to satire and critique—suggests a highly reflexive engagement with vegan culture and ideology. Notably, participation in *r/AutismInWomen* points to a possible overlap between neurodivergent individuals and those drawn to Vystopian discourse, suggesting that some users may turn to Reddit for broader emotional and psychological support, not just moral alignment. This reinforces the idea that *r/Vystopia* functions as both an ideological and emotional support space. Additionally, increased activity in *r/antinatalism* lends further support to RQ1 findings, highlighting a strong interest in the ethics of procreation. This suggests that Vystopic users may not only question the morality of current societal norms but also grapple with deeper existential concerns about the value of life and the ethics of creating sentient beings in what they perceive to be a fundamentally flawed world.

Exploratory analysis shows that *r/Vystopia* users consistently focus on animal ethics, even outside their home subreddit. As illustrated in Figure 1, commonly used words in their *r/Askreddit* posts (such as "animal," "suffering," "reason," and "moral") suggest that the Vystopian perspective is pervasive and deeply integrated into their online presence. See Supplementary Materials C for word clouds from other frequently visited subreddits (Veitch & Gregson, 2025).

Table 2

The Ten Most Frequented Subreddits by r/Vystopia Users Compared to r/vegan and r/AskReddit

Subreddit	<i>r/Vystopia</i>		%DIFF	BIC
	Frequency	<i>r/vegan</i> Frequency		
vegan	4139	16193	57.63	609.85***
vegancirclejerk	1048	1202	437.67	1368.41***
DebateAVegan	790	2646	84.18	189.56***
AskReddit	711	2740	60.02	101.20***
sanpedrocactus	547	0	674546.10	2134.51***
antinatalism	474	378	673.30	798.14***
AskIreland	350	60	3497.29	1043.05***
Vystopia	348	211	917.08	680.91***
AutismInWomen	248	52	2841.08	703.57***
ShittyVeganFoodPorn	248	630	142.76	108.69***

Subreddit	<i>r/Vystopia</i>	<i>r/askreddit</i>	%DIFF	BIC
	Frequency	Frequency		
vegan	4139	2253	28733.39	33622.49***
vegancirclejerk	1048	52	316214.72	10176.98***
DebateAVegan	790	1	12398954.15	7967.75***
AskReddit	711	393534	-71.64	1777.11***
sanpedrocactus	547	0	17170235.74	5514.82***
antinatalism	474	86	86405.03	4304.49***
AskIreland	350	0	10986403.68	3520.73***
Vystopia	348	0	10923623.65	3500.48***
AutismInWomen	248	0	7784622.60	2488.367***
ShittyVeganFoodPorn	248	24	162081.72	2333.52***

Note. BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion. Values ≥ 2 indicate positive evidence against the null hypothesis. BIC $\geq 2, 6,$ and 10 correspond approximately to $p \leq .00018$ (*), $.000014$ (**), and $.0000024$ (***), respectively.

Table 3*t*-Tests Demonstrating the Difference in Language Use in *r/Vystopia* Relative to Controls

LIWC-22 Category	<i>r/Vystopia</i> Mean (SD)	<i>r/Vegan</i> Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Moral	0.71 (1.87)	0.52 (1.91)	5.94	0.10	< .001
Negative Emotions	1.62 (3.29)	0.86 (2.93)	15.04	0.25	< .001
Mental Health	0.22 (0.98)	0.06 (1.06)	9.36	0.16	< .001
Death	0.41 (1.29)	0.28 (1.52)	5.54	0.09	< .001
LIWC-22 Category	<i>r/Vystopia</i> Mean (SD)	<i>r/AskReddit</i> Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Moral	0.71 (1.87)	0.40 (2.06)	8.56	0.16	< .001
Negative Emotions	1.62 (3.29)	0.86 (2.92)	13.48	0.25	< .001
Mental Health	0.22 (0.98)	0.09 (0.93)	7.31	0.13	< .001
Death	0.41 (1.29)	0.31 (1.86)	3.37	0.06	< .001

Discussion

In this study, we focused on the lived and affective experience of perceiving current society as dystopian, and the psychosocial factors associated with this perception. Specifically, we investigated the psychological impacts of viewing *current* society as dystopian, relative to one's *ideal* state of affairs—a research perspective that, to our knowledge, has not yet been adopted. We pursued a novel and naturalistic approach to investigating dystopian experience, by exploring the psychosocial characteristics of those individuals who self-subscribe to a community defined by their enduring experience of a particular form of dystopia—Vystopia. We analysed both behavioural and linguistic Reddit data from the *r/Vystopia* community, a group of ethical vegans who describe grappling with an “*existential crisis stemming from the perceived, trance-like societal collusion with a dystopian reality*”. Through three guiding research questions, our analyses offer a foundational understanding of the Vystopian experience, while contributing to a broader understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying dystopian worldviews. Here we summarise our key research findings, the implications of this research and identify potential directions for future research⁵.

This research provides a range of insights at the intersection of two fields—1) how people psychologically represent possible alternative worlds (dystopias and utopias) and 2) how people sustain plant-forward diets. First, we demonstrate that people can experience the *current* world as a dystopia and that dystopian thinking is not only applied to concerns about *future* states of society. Second, we demonstrate that such worldviews are

5) See Supplementary Materials E for our constraints on generality section which outlines the limitations of the current work (Veitch & Gregson, 2025).

associated with damaged interpersonal relationships and suicidal ideation. Third, we find that dystopian worldviews are all-encompassing and are associated with the majority of an individual's online behaviour being related to the promotion of ideals aimed at combating dystopia. Furthermore, we provide empirical evidence suggesting that the experience of a dystopian reality may be shaped by perceptions of moral inadequacy in the environment relative to one's own ethical ideals. We unpack each of these key findings in greater depth below.

A Perspective Shift: From Future-Oriented, to Current Experiences of Dystopia

We demonstrate that Vystopia not only aligns with insights from future-oriented research but also extends this understanding by illustrating that such cognitive and emotional processes can manifest in the present. We identified key psychological experiences commonly associated with Vystopia. These include strained interpersonal relationships, struggles with the ethical complexities of existence, distress over the systemic commodification of non-human animals, and an acute awareness of the pervasive nature of carnism. Though unique to Vystopia, these themes build on prior research on future-oriented dystopian thought, demonstrating that perceiving the present world as dystopian has comparable psychological states to fearing future dystopian worlds (Ogunbode et al., 2023). Specifically, we provide evidence that dystopian experience is associated with indicators of poor mental health and reluctance to have children. Crucially, we identify key distinctions between experiencing the *current* world as a dystopia and anticipating a dystopian future. The absence of temporal distance forces users to confront persistent reminders of a world they perceive as dystopian. This immediacy fosters a profound sense of inescapability, as prevailing societal norms remain fundamentally at odds with their ethical ideals.

Current Dystopian Worldviews and Their Personal Challenges

Our research uncovered several personal challenges that perceiving the world as dystopian is associated with. Linguistic analysis revealed that Vystopic vegans use significantly more language related to morality, death, negative emotions, and mental health than both non-Vystopic vegans and neutral controls. This suggests that experiencing the world as dystopian is linked to increased psychological distress, echoed by frequent mentions of suicide in the text data. In line with prior research on imagined alternative worlds, our findings show that Vystopian worldviews are rooted in dissatisfaction with prevailing moral norms - further evidenced by heightened discussion of morality and death. These themes appear specific to Vystopia rather than veganism more broadly, as they are less apparent in *r/vegan*.

This insight contributes to the ongoing debate about the relationship between plant-forward diets and mental health. While some nutrition researchers attribute higher rates of depression among vegans to dietary deficiencies, this is contested (Jain et al., 2022). Our findings suggest that moral disillusionment may also play a role. This aligns with Hopwood (2022), who argues that meat-reducers experience depression due to cognitive dissonance. We extend this idea, proposing that vegan-associated distress may stem either from misalignment between behaviour and ideals (meat-reducers) or between ideals and the state of the world (Vystopic vegans). Future research should focus on providing strong causal evidence about the relative role of how moral dissatisfaction and nutritional factors each contribute to mental health outcomes, to better support those pursuing plant-based diets.

Dystopian Experience is All Encompassing

Our findings suggest that dystopian experience can significantly shape online identity, particularly around ethical ideals. Vystopic vegans engaged more deeply with ethical veganism than both general vegans and neutral users, indicating a distinction between adopting a moralised practice and perceiving the world as dystopian. While *r/vegan* includes critiques of the food system, such discourse appears less central to users' identities than on *r/Vystopia*. The urgency and emotional intensity of Vystopic posts suggest that dystopian thinking can be more consuming than general social criticism.

Although vegan activists are known to experience burnout due to the emotional toll of advocacy (Cox, 2011), the relationship between Vystopia and burnout remains unclear. These findings point to the role of dystopian worldviews in shaping identity, digital behaviour, and activism, with implications for the wellbeing of social change actors. Understanding the immersive nature of Vystopic thought may help activists in developing strategies that balance moral urgency with psychological resilience, supporting more sustainable forms of activism.

We found that Vystopic vegans, as a stigmatized minority, often report a lack of social support—potentially contributing to the adverse mental health outcomes discussed above. Research suggests that emotional and tangible support from loved ones can help individuals maintain plant-forward diets and protect against psychological distress (Gregson & Piazza, 2025). Accordingly, support—whether from close relationships or online communities like *r/Vystopia*—may serve as a buffer against the negative effects of dystopian thinking. While we observed some qualitative evidence for this, further study is needed. Emerging research also indicates that mass gatherings, such as The Vegan Campout festival, may help reduce isolation by creating a “temporary social majority” that reinforces identity and mental resilience (Prosser et al., 2025).

Future Directions

Given the breadth and exploratory nature of this study, several future research directions merit exploration in controlled settings. For instance, discussions on *r/Vystopia* often centered on the ethics of procreation. Given the contemporary moral debate surrounding population growth and decline (Cafaro, 2022), future work could examine how dystopian concerns—such as existential anxiety, environmental degradation, or perceived future quality of life—influence beliefs about having children, and whether those with dystopian worldviews extend their moral concern more readily to future generations.

At the societal level, future research could explore how dystopian experience influences collective action—such as activism, political dissent, or shifts in voting behaviour—as well as how expressions of dystopian sentiment are perceived by others. For example, third-party responses to Vystopic vegans may either support or hinder broader movements like plant-based advocacy.

It remains unclear whether holding a dystopian worldview reflects a broader psychological disposition. Future research should explore whether certain personality traits, cognitive styles, or developmental experiences predispose individuals to these worldviews. Investigating the link between dystopian worldviews and mental health could clarify whether such beliefs contribute to, or result from, psychological distress.

Conclusion

In a growing body of literature, researchers are beginning to explore the psychological experiences of individuals who perceive the world as a dystopia (Daysh et al., 2024). The present study investigated Vystopia—a form of dystopia, experienced by ethical vegans who see society as morally failing—through the perspectives shared in a dedicated online community. Our findings reveal that *r/Vystopia* users are unique in the intensity with which they center their identities around ethical ideals, grapple with existential questions about morality and existence, and confront the systemic commodification of animals. While the Vystopian worldview highlights significant personal costs, such as strained relationships and negative mental health impacts, it also underscores the transformative potential of moral conviction in driving collective reflection and action. Understanding the experiences of Vystopic-vegans offers valuable insights for moral psychologists, as well as opportunities for advocates to navigate the complex emotional landscape of veganism and refine their approaches to managing their wellbeing whilst advocating for food-system change.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contributions: P.V. conceptualized the studies, analyzed the data, and was responsible for writing the original draft, methodology, formal analysis, and investigation. R.G contributed to data collection, conceptualization, methodology, investigation, visualization, and to the writing—reviewing and editing. All authors reviewed the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics Statement: This research followed all ethical guidelines for human research participants. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the School of Psychology ethics committee at the University of Kent (Approval number: 202417212887069233). Due to the nature of our research the committee approved our application to conduct and publish this research without collecting prior consent. Following BPS guidelines on observational work, we assume prior consent, given that we rely on publicly available data. All users of Reddit are required to agree to the platform's Terms of Service which outline that their posts are public and that their data will be stored and potentially accessed and analysed by third parties. We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies.

Reflexivity Statement: Whilst the majority of this paper uses quantitative means of analysis, elements of the analysis under RQ1 and RQ2 required some qualitative interpretation. Due to the interpretative nature of these sections one of the researchers would like to disclose their position as an ethical Vegan. This means—in their personal lives and otherwise—they seek to exclude all forms of exploitation of and cruelty to animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose, as far as is possible and practicable (The Vegan Society, 2023). The other researcher would like to disclose their position as someone who has adhered to a strict vegetarian diet for several years and who is therefore sympathetic to plant-forward dietary practices. Whilst we acknowledge that these positions come with a potential bias, we have made every effort to remain self-aware, critical and open-minded. In addition, we believe these positions better allow us to accurately represent the population we are studying.

Data Availability: The raw dataset analysed for this work has not been made publicly available in order to protect the privacy of the Reddit users whose data was used in this study. The raw Reddit data can be made available upon request, subject to an appropriate data use agreement. All datasets required to replicate our analysis are available in the files section of the OSF (see Veitch, 2025).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available:

- Preregistration (see Veitch & Gregson, 2024)
- Data, code (see Veitch, 2025)
- Supplementary Materials A–E (see Veitch & Gregson, 2025)

Index of Supplementary Materials

- Veitch, P., & Gregson, R. (2024). *Dystopian realities: An investigation with "Vystopic" vegans* [Preregistration]. OSF Registries. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/ZV6U9>
- Veitch, P. (2025). *Dystopian realities: An investigation with "Vystopic" vegans* [Data, Code]. OSF. <https://osf.io/pv7km>
- Veitch, P., & Gregson, R. (2025). *Supplementary materials to "The vegan dystopia: Understanding the psychosocial experience of vystopia"* [Supplementary Materials A–E]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21177>

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Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations (PHAIR) is the official journal of the Society for the Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations.



PsychOpen GOLD is a publishing service provided by the Leibniz Institute for Psychology (ZPID), Germany.