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# Overcoming (vegan) burnout: Mass gatherings can provide respite and rekindle shared identity and social action efforts in moralized minority groups

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## Abstract

Moralized minority actors can play important roles in social change processes by rejecting majority social norms and modeling alternative societal pathways. However, being a minority actor can be difficult, often resulting in stigma, derogation, and hostility from the majority group. For actions intrinsically linked with daily life (e.g., eating), such social obstacles might become so great that individuals acting alone experience activist burnout and social isolation, and may stop pursuing social change altogether. Event-based interventions are a promising (yet currently understudied) avenue for ameliorating these negative consequences and maintaining minority-driven social change. Through on-site field interviews ( $N=20$ ), we explore how attending an identity-centering mass gathering (“The Vegan Campout”) acts to validate and empower a minority group (vegans) seeking social change. We show how the event functioned as a space where vegan identity, food, and action were centered and celebrated, in stark contrast to vegans’ experiences of a majority meat-eating society, where they often experienced negativity. Experiencing a ‘temporary social majority’ context provided important respite for vegans to gain strength, rekindle their vegan identities, and (re)affirm their commitment to activism. Our findings provide insight into the benefits of identity-centering events for sustaining social change efforts among moralized minority groups.

## KEYWORDS

burnout, events, festivals, identity, mass-gatherings, moralized minority groups, social action, social change, The Vegan Campout, veganism

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## Highlights

- Identity-centring mass-gatherings can provide an important source of social connection, validation, and inspiration for moralised minority groups (e.g. vegans) pursuing social change.
- Mass-gatherings help moralised minority group members overcome social isolation and strengthen their sense of shared identity.
- Mass-gatherings offer a positive and affirming space in which moralised minority group members can have a majority identity experience that prefigures the future the group is working towards.
- Mass-gatherings help moralised minority actors to go further in their action and activism by facilitating important connections between individuals and organised collective action groups.

## INTRODUCTION

Transitioning toward a more sustainable future requires rapid social and behavioral change to many of our everyday practices (IPCC, 2022). We have limited time in which to reduce fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions, and halt habitat and ecosystem destruction, if we are to meet societal and international targets to limit the impact of climate change (O'Neill et al., 2018). Despite this urgent need for change, many of the lifestyle practices needed to stay within planetary limits are currently minority pursuits. Mainstreaming these pursuits and understanding how minority actors can influence social change toward more sustainable futures is therefore of utmost importance.

One such transformation required is a shift in dietary habits toward a plant-based diet (Willett et al., 2019). In recent years, there has been a growth in dietary transformations, with studies estimating that people who are willing to reduce their meat consumption for environmental reasons make up 12.8% to 25.5% of the population (Sanchez-Sabate & Sabaté, 2019). Some minority actors are already modeling a potential pathway toward this transformation, through a commitment to veganism: abstaining from meat, dairy, and animal products in their diet and/or wider lifestyle (Wrenn, 2019). While meat reduction is becoming increasingly common in the United Kingdom, surveys estimate that less than 2% of people are fully “vegan” (YouGov, 2022). In most countries around the world, vegans are a minority group within society.

Research demonstrates that minority actors (e.g., vegans) can have an outsized impact on social change efforts through establishing new norms (De Groeve et al., 2022; Moscovici & Lage, 1976). Minority actors can change others' private opinions and offer social support for others engaging in nonnormative practices such as meat reduction or veganism (Bolderdijk & Jans, 2021), suggesting that the influence of minority groups is subtle but crucial to social change processes in the long term. Other research also points to the important social role that vegans play in encouraging societal meat reduction (Gregson et al., 2022; Judge & Wilson, 2019) and creating markets for plant-based meat and dairy alternatives (Krampe & Fridman, 2021; Trewern et al., 2022). Vegans act as “moral rebels” (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin et al., 2008), disrupting the interpretation of the majority meat-eating social norm and questioning the necessity of meat consumption among non-vegans (De Groeve et al., 2021). In presenting an alternative way of living, vegans can potentially shift the “Overton window” surrounding animal consumption (Winters, 2022) and change the public debate toward more pro-environmental alternatives.

Although minority actors have a high potential to create social change, they may face significant social sanctions for going against the majority (meat-eating) social norm, such as prejudice, stigma, and derogation (Earle & Hodson, 2017; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). Veganism has been characterized as a “moralised minority practice identity” (Kurz et al., 2020), which entails particular challenges due to the moralized representation of veganism within society, its minority status, and the high visibility of vegan practices in meat-dominated environments. Veganism sits unsteadily between the categories of “dietary behavior,” “social identity group,” and “activist identity.” While vegans share a social category membership with other vegans (Judge et al., 2022; Markowski, 2022) in a psychological sense, they are in the societal minority and may be atomized socially and geographically—potentially not knowing or regularly encountering other vegans in their everyday lives (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020).

Moral convictions can be a powerful motivator for minority group members to engage in collective action but can come at a cost to social relationships with members of the majority group (Skitka & Morgan, 2014; Täuber et al., 2015; van Zomeren et al., 2012). Eating is a social activity central to many family and cultural events (Greenebaum, 2012). Vegans risk social-interactive trouble with those who eat meat or dairy, being labeled as “killjoys at the table” (Twine, 2014), and, worse, being ostracized within their social networks (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Minson & Monin, 2012). Moreover, in many societies, disrupting the meat-eating norm can be seen as a very real political threat to the status quo (Stanley, 2022). Thus, there is a cost for people who identify as vegan and are committed to upholding what are strongly held moral norms and values (Bagci et al., 2022; Vestergren & Uysal, 2022)—particularly when faced with familial or cultural norms that run counter to their own principles (Asher & Cherry, 2015).

Due to the myriad of social difficulties they encounter, vegans may experience “activist burnout” (Cox, 2011), an intense form of physical and mental exhaustion following social action that hinders their ability to maintain their veganism in the long term. Vegans experiencing social difficulties and burnout may then refrain from discussing their veganism with others or might exclude themselves from social situations that make their veganism visible to others. This self-silencing might further reduce vegans' potential impact on societal transitions toward plant-based systems (Bolderdijk & Cornelissen, 2022). Finding interventions that can support vegans in shouldering the attendant social costs and in sustaining their challenge to meat-eating norms is vital to securing their vision of a vegan future. Supporting the “world-making” actions of vegans in their everyday lives will also serve to improve societal transformations toward meat- and dairy-free dietary alternatives, which will have dramatic health and environmental benefits for society at large (Oliver, 2023).

One way to overcome the problem of burnout that has been explored in other social movements is to build a strong community around the shared group identity. While vegans are undoubtedly a psychological group, they often lack the physical interactions among members that characterize (and strengthen) many other social movements. Connecting with other group members is important to the enactment and consolidation of identity (Hopkins & Reicher, 2017), and it provides a sense of belonging and solidarity that can enhance well-being and mitigate the effects of stress and burnout (Haslam et al., 2016). Being able to connect is also vital for collective action outcomes (Vestergren et al., 2019). Specifically, it is through interactions with others who share one's values (Smith et al., 2020) that one can develop a shared understanding of the nature of the problem at hand, a shared vision for the future and what is required to achieve change, and a sense of moral obligation to be part of pursuing that change. These intragroup processes are important to the politicization of identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Thomas et al., 2014; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Overall, the collective action literature suggests that in-person interactions with like-minded people—something that vegans may often not have access to on a daily basis—can boost minoritized group members' motivation and ability to work toward social change.

Identity-centering events such as football matches (Hill, Canniford, & Eckhardt, 2022) and dance festivals (Hill, Johansson, et al., 2022) have been shown to promote some of the above processes and can be conceived of as a potentially powerful group-based intervention for solidifying group norms and promoting pro-social group behavior. Indeed, attending multiday mass gatherings can have many benefits, including expanding one's circle of moral concern (Yudkin et al., 2022). This research, however, has thus far typically been conducted among majority group members whose identities are not threatened or questioned in everyday life, as well as groups who lack a social action orientation and are not working to effect change in wider society. Although protests (Thomas & Louis, 2014) and prefigurative forms of collective action (Yates, 2015) suggest similar outcomes for minority group members with a social action orientation, these events are explicitly solidaristic and foreground intergroup struggle. What has not been examined, however, is the potential for mass gatherings that celebrate ingroup identity to benefit more atomized and moralized minority group members. As described above, vegans form a group who may differ in terms of how they understand their identity (e.g., individual dietary practice vs. activism) and in the degree to which they feel themselves to be part of a vegan community (Wrenn, 2017). It is not obvious that, in coming together, they would find (only) what unites them and not what divides them.

In this article, we investigate an environment that potentially provides these much-needed opportunities for vegans to connect with and experience a vegan future in the (temporary) present. The Vegan Campout is an annual weekend event attended by over 10,000 vegans in the United Kingdom (Vegan Campout, 2023). It is advertised as a festival celebrating veganism in all aspects. All the food outlets are completely vegan, the products available to purchase are all vegan, all the artists performing are vegan, and there are talks and workshops throughout the weekend on vegan activism and social movement building. Attendance is not limited to vegans: the campout centers on vegan practices but does not mandate a vegan identity to attend.

Our research sought to examine the question of how attending the Vegan Campout influenced people's understanding of their own vegan identity and activism. To do this, we conducted 12 semi-structured on-site field interviews with 20 participants during the Vegan Campout. Gaining insight into these impacts provides an opportunity to understand how such events can support vegans acting in pursuit of a meat-reduced future, with theoretical implications for the potential role that identity-centering events might play for moralized minority groups more broadly.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

We conducted field interviews during the Vegan Campout in the United Kingdom to gain insight into participants' experiences of the event in situ. The event ran for three days on August 20–22, 2021. To ensure participants had enough time to experience the event before being interviewed, interviews were conducted during daytime hours (2–6 p.m.) on the final day of the festival (Saturday) and on the final morning (Sunday) while people were leaving (7–10 a.m.). These time windows were chosen to maximize participation and response quality, ensuring that participants had experienced the festival environment before the interview, and to avoid clashes with headline acts in the evening and people leaving the site in the morning. Given this short window for data collection, two field assistants helped conduct interviews alongside the first author. These field assistants were both vegans as well as event attendees. They were trained in interview techniques and mentored by the first author throughout data collection.

We conducted semi-structured interviews on the festival site (located in Nottinghamshire, UK) according to participant convenience. The interview schedule featured five broad questions inviting participants to reflect on why they attended the festival, their vegan identity, their experiences at the event, whether they felt that attending changed their relationship to their vegan identity, and whether they felt they would “do anything differently” in their lives after attending. The full interview schedule is available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) page for this article (<https://osf.io/c2fdm/>). We designed this short interview schedule to allow attendees to participate quickly alongside other festival activities. Most interviews took place in the campsite, and some interviews took place while participants (and researchers) waited in queues for food and coffee (see Figures 1 and 2 for author images of the interview sites).

Although we originally intended to do individual interviews only, the communal nature of the festival environment meant that some participants opted to do group interviews with their campmates, friends, or partners. Interview size ranged from one to three people. Twelve interviews were conducted in total, with five being individual interviews and seven being group interviews. This was the maximum number of interview participants our team could gather within the limited data-gathering window. In group interviews, interviewees were encouraged to think about their own response to the question and were also encouraged to build on the points of other participants when relevant. Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, but for each interview, a nominal donation to the vegan charity Viva! and a large sticker were offered to incentivize participation. The research team donated £40 to Viva! in total. The shortest interview was 4 minutes, 54 seconds, and the longest interview was 37 minutes, 28 seconds. The mean interview time was 18 minutes, 51 seconds. Interview length depended on participants' interest in the discussion, the size of the interview group, and participants' availability. In total, these interviews resulted in 82 transcript pages, containing 3467 lines of speech. The consent forms, codebook, information sheet, and anonymized participant transcripts are also openly accessible on the OSF page for this project (<https://osf.io/c2fdm/>).



FIGURE 1 First author's image of the festival campsite.



**FIGURE 2** First author's image of the food and coffee queues.

## Participants

We gained informed consent and interviewed people who were willing to talk to us. Participant demographics and other information relating to each interview transcript can be found in [Table 1](#). In total, we interviewed 20 participants ranging from 21 to 58 years old ( $M=35.5$ ), ten of whom were women, eight were men, and two were nonbinary (one of these participants self-identified as "approaching non-binary"). Nineteen participants were British, and one was Italian. The research team sampled from across the event site. Although the research team aimed to sample a diverse range of ages and genders, most interviewees were white. This lack of racial diversity is consistent with the demographics of both festival environments and vegans in the United Kingdom. However, as a result, our sample in this study does not represent the views of nonwhite vegan event attendees, who may have experienced this environment differently (Greenebaum, 2018).

Most participants self-identified as vegans ( $N=19$ ), and one participant self-identified as vegetarian. The vegetarian was part of a group interview with two vegans (interview 4), so their data was retained in this analysis. Pseudonyms are used throughout the extracts, and any potentially identifying information (e.g., exact locations or names of friends) has been removed.

## Analytic strategy

We approached our analysis using an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Due to the understudied research context and the novelty of the event, we analyzed the data from the participants' perspective first and brought in theoretical and researcher-driven critical approaches once the initial coding was complete. Thus, we began with an inductive (data-driven) approach to coding, where everything of potential relevance to our research question was coded to prioritize respondents' meaning making. In collaboration with her coauthors, the codes were then further developed by the first author and collated based on patterns of shared meaning. Following these discussions among the author team, and after sense-checking the themes with the vegan field assistants who helped conduct the interviews, a degree of deductive and latent analysis was used to ensure themes were meaningful to the research question (Byrne, 2022). We adopted a critical realist epistemology for this project (Fletcher, 2017). This allowed us to foreground our vegan participants' experiences, as well as integrate relevant theorizing on the social psychology of

**TABLE 1** Interview participant demographics.

| Interview number | Interview length (minutes:seconds) | Interviewee pseudonyms | # of participants | Ages           | Genders                       | Home location             |
|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1                | 9:38                               | Edward and Frankie     | 2                 | Both 26        | Male, nonbinary               | North England             |
| 2                | 18:60                              | Julie                  | 1                 | 49             | Female                        | West Midlands, England    |
| 3                | 10:21                              | Megan                  | 1                 | 21             | Female                        | Norwich                   |
| 4                | 37:28                              | Carol, Jane, and Amy*  | 3                 | 51, 55, and 19 | All female                    | Shropshire and Birmingham |
| 5                | 28:36                              | Daniel and Suzie       | 2                 | 49, 29         | Male, female                  | Buckinghamshire           |
| 6                | 12:02                              | Mark                   | 1                 | 58             | Male                          | Malvern                   |
| 7                | 5:29                               | Jenny and Alex         | 2                 | 33, 30         | Male, female                  | Cambridgeshire, London    |
| 8                | 11:32                              | Michael and Sarah      | 2                 | 38, 24         | Male, female                  | Both Norfolk              |
| 9                | 34:23                              | Jake and Rowan         | 2                 | 31, 24         | Male, "approaching nonbinary" | Scotland, South Wales     |
| 10               | 4:54                               | Jeremy                 | 1                 | 33             | Male                          | Scarborough               |
| 11               | 17:28                              | Lucy and Paula         | 2                 | 28, 39         | Both female                   | North England             |
| 12               | 18:05                              | Luca                   | 1                 | 48             | Male                          | Italian, living in London |
| Total            |                                    |                        | 20                | 21–58          | Women: 10 Men: 8 Nonbinary: 2 |                           |

\*Amy self-identified as a vegetarian; all other participants self-identified as vegan.

identity and social change. The themes were revised and sense-checked in an iterative process led by the lead author, in discussion with the coauthors, other researchers, and vegans. We have purposely not quantified the frequency of themes in this article, as we want to foreground qualitative insights. However, to facilitate research transparency, we have made the theme codebook openly accessible on the OSF project page (<https://osf.io/c2fdm/>). This document includes the number of total references to each theme and number of interviews that included each theme.

## Positionality statement

The first author, who conducted this analysis, is a white British woman. Throughout the project, she reflected on her own identity and how it affected the interview and analytic process. At time of writing, she does not currently self-identify as a vegan but has been a strict vegetarian for more than seven years and is actively reducing her dairy consumption. It could be argued that her status as a sympathetic “outsider within” the vegan identity group (Adeagbo, 2021) was beneficial to the analysis, as it meant she did not feel the need to “defend” or embellish participant accounts to manage the impression of the vegan identity group, but neither did she feel any need to derogate or undermine the vegan identity cause. To understand how the event might shape participants, the lead author attended the Vegan Campout herself and engaged with talks, food, music, and stalls before starting data collection. This enhanced her ability to understand participant perspectives and to ensure data collection went smoothly. Additionally, the rest of the research team were a mixture of vegetarians, flexitarians, and meat eaters, which helped the first author gain multiple perspectives on her analysis. To ensure ingroup vegan perspectives were well represented in this work, the two field assistants on this project who helped conduct the event interviews were vegans and event attendees.

## ANALYSIS

Throughout the interviews, all participants spontaneously reported some forms of stress and burnout associated with their veganism (and vegetarianism) in their day-to-day lives. People spoke of being “mocked” by others, feeling “depressed,” and experiencing “dread” about being questioned about their food choices. These feelings align with the academic descriptions of vegan stigma and do-gooder derogation outlined in the introduction. These experiences were the backdrop to the positivity with which they viewed the festival. Our analysis focuses on how and why the festival benefited our participants. First, we show how the event served as a practical “social connector,” which created an opportunity for vegans (usually a small minority in their daily lives) to meet other vegans in real life. Second, we considered how the event gave people an improved sense of psychological connection to vegans as an identity group. Third, we found that participants felt they were emotionally and cognitively restored at the campout. Finally, we examine the social change and behavioral consequences of attending the campout.

### Theme 1: Building vegan social networks

The vegans we spoke to emphasized the importance of connecting with other vegans at the event. Traditional festivals can often be solo experiences, where people attend as observers, watching artists perform but not interacting much with other attendees (Griffin et al., 2018).

However, at the Vegan Campout, the opportunity to meet and interact with other vegans appeared to be a huge draw for participants. Even queuing, as Suzie recounts below, was seen as an opportunity for vegans to connect with each other.

### Extract 1 (Interview 5, Lines 131–142)

**SUZIE:** It's just kind of been like that every time we've been in a queue or people walked past and (.) look at your food and just say “oh that looks really good what's that?” and you just get talking and you have shared excitement over the food? And it's just (.) It's just um (.) It seems like such a little thing but it's just so wholesome and heart-warming to kind of have (.) that experience with other like-minded people? That it's one of my favorite things to like come here [laughs].

Whereas queues for food are frequently seen as a mundane part of the festival experience at best, here food queues are experienced as important opportunities for interaction with others who are “like-minded” and share one's “excitement over the food.” There is an opportunity to connect with others over something that is central to the vegan identity. Summing up the importance of connecting with others, Suzie describes meeting other vegans in the queues as some of her “favorite” moments of the festival, not a practical inconvenience.

While many vegans valued the spontaneous opportunities for social interaction, some strategically used the campout for developing stronger vegan networks after the event. Many informal structures to help vegans connect and organize were created throughout the event. These initiatives were often targeted toward “lonelies”: vegans who attended the event on their own. In the following extract, Carol discusses her experience of managing one of the many WhatsApp groups organized to help attendees connect with each other.

### Extract 2 (Interview 4, Lines 59–77)

**CAROL:** And I (.) I was (.) I admired one of the chats? One of the VCO [Vegan Campout] chats? And we were called (.) I can't remember what the chat was called but (.) it was the over forties chat anyway (.) and (.) it was amazing (.) I think I was in four or five chats in the end? It was the lonelies (.) the solo campers (.)... So there were lots of WhatsApp groups set up (.)... So solo campers. Um (.) nondrinkers.

**INT:** Cool!

**CAROL:** Under twenties over forties (.) there were age group ones twenties thirties.

**INT:** That's so good! I didn't realize!

**CAROL:** And it's (.) it's quite special that is (.) because the lonelies aspect is quite special for campout (.) because there's a lot of vegans who don't have vegan friends (.) so you know they're forced to come on their own? And just to be able to come and just you know you'll

be able to meet people you can chat to them before on the chats (.) It's really really good (.) It's pretty special.

Carol describes the facilitation of interaction between “lonelies” as being “quite special” because it responds to the predicament of many vegans where they “don't have vegan friends” and are therefore “forced” to come alone. The use of “forced” in her interview suggests a perceived need for attendance and possible connection—a need that is strong enough to overcome the absence of a friend to go with. Moreover, in the opportunity to “meet people” and “chat,” there is an implicit potential of making vegan friends who can provide connection and support when they return to their normal lives. Below, Suzie is eloquent in how she describes the importance of majority-vegan events such as the campout for meeting other vegans.

### Extract 3 (Interview 5, Lines 238–244)

**SUZIE:** Yeah I think it's (.) if I'd reached out more? Or maybe had something like this? That I knew was around? I know this (.) this is only the fifth one so obviously it's not been around the whole time but (.) If there were more things like this around when I first turned vegan (.) I'd probably meet a lot more local people or have that push to put myself out there onto local Facebook pages and online groups (.) because uh (.) I just (.) I think I (.) had that social shyness? About finding them? Um (.) and this place kind of gives you a bit more (.) of a safe space to do that.

**INT:** Yeah.

**SUZIE:** Like oh there are (.) vegans everywhere.

For someone like Suzie, who describes herself as shy, the campout is a “safe space” to find and connect with other vegans. She notes that a space like this would have made her transition into veganism easier and that she would have found more social support from others had she attended the campout early in her vegan journey.

Thus, the campout enables both serendipitous and strategic opportunities for social interaction that may not exist in people's daily lives. Although our data do not speak to what happens after the festival, there is the potential for strengthening people's social networks and support, which, in turn, can help sustain vegan practices and participation in actions to promote social change (Hodson & Earle, 2018).

## Theme 2: Strengthened psychological connection to the vegan group

Many vegans described feeling a strong sense of psychological connection to other attendees and vegans at the event, describing intense experiences of belonging and understanding. In the campout environment, participants felt recognized and accepted by fellow vegans, and they were able to authentically express themselves and their vegan principles. Our participants contrasted this experience of connection to their regular lives, where many participants felt they often had to downplay or conceal their veganism when around nonvegan friends or family. In the extract below, Lucy recounts how attending the campout “shows you you're not alone” and

that her actions are worthwhile, as she is part of a larger group working toward a clear collective goal.

#### Extract 4 (Interview 11, Lines 144–152)

**LUCY:** I think it's very very good because it brings people together and it shows you you're not alone (.) because you all go through stages and we were thinking well we might buy stuff from the supermarket is it going to change anything? Um (.) but then (.) you know it's the old thing there's safety in numbers if you unite all your voices you make one big voice all that kind of stuff (.) so it's definitely reassuring and inspiring to be among other vegans? Rather than just kind of (.) plod away at home thinking “oh well I'm vegan” but there is a lot more you can do and it's nicer and easier and more effective if you're doing it with lots of other people.

Lucy recounts the struggle of taking actions independently, along with the value of uniting with other vegans as “one big voice.” In this extract, we see Lucy's self-doubt in regular life about whether her vegan behaviors will make a difference. We also see a sense of personal threat implicit in her mention of “safety in numbers.” Being surrounded by members of her group is a “reassuring and inspiring” experience for her, and her actions are “easier and more effective” when she knows she is not acting alone. Thus, the campout connects people, psychologically, to a wider identity group who share the same values and practices and allows attendees to feel more confident and agentic in their personal and collective actions toward social change.

Vegans are in the societal minority, and their practices are rarely enabled by infrastructure or existing social norms (Judge et al., 2022). As Suzie notes below, the feeling of being surrounded by others who empathize with and understand the vegan experience was quite “exciting” compared to her usual world, where she would be met with “resistance or mocking.”

#### Extract 5 (Interview 5, Lines 49–54)

**SUZIE:** It was just (.) an exciting kind of feeling to be surrounded by other like-minded people? And to be surrounded by other people wearing vegan apparel and eat what I want and talk excitedly and not (.) be met with that kind of resistance or mocking and (.) um (.) you know just be able to talk openly about things that are really really important to me (.) so it was just a nice experience (.) and yeah just I really loved it the first time? And instantly at the end of the weekend booked again for this year.

For Suzie, the Vegan Campout was an environment where she could retreat from the “resistance” to and “mocking” of her veganism in her daily life and find a more “like-minded” community. At the campout, Suzie doesn't have to mask her vegan identity and enthusiasm; she can express herself more authentically by “talk[ing] excitedly” and “eat[ing] what I want.” This experience resonates with research on how “othering” constrains minority-group members' self-presentations (Khanna & Johnson, 2010; Klein et al., 2007) and how being recognized by fellow group members is important for one's sense of authenticity and ability to act on one's own terms (Blackwood et al., 2013; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). In the extract below, Jake reflects on his experience of watching a music act play at the campout one evening with other attendees and on how feeling connected to a physical crowd of like-minded

others gave him a “glimmer of hope” about the potential for a vegan future. When pressed about what that feeling meant for him, Jake elaborates on how alone he feels in his normal life, and how the campout provides a “personal consolation” for him.

### Extract 6 (Interview 9, Lines 258–279)

**JAKE:** Well (.) I just (.) think (.) you know obviously there's like three or five percent of the population that's vegan? And (.) you know I'm going in a supermarket (.) every few weeks and there's more things (.) um (.) there's (.) it's just a glimmer of hope for humanity (.) and it feels (.) felt like (.) you know I was finally in the midst of (.) um (.) a group of people who shared my ideals (.) um (.) whereas uh (.) it's (.) it's quite a drag? Living where I live (.) In quite a conservative town sometimes like [town name removed] ... I live in a world (.) it's quite (.) it's quite difficult in some ways just to take on (.) this whole worldview of veganism.

**INT:** Yeah.

**JAKE:** And so (.) it (.) provides a sense of personal consolation to me (.) to be in a crowd of people who (.) who (.) um (.) actually do um (.) who do understand my (laughs) my suffering and my despair in the face of (.) what's happening in the world.

Jake's emotional account highlights just how difficult it is being vegan in a meat-dominated world: “my suffering and my despair.” For Jake, being surrounded by like-minded others who “shared [his] ideals” and “do understand” his emotions is a “personal consolation”: something to soothe the pain he feels about the world and perhaps motivate him to keep acting in line with his vegan principles and ideals. Our analysis demonstrates that the campout was a space where vegans could feel psychologically connected to fellow vegans. At the campout, they experienced recognition and validation by other vegans—a sense of belonging and being understood.

### Theme 3: Emotional and cognitive restoration of vegan identities and practices

The social difficulties that vegans often experience can be exhausting and may lead to poor mental health and activist burnout. For our participants, the Vegan Campout seemed to be a place where vegans could recuperate from these difficulties, rejuvenating and restoring their enthusiasm for their vegan identity in a celebratory and empowering environment. Some participants regained their enthusiasm from sharing a fully vegan joyous festival space, whereas others did so from becoming more informed about vegan activism at the festival talks. For example, below, Edward and Frankie note that the talks helped them “light that fire” for their veganism, leaving them “ready for the year.”

### Extract 7 (Interview 1, Lines 153–161)

**EDWARD:** Yeah (.) The talks (.) are always you come away with a bit more fire in your belly and a bit more

**FRANKIE:** Uh huh.

**INT:** Is that the same for you?

**FRANKIE:** Absolutely yeah (.) you can kind of get lost in your day to day (.) And I think this kind of (.) just kind of recenters you? Just brings you back to your (.) to the reasons

**EDWARD:** To the reasons yeah and like you say lights that fire again.

**FRANKIE:** Every time I've left (.) I come back like ready for the year? Sort of thing (.)

Frankie and Edward reflect here on how the meaning of veganism can get lost in the mundanity of everyday life. The Vegan Campout is described as a space to (re)connect with one's reasons for going vegan and prepare oneself for the year ahead. Their experience suggests that becoming a vegan is not a single moment of transformation; keeping focused on one's motives requires a consistent, maintained effort. Other vegans also spoke about the need for time away from their regular lives. This was especially important to Luca, who like Frankie and Edward notes that the day-to-day process of vegan activism can be quite depressing. He reflects that attending the campout is an important opportunity to reflect on his progress and protect his mental health moving forward.

#### Extract 8 (Interview 12, Lines 57–72)

**LUCA:** So it's like you know (.) giving space for every action that you do is actually quite helpful? Because otherwise we tend to get (.) depressed? Or upset.

**INT:** Yeah or burnt out.

**LUCA:** Yeah burnt out (.) about things uh (.) and so I guess (.) this also coming to the vegan campout is good for mental health (.) like us as vegan or vegan activists (.) because um (.) sometimes we feel like we suffer so much for the animals (.) We feel so much and therefore (.) it can it can (.) obviously it can put us down quite a bit (.) and say oh (.) okay you know (.) you forget about having fun basically.

**INT:** [laughs] It's true yeah.

**LUCA:** [laughs] Yeah cuz you're always focused on the negative and because there is so much (.) disrespect for animals everywhere around the world every time you go to the supermarket (.) and you know to walk through the aisle it's (.) it's painful (.) so I guess moments like that where you can just switch off and not worry about reading ingredients on the package and (.) all the time you can just relax and um yeah and just have fun.

The challenge that Luca reflects on is not the resistance of others to their veganism; it is something much more fundamental to having a vegan identity in a meat-eating world. Luca talks about the daily exposure to food products that violate his values and the need to be extremely cautious of the contents of what he is consuming. For Luca, there is a deeply emotional assault from seeing meat products in his daily life; vegans often identify with animals harmed and are highly concerned about animal cruelty (Lund et al., 2016). Thus, Luca sees the Vegan Campout as an antidote to the stress of being vegan in everyday life—a place where he can “switch off” and “not worry.” The campout provides a restorative context for recapturing the joy in his vegan identity and practices.

In the next extract, Jane and Carol recount the disarming experience of not having to worry about their food at the festival, as well as the reprieve they feel at knowing everything available is vegan.

### Extract 9 (Interview 4, Lines 600–608)

**CAROL:** I was saying how nice it is at the festival that you don't have to worry about that sort of stuff?

**JANE:** Yeah!

**CAROL:** Cuz I heard someone saying “who wants sausages” and I was thinking oh god someone's gonna have a I'm gonna smell dirty sausages and then I was like “ah they're all vegan!” [laughs] You don't have to worry about [it]!

**JANE:** Yeah I ordered the pie. Mr. Pie Man he was saying do you want gravy? And the first thing I nearly said to him is “well is it vegan?” and I had to stop myself [laughs] Is it vegan well yeah!

**CAROL:** Pile it on! So you don't have to worry about that stuff do you?

**JANE:** Nah it's great!

**CAROL:** You can just relax and talk about other stuff! [laughs]

Carol and Jane are so accustomed to asking whether their food is vegan that they mentally prepare themselves for confrontation when someone offers them sausages. They mentally prepare for the visceral discomfort they will feel about meat sausages, and dread it (“oh god”), before realizing that they do not have to “worry about that stuff” at the campout as all food is vegan. They feel a reprieve, like Luca, and note that “you can just relax and talk about other stuff.”

Extracts 8 and 9 both demonstrate that it is commonplace for vegans to feel marginalized in their practices. We see how unusual and special it is for attendees to experience an environment where they don't have to stress about what their food contains. Many meat eaters never need to worry about whether they can eat the food they are offered. For vegan event

attendees, this is an uncommon experience that leaves a profound impact. Not having to stress about whether they will be included and whether their practices can be accommodated leaves them open to talk about “other stuff” and relax more, knowing that they are understood and respected by others.

#### Theme 4: Going further in vegan action and activism

Our previous three themes demonstrate that vegans in our research felt better connected to other vegans, more psychologically connected to a vegan identity, and well rested and restored in their vegan identities. In line with much theorizing on the benefits of attending events for social change (Drury & Reicher, 2009), after experiencing these benefits from attending the campout, many vegans left feeling more empowered to “go further” in their vegan actions and activism in their day-to-day lives. Many participants explicitly stressed a broad desire to “go further” or “push” their veganism in their discussions with us.

#### Extract 10 (Interview 8, Lines 108–115)

**SARAH:** Like I say cuz it's pushed things more for me it's like (.) I probably wanna do more now? So it's pushed me I wanna research more (.) I wanna educate more people (.) yeah I just wanna keep like (.) the activism side of it? I wanna get more involved I wanna go on rallies and things like that and get really like (.) yeah.

**MICHAEL:** There's a lot of people doing a lot of good work and I think we want to be a bit more of a part of that.

**SARAH:** Yeah (.) yeah yeah definitely yeah.

For Michael and Sarah, the Vegan Campout encouraged vegans to engage in activism by spotlighting the activism already being done in the community and giving people tangible resources and opportunities to get involved. Across the event there were many different talks, with some explicitly organized for activist recruitment, discussing strategy or publicity. The campout was also an opportunity for organized training and strategizing, which allowed participants to extend their activism and get involved with more established activist groups already “doing a lot of good work.” In this way, for some attendees, the Vegan Campout acted as an important connector between individual vegans and the broader vegan social movement, facilitating further engagement with political and societal collective actions.

Some participants expressed a desire to get more involved in the vegan cause in spiritual terms. In the extract below, Rowan, who is a Buddhist, describes feeling “the call” to participate in more activism after their experiences at the campout.

#### Extract 11 (Interview 9, Lines 387–396)

**ROWAN:** I (.) like the idea of being able to use the pain that I've got (.) and the grief that I've got to (.) to help other beings I mean (.) I've just felt the call this weekend (.) It's like (.) there's

(.) I've gotta do it? In some way but (.) it's quite a shock (.) because I'm like oh bloody hell (.) here I go what next! [laughs]

**INT:** [laughs]

**ROWAN:** Dya know? (.) Here we go.

**INT:** Not this again. [laughs]

**ROWAN:** But sometimes you've gotta use it what else can you do (.) it's like that connection for me that (.) it represents connecting self and other? And getting out of my own (.) getting out of my own pity party? And really doing something about things rather than just sitting and stewing in my own suffering.

Rowan describes “the call” to engage in more activism as a way to channel negative emotional experiences—to get out of their “pity party” and “suffering” and make a positive impact on the world. For Rowan, this call was unexpected and “quite a shock.” Moreover, their comment “bloody hell (.) here I go what next” suggests an expectation of something profound and transformative occurring as part of their journey to engage in more activism.

Some vegans related this impulse to “go further” explicitly to formalized activist efforts (e.g., protests, campaigning), whereas others reflected on their more mundane daily vegan practices or social interactions with non-; Cvegans. These subtle everyday actions of “micro-change” are an important avenue for vegan “everyday activism” (Mansbridge, 2022): actions that are inspired (but not coordinated or mandated) by the vegan social movement and that aim to change the behavior of the meat-eating majority in subtle, informal ways. The desire to enact such social actions, regardless of potential personal risk, appeared to be strengthened for participants after attending the campout. For example, in the next extract, Jake reflects upon the fact that, despite the limitations of his job at a care home where meat was at “every meal,” the campout had encouraged him to not “shy away” from answering questions, and introducing “some different ideas” about veganism in his workplace.

### Extract 12 (Interview 9, Lines 582–591)

**JAKE:** I don't talk about it very explicitly at work (.) I like to keep it quite low key? Probably because it's a workspace and I don't wanna like (.) But I think I feel a little bit braver? You know just to tentatively (.) If people do ask me about it? To talk more about it at work and be a little bit more confident (.) you know when somebody sort of chuckles and says (.) Oh I couldn't live without meat (.) you know in a gentle way just sort of introduce some (.) some different ideas? And like maybe you could watch *Seaspiracy* you know? Or something and... [laughs]

Many vegans are stereotyped as being loud activists (De Groeve et al., 2022), but this is often not reflective of vegan experiences. In this research, we found that the types of vegan action and activism described were very broad. Here, Jake sees recommending vegan documentaries such as *Seaspiracy* as a more “gentle” form of conversational activism. Particularly

in contexts such as Jake's place of work or the rural community where he lives, more overt forms of activism such as protest may be difficult for vegans to engage in. Ruth expands on this difficulty below, as she reflects on why she chose not to attend the activism talks at the event.

### Extract 13 (Interview 2, Lines 217–229)

**RUTH:** I'm a teacher in a rural area so most of my children are farmers?

**INT:** Oh okay.

**RUTH:** So I'd thought (.) perhaps now isn't the time to get into activism but perhaps if I'm not working in a school that's very (.) rural then possibly more I would do (.) at the moment? I feel I make a difference through (.) just showing people what I eat and what I do? And if they ask me questions I answer honestly? But I don't get into (.) activism (.) but I'm not ruling it out in the future.

**INT:** Mmm is there a reason you don't get into activism?

**RUTH:** Um (.) if it was public? That would put me in a very difficult position in my job.

In contexts where veganism presents a real sociopolitical or economic threat, such as Ruth's case above, small “everyday activism” like having conversations about veganism with meat eaters still carry significant social risks. That the campout can encourage vegans to engage in these forms of (gentle) everyday activism and, as Jake noted, help them “feel braver” in doing so is a testament to how empowering the event is for these moralized minority groups.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, this research demonstrates the restorative and rejuvenating impacts of identity-centering events for a moralized minority group working toward social change. Our analysis shows that the Vegan Campout functioned as a space where vegan identity, food, and action was centered and celebrated. The event was an opportunity for vegans to connect with each other. Vegans initially attending on their own were invited to “lonelies” chat groups to facilitate this social connection, and even seemingly mundane activities, such as queuing, were celebrated by attendees as important opportunities for social connection and validation. The campout was experienced as an important space for vegans to “recharge” their identities and to renew or acquire a more politicized activist identity. By providing an important space for a “vegan future” to become temporarily realized in the present day (i.e., a prefigurative space; Yates, 2015; Clarke & Drury, 2024), the event showed people that their efforts to promote veganism were part of a collective effort and not in vain. Finally, the campout was experienced as a “retreat” not just from the mundane demands of everyday life—as experienced at majority-group mass gatherings—but from majority-group hostility toward vegans. Thus, the event gave vegans, as a *minority* group, the opportunity to temporarily experience what life is

like as a “temporary social *majority*”: where their identities and practices were catered to and treated as the default choice.

This latter finding is particularly instructive. For attendees at the Vegan Campout, the psychological and social benefits sprung from the stark contrast between the openness and celebration of veganism at the campout and the relentless, corroding experiences of having to defend and downplay their veganism in their daily lives. This was a place where they could be their authentic selves away from the critical gaze of the majority, meat-eating, society (Swim & Thomas, 2006). Stereotypes of vegans construct them as a confident activist group whose members are well connected to each other (De Groeve et al., 2022). What we saw corroborates other research suggesting, on the contrary, that vegans are exhausted by the daily negotiation and questioning of their dietary practices and would often prefer to stay quiet about their preferences (Bolderdijk & Cornelissen, 2022). This research stands with many other accounts demonstrating the difficulties and pain many vegans face when existing in a meat-dominated society. Our research shows that vegans are often disconnected from each other and can feel atomized and lonely in their actions and identity. This analysis demonstrates how attending events like the Vegan Campout can provide powerful social and psychological resources for vegans to stay engaged in identity practices and activism, connect with others in their community, and avoid burnout. In turn, such events could be important to foster innovation and experimentation for social change: in the case of veganism, for a move toward a more sustainable society.

## Limitations and future research

This research joins an expanding body of literature emphasizing the positive impacts of mass gatherings for social identity and social action (e.g., Hopkins & Reicher, 2017). In particular, it takes this work in a novel direction by exploring a context where the mass gathering involves the bringing together of a group who usually represent a very small minority within society. This case study uses veganism as an example, but future research could explore how and why these benefits may also manifest for other stigmatized minority groups and for groups defined by minority environmental practices or identities (e.g., localized support meetings for people who refuse to fly or zero-wasters). Future research could also explore how these benefits might manifest in different places, cultures, and times. The Vegan Campout took place in a very specific place and time—the United Kingdom, immediately following 18 months of lockdowns due to COVID-19. The social identity and connective benefits of these events might look different in countries where veganism is less common, and in places and times where vegans are more or less isolated. Further research could also investigate the potential to integrate these kinds of event-based interventions into existing identity groups and spaces, such as workplaces or educational institutions. Localized gatherings of minority groups may serve to improve their mental health and enhance the potential for social change, in a similar way that mental and physical health support groups benefit their participants. This analysis focused on exploring the benefits of the event for vegans, but also of interest is the potential for participation in the event to impact nonvegans. Future research could examine how nonvegans experience such events, and how these events could promote societal meat exclusion or reduction behaviors in the longer term.

This work is not without potential limitations. Though this work reports the experiences of vegans who attended the campout, the interviews were completed during or immediately after the event, and participants might have considered or highlighted different impacts if they had had more time for reflection or post-event action. We wished to focus in this article on experiences vegans had at the event, as it was happening, but further research could identify other impacts of attending the event. Moreover, our work suggests that vegans

might feel more confident about engaging in social action when they return to their normal lives; however, this finding should be further investigated through longitudinal research (Louis, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates how an identity-centering mass gathering can act as an identity resource for stigmatized, moralized minority-group members to connect with one another, strategize, and affirm their moral values and social action efforts. Given the social difficulties minority actors may face in everyday life, this research demonstrates that in-person, identity-centering, mass-gathering events represent a—perhaps previously underestimated—way of rekindling a social movement and an important means to address activist burnout among those wishing to effect social change.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The consent forms, information sheet, interview schedule, anonymized participant transcripts, and codebook are openly accessible on the OSF page for this article (<https://osf.io/c2fdm/>). Any potentially identifying information (e.g., place, person, or street names) was removed or redacted from the transcripts before making them openly accessible. The transcripts were also screened by the research team for any areas of ethical or legal concern. No issues were identified in this process, and thus anonymized transcripts were uploaded and made freely accessible under the CC-BY Attribution license.

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