

AUTHORITY, CREDIBILITY AND TRUST IN VEGAN BLOGS:  
METHODS USED BY CONTENT CREATORS IN THE PRESENTATION OF INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

Online channels are becoming an increasingly common method used by the public for health information seeking. Within the online platforms available, user generated content (UGC) sites such as blogs are an accessible and popular source of information. The percentage of the world population that follow a vegan lifestyle is also on the rise, leading to a need for those individuals to understand the quality of the content that they encounter on UGC sites, as well as for information professionals to understand how to guide these users in assessing the information.

This study used a survey based approach to analyse six UK based vegan blogs. The biographical content and two recipe posts from each blog were assessed using content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis examines the methods used by content creators to give an air of cognitive authority and an impression of credibility to their content, and how they use personal stories within posts to build a sense of trust and authenticity with their users.

The research found that writing with confidence, using a positive approach to writing and referring to personal experiences were methods used to instil an air of authority. The same methods were used to give an impression of cognitive credibility, as credibility impacts authority. Personal stories were used to create a sense of trust and authenticity with users by providing opportunities for users to relate to and make personal connections with content creators. Content creators shared the positive health benefits of following a vegan lifestyle, including improved physical and mental health, as well as showcasing ways in which they have gained a positive reputation in the vegan community.

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# 1.0 Introduction

With the limitless supply of knowledge available online, it is easy to find information on any topic. However, it can be challenging to understand which information sources are trustworthy authorities producing credible information. In addition to professional, institutional and academic websites, there are countless user generated content (UGC) sites, which can be established and managed by anyone, regardless of their qualifications on a topic. With a growing global vegan population (Joy and Tuider, 2016; Radnitz, Beezhold and DiMatteo, 2015) and approximately 3% of the population of the United Kingdom (UK) identifying as vegan, (George, 2019) vegans may be looking to UGC sites such as blogs to obtain information on health and nutrition. In a discussion of French vegan food blogs, Veron (2016, p.290) found that vegan blogs can serve as a platform for both content creators and users “to question and challenge certain food-related norms, habits, or dominant representations”. Therefore, it is important that information professionals and users are able to understand how authority, credibility and trust are implied by content creators, as the criteria for these factors differ from institutional, academic and professional sources. This research set out to understand the methods used by content creators of vegan blogs in creating a sense of authority in their content, specifically in terms of cognitive authority, and to identify ways in which the presentation of credibility in vegan blogs differs from academic and institutional sources. Understanding these methods will assist information professionals and users in recognising implied authority, and the various ways in which information can be presented as credible. In turn, information professionals and users will be better able to verify information that they may question with additional sources. The third aim of the research was to understand the role that personal stories play in creating an impression of trust, as trust is an influencing factor of authority.

This study was undertaken using a survey based approach to assess six vegan blogs based in the UK. Content analysis was conducted using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). Discourse analysis was conducted using discourse analysis in social psychology (DASP), as outlined by Wood and Kroger (2000) though based off the original model by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Thematic analysis was conducted using the applied thematic analysis



approach described by Guest, Namey and MacQueen (2012). The works of Wilson (1983) on cognitive authority and Neal and McKenzie (2011) on affective authority were influential models for this research. The findings of this study indicate that confidence, referring to experience, writing with positivity and building a connection with users are important factors in authority, credibility and trust as presented by vegan blog content creators.

## 1.1 Research Context

Searching for information online is a widespread phenomenon, with health-related information being the most widely searched for topic on the internet (Kim, 2015). People may seek answers online for speed, convenience and anonymity. While people may understand that there is a difference in the credibility of information found on institutional websites versus social media (Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013), less is known about the authority, credibility and authenticity of content on UGC sites such as blogs. It is important to understand these factors, as they impact the way in which users interact with and interpret the information on UGC sites, which is exceptionally important when the information pertains to health. Amongst UGC sites, the presentation of vegan health and nutrition information is unique, as are the methods used by content creators to build trust with their users.

Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen (2018) found that research into health seeking behaviour has mostly focused on severe health conditions, with less research focusing on areas of general interest in healthy populations. As veganism has been on the rise in recent years (Radnitz, Beezhold and DiMatteo, 2015) newly converted vegans or those interested in veganism may seek nutrition information from online sources such as blogs that they perceive to be sources of accurate information. As there can social stigma around being vegan (Cole and Morgan, 2011; Veron, 2016) some individuals might avoid speaking to knowledgeable friends or professionals and might instead rely on the internet for their nutrition and health needs. Individuals who live in areas where veganism is uncommon, or those who don't know other vegans, may also rely on the internet for recipes, health and nutrition information (Veron, 2016). As opposed to institutional websites, blogs have a friendly tone, often give a sense of community, and provide opportunities for interaction

between users and content creators, which can be appealing to those who feel alone in their vegan lifestyle (Veron, 2016). However, Dickinson, Watson and Prichard (2018) conveyed that there is a need for concern over the dietary related information presented on blogs. As anyone can start a blog and post content online, it is important that users understand what methods are being employed to instil a sense of cognitive authority, and how credibility is depicted on UGC sites as opposed to institutional sites, which they might be more familiar with or willing to trust. Being able to objectively look at information on blogs and understand how trust and authenticity are created by content creators could potentially assist users in assessing the information they are presented with on these sites to determine if it is accurate and credible. By understanding how authority is created, the differences between credibility on UGC sites versus institutional sites, and how trust and authenticity are built by content creators, information professionals can guide users in making educated choices regarding the content they find on UGC sites such as blogs. Assessing nutrition information online can be challenging, but with a greater understanding of the authority, credibility and authenticity of information on vegan UGC sites, users can gain the tools necessary to assess the information they are presented with, and information professionals can assist users in making informed choices when they interact with information in this capacity.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What methods do content creators of vegan blogs use to create an air of authority in the presentation of their blog content?
2. How does the presentation of credibility of user generated content in vegan blogs differ from academic or institutional sources?
3. What role do personal stories related in 'About Me' sections or within posts play in creating an impression of trust and authenticity in vegan blogs?

While these questions could potentially apply to health or nutrition blogs in general, this research will be focused on vegan blogs based in the UK. As veganism is on the rise and entails a drastic change in lifestyle and diet, these individuals have a need for health information and advice, which is often looked for in UGC sites such as blogs.

### 1.3 Report Structure

The report will begin with a literature review, in order to provide background information and current understanding where information is sought online, the information seeking demographic and how information is assessed. This will provide detailed context for the purpose of this study. Methodology will discuss background information on the types of analysis used, how the samples were selected and how the data was analysed. Following methods, the results of LIWC analysis, DASP and thematic analysis will be reviewed in depth. This will lead into the conclusion and recommendations, including what the analysis means, and considerations for future research.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Information pertaining to vegan lifestyles can be found online in many different formats, from websites of professional nutritionists to user generated mediums such as YouTube, blogs and Instagram. With such varied formats easily accessible and with content uncontrolled, users may be presented with information that is inaccurate, anecdotal or out of date.

This literature review will look at the online information seeking demographic, in order to understand who is using these online mediums to obtain health information. The most common types of online resources will be discussed. Current approaches to assessment of online information will be reviewed, which will help in understanding where recommendations can be made. A discussion of the rise in vegan lifestyles will highlight the importance of increasing awareness of information assessment for this demographic. Related studies on blogs and vegetarian nutrition information will be reviewed, to gain a sense of what is currently understood about these fields. Finally, authority and credibility and how they relate to UGC sites will be reviewed, as these factors, along with trust, are the focus of this study.

### 2.1 The Online Information Seeking Demographic

While people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds search for health information online, certain factors are consistent amongst the majority of information seekers. In studies of adults in developed countries, women are found to search for health information online more often than men (Nikoloudakis *et al.*, 2018; Fassier *et al.*, 2016; Marton, 2015; Rowley, Johnson and Saffi, 2017). This is consistent with findings of offline health information seeking amongst UK adults, which shows that adult women visit health care professionals more than adult men (Rowley, Johnson and Saffi, 2017). The research of Rowley, Johnson and Saffi (2017) takes into account that men are more active internet users than women, so it is notable that although women seek health information more than men it is not a result of them having a greater online presence.

A high education level is another contributing factor to online health information searching (Kim, 2015; Nikoloudakis *et al.*, 2018; Yan *et al.* 2018; Feng and Xie, 2015). However, these studies are reporting those searching for general health information not particularly searches pertaining to nutrition, let alone veganism. Contradicting the above information, Fassier *et al.* (2016) report that French adults with low education levels are more apt to search for health information online, including nutrition related information. Higher education levels may translate to higher digital literacy, explaining the role of education in online searching. In opposition, low education levels might cause individuals to search for information online rather than seeking in-person professional help, which can be difficult to access.

Similarly, there is conflicting information on the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on the degree to which one searches online for health information. Nikoloudakis *et al.* (2018) found that Australian adults with high SES were more likely to conduct these searches, while the research of Fassier *et al.* (2016) on adults in France found this to be true of low SES individuals. Regardless, research is consistent in showing that SES impacts online health seeking behaviour. Patterns might be explained by high SES individuals having greater access to online devices, and as with education levels, having a higher degree of digital literacy. Low SES individuals may not have the time, knowledge or finances to seek health information in person.

Lynch (2010) reports that young adults in particular use the internet to search for health information. This is supported by the research of Nikoloudakis *et al.* (2018), who found that online health information seekers are often categorised as young. This may be explained by the 'Google Generation' being accustomed to relying on the internet for quick and simple answers. Bowler, Julien and Haddon (2018) found that young people in the UK appreciate the speed of searching and retrieving information online, as opposed to finding a person-based source, discussing their query, and awaiting information. As many young people today possess smartphones, tablets and laptops, the accessibility of online information is becoming increasingly easy.

Information literacy is “a person’s competence measured by their ability to identify, access, evaluate, and organise information in order to complete a task or solve a problem” (Chandler and Munday, 2016). This is expanded upon by Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (2005) who acknowledge the specialised region of internet literacy, which they define as “a multidimensional construct that encompasses the abilities to access, analyse, evaluate and create online content”. Kim (2015) found that amongst American adults, those with higher computer skills were more likely to search for health information online. This could be due to individuals with greater digital self-efficacy and skill levels being more inclined to apply their knowledge, leading to an increased trust or self-perceived competence in accessing and evaluating information.

## 2.2 Where are Users Currently Searching for Information Online?

When searching online there are various platforms that may be used, such as search engines, institutional websites, social media sites and UGC sites. Many factors may influence information seekers in their choice of where they look for information online, including the type of information they require, their level of motivation in searching and assessing information, their skill set and their degree of internet literacy. While the internet has become an important and well used channel for finding information, it is even more relevant as a method for finding health information (Nan and Daily, 2015; Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013). Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) identified that UGC sites are popular amongst Scottish adolescents as an immediate method for finding personified information on various health topics. UGC sites have the appeal of regular updates and first-hand accounts, making them relatable and potentially less intimidating than institutional websites. Health information can often be a sensitive subject, or a topic individuals fear being judged for, and the anonymity of the internet can provide a sense of safety for those seeking health information. Syn and Kim (2016) studied how American college students aged 19 to 29 use Facebook to search for health information, and found that with increased topic sensitivity such as sexual health, there was decreased information seeking, with reading information decreasing slightly while posting questions decreased significantly. Though it may be perceived as a less sensitive topic than sexual health, individuals who follow vegan lifestyles are often faced with stigma and judgement (Cole and Morgan, 2011; Veron, 2016),

potentially leading those seeking vegan health information to rely on online channels. Veron (2016) studied the relationship between food blogs and veganism in France, and found that blogs are a useful means for vegan individuals to connect with others to share information, especially in regions where those individuals are physically isolated or experience lack of acceptance.

The research of Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) found that when conducting searches by key words, Google was the most used search engine amongst pregnant Australian adults. This may be related simply to the popularity of Google, or to the ease and straight forward nature of Google's interface.

When accessing websites directly, institutional websites such as those for government or health organisations are found to be the most popular choice (Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel, 2018; Nikoloudakis *et al.*, 2018). This could be linked to assumptions by the public that authoritative bodies have a responsibility to produce accurate information. However, authoritative bodies can be biased, or unintentionally present inaccurate or outdated information (Nikoloudakis *et al.*, 2018). The research of Fassier *et al.* (2016) on French adults contradicts the findings that institutional websites are preferred, stating that institutional websites were used to search for health information by only 12.9% of users studied, and that young adults were more likely to use these sites. Fergie, Hilton and Hunt (2015) studied Scottish young adults aged 18 to 30, and their findings indicate that professional content is preferred for seeking health information when the information seeker desires factual information.

Within the UK, Marton (2015) reports that the most frequently used health related websites are NHS Direct Online, Netdoctor, Yahoo!Health, US National Library of Medicine, Health on the Net, the Mayo Clinic and WebMD. The fact that the NHS website is the most searched health website by UK residents could indicate that people prefer sources with which they are most familiar, or interact with regularly. However, it is unclear from the study whether these sites were visited directly, or whether they were visited due to high rankings from the search engine through which the information was sought.

Social networking sites, or social media sites, are another prioritised source for online health information seekers. Social networks are used to find various forms of health information including paediatric care, sexual health, injuries and nutrition (Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel, 2018). Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) found that Facebook, Twitter, blogs and forums were commonly used platforms by Australian women. This could potentially be linked to the desire for shared experience, and the usefulness of connecting to others who have had similar issues or experiences. In their study of America adults, Feng and Xie (2015) found that the ability to connect over health related queries can have a positive impact on information seekers, with possibilities for users to share information. However, this also presents the issue of inaccurate information being passed on, whether unintentionally or intentionally. UGC sites, and blogs in particular, have a great impact as a communicative and informative online platform (Colucci and Cho, 2014). Colucci and Cho (2014) report that since the turn of the century, UGC on blogs has increased by both individuals and companies as a method to share information. In a similar vein, Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) found in their study on the online health-seeking behaviour of Scottish young people that UGC regarding health is a valuable resource. Again, the relatable nature of UGC sites, the ability to interact with content creators in the comments and the accessibility of UGC sites are possible contributing factors to the popularity of this medium, especially for young people, who appreciate the anonymity. Similar to blogs, online forums have been acknowledged as a useful source for health information, though due to the collaborative nature of forums, information may be anecdotal and based on personal experience as opposed to backed with relevant education and professional credentials (Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen, 2018). The research of Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen (2018) was focused on Finnish girls and young women aged 15 to 19, and revealed that this demographic found value in the sharing of personal experience in order to relate to one another. Similarly, Fergie, Hilton and Hunt (2015) found that Scottish young adults have a preference for UGC sites when the motivation to seek information is to assess and understand the experiences of others. This demonstrates the importance of shared experience as a component of authority.



## 2.3 The Perception, Evaluation, and Assessment of Online Information

Despite the widespread use of the internet to obtain health information, some information seekers do understand that not all sources can be readily accepted as accurate and trustworthy, and may require further assessment (Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel, 2018; Marton, 2015). In regards to British adults, Marton (2015) found that roughly half of those studied attempted to verify the author or primary source of information found on health websites, with an intent to discern the organisation in charge of producing the content. However, the approaches to assessment undertaken are subjectively determined by the individuals, which can lead to issues in understanding what makes a source credible. Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) found that in Scotland, young people aged 14 to 18 are acknowledged as a group that, despite familiarity and adequate skills in using the internet, lack an ability to locate and evaluate health information. In their study of online nutrition information seeking amongst pregnant Australian women, Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) found that women understand the importance of ensuring information is accurate, and that there is a high chance of acquiring misinformation online. Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) further explain that despite understanding the need to be critical of the information, assessment skills are based on shared and general knowledge, rather than informed evaluation skills. This could be a result of group mentality, wherein one member of a group says that a certain site is untrustworthy, and other group members believe them without question. On a smaller scale, general guidelines for how to assess information could come from a biased source, or simply be outdated.

Nikoloudakis *et al.* (2018) studied Australian adults aged 18 and older and observed that information seekers question the validity of institutional websites, acknowledging that information may be inaccurate or lack scientific backing. Opposing this, Syn and Kim (2016) found that when seeking health information online, American college students aged 18 to 29 are more likely to trust institutional websites, but that they do so by verifying the information they find with a trusted person.

In regards to social media, Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) report that Australian women recognise that posts may be opinion, based on personal experience, may lack

evidence or be incorrect. Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) found that Scottish young adults have concerns about the accuracy and trustworthiness of information on social media sites, and are cautious when using social media platforms. Syn and Kim (2016) support this concept, explaining that American college students have a tendency to choose institutional or professional websites over social media, which they perceive to be personal opinion.

When utilising UGC sites as a source of health information, young people in Scotland and America are reported to be wary of the accuracy of information much like they are with social media, though they do find UGC a valuable resource, particularly as a means to obtain real-life accounts of personal experiences (Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013; Fergie, Hilton and Hunt, 2015; Syn and Kim, 2016). For young people, the value found in personal experience could be linked to fear of judgement or risk of embarrassment when asking friends, family and professionals about sensitive topics such as sexual health. This skepticism of information is supported by the research of Colucci and Cho (2014) on Generation Y adults, with the exception of when professional qualifications are visible. One method used by young people to aid in determining accuracy is to compare the information found on UGC sites to reputable sources (Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013; Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen, 2018). Understanding the importance of verifying facts before believing what they read demonstrates that young people, while eager to find information fast, are still driven to ensure that UGC is comparable in value to professional sources. While these studies were undertaken in Scotland and America, it is possible that similarities would be found in other developed countries.

When assessing health information online the factors deemed most important to consider by British adults include presence of qualifications, degree of contradiction to related sources, transparency of sources, relation to personal experiences, visibility of influencing corporations and whether or not the information concurred with that provided by health care professionals (Marton, 2015). This supports the idea that users understand the importance of assessment. Rowley, Johnson and Sbaffi (2017) found that when selecting websites, British adults assess visual design elements, clarity of information, potential biases and usefulness of information. Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) report a reliance on website visuals when assessing whether a website is institutional or not. Fergie, Hunt and Hilton

(2013) further found that Scottish young people check the URL to see if '.org' or '.nhs' are included, look for recognised logos and scan the information pages. This complies with the research of Maher, Robichaud and Swanepoel (2018) on Australian women, as the popular criteria for assessment does not always focus on the most vital features, but is based on general perceptions and shared lay-information. Similarly, Bowler, Julien and Haddon (2018) found that British adolescents spend minimal time gathering and assessing information.

In regards to assessing UGC sites such as blogs certain criteria are similar to assessing social media sites. However, with UGC sites there is an emphasis on personal aspects of the author or content creator. In a study of online forum use by young women, Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen (2018) uncovered that the tone used by the content creator influenced user's perception of credibility. As content creators of blogs often aim to build a connection with their readers as opposed to the traditional separation between content creator and passive user, a sense of trust is a factor in user assessment of credibility (Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen, 2018; Colucci and Cho, 2014). Users assess the degree to which they trust a content creator by looking at the content creator's reasons for blogging, their level of expertise and their reputation amongst other blogs (Colucci and Cho, 2014).

Additional factors that influence trust include the content creator's friendliness, ability to interact with users and their personal experiences (Colucci and Cho, 2014). However, as expressed by the word 'influence' what builds rapport and connection to a person differs amongst individuals, so the factors that build a sense of trust, and therefore belief in credibility, for one person might not have the same effect on others. Hirvonen, Tirroniemi and Kortelainen (2018) report that group mentality can impact users' perception of credibility, in that users believe that if opinions are agreed upon in the comments section of a post, they are likely accurate. This is supported by Fergie, Hunt and Hilton (2013) who found that 'likes' and 'shares' can indicate accuracy, and if something is inaccurate, users will point this out in the comments section, or 'dislike' it. Unfortunately, group mind-set can be wrong, which is one way that misinformation becomes widespread. In addition, positive experience often goes unmentioned in comments, whereas negative experience is shared and reported (Savolainen, 2011).

Consistent with assessment of websites, visual elements and design of blogs play a role in assessing credibility of content (Rowley, Johnson and Sbaffi, 2017; Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013; Colucci and Cho, 2014; Neal, 2010). Colucci and Cho (2014) state that design was interpreted as an indicator of professionalism and honesty, and thus trust in the content creator to relay accurate information. The efforts of content creators in taking the time to present a professional looking and well thought out blog translates in the eyes of their users to their ability to conduct proper research and present credible and accurate information. Colucci and Cho (2014) found that the users' familiarity with the site influenced their perception of the content creator's credibility. The more a site is accessed and the information used, the more likely the user is to continue visiting that site.

As one of the perceived benefits by users of blogs over websites is the regularity at which content creators update their pages, frequency of posts is a criteria for determining accuracy of content (Colucci and Cho, 2014). When content is updated or added often, users interpret this to mean that it is the most up to date information available. Colucci and Cho (2014) state that the frequency of posts shows dedication from the content creator, which again, translates to the degree to which the content creators care about their content. Furthermore, this also contributes to the building of trust.

## 2.4 The Rise in Vegan Lifestyles and the Need for Nutrition Information

A vegan lifestyle is that in which an individual chooses to solely consume plant-based foods, avoiding consumption of anything derived from animals (Sneijder and te Molder, 2009). An individual's decision to lead a vegan lifestyle may be motivated by their ethics, religion, taste preference, or, as reported by Radnitz, Beezhold and DiMatteo (2015) the potential health benefits. Research shows that there has been a worldwide increase in veganism in recent years (Radnitz, Beezhold and DiMatteo, 2015), and that the number of people choosing to follow a vegan lifestyle will likely continue to grow (Joy and Tuider, 2016). The related increase in awareness of the growing vegan population has led to improved availability of vegan options in shops, restaurants and fast food outlets. This increased awareness may in part be attributed to the use of social media platforms and UGC sites, wherein members of

the vegan community are sharing and discussing vegan information (Rogerson, 2017). In contrast to standard websites, UGC sites are interactive, have a personal feel, and users often communicate with the content creator and other users via the comments sections (Veron, 2016). Veron (2016) identified that blogs can be the most accessible and often a vital source of communication for vegans, especially those who live in removed communities, or areas where vegans are a very small portion of the demographic. Due to a lack of community and perceived availability of information, it is possible that UGC sites present a strong draw for vegans seeking health information.

## 2.5 Comparative Studies on Blogs

Although blogs have been consistently in production by members of the general public since the 1990's (Dowling, 2013) they have become increasingly more common in recent years and are acknowledged as an influential online communication method (Colucci and Cho, 2014). This is in part due to the increased accessibility of blogging platforms and software, and the improved digital literacy of the general public. It is no longer required that an individual have specialised skills in order to create and manage a blog. However, as a result of this increased ease of use, it is also easier for those who are unqualified to offer guidance on a subject and to present their ideas to the public. Nardi *et al.* (2004) state that most blogs are written by members of the general public. As there is no governing body overseeing the quality of information posted on UGC sites, it is left to the discretion of the content creators to provide reliable information and/or to maintain a sense of transparency in the presentation of the information they provide. However, as ordinary people may begin blogging as a form of self-expression or for enjoyment, they may not expect the public to utilise their content for informative purposes, and therefore might not understand the need to provide clarity regarding the authority and credibility of their information. The research of Nardi *et al.* (2004, p.43) found that there are five primary motivators for creating content for blogs: "documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums". Providing legitimised information to educate and influence potential users does readily fall into any of the motivation categories identified by Nardi *et al.* (2004). This could

help to explain why some content creators do not see the value in providing proof of credibility to their users, as they might not have set out with the intention to educate.

While the research of Nardi *et al.* (2004) referred to blogs in a general context, in a case study of healthy living blogs, Boepple and Thompson (2014) found that content creators for this genre are motivated by a desire to provide healthy lifestyle information to others. Similarly, Davies, Jolley and Coiffait (2016) analysed the motivations of medical professionals who blog and determined that the majority of medical bloggers created content as a means of self-expression, and with an intention to share their research. Davies, Jolley and Coiffait (2016) noted that bloggers acknowledged their potential lack of authority and recognised that their research should not necessarily be interpreted as reliable. While medical professionals are aware that their content may be misconstrued as accurate when it is not, it is likely that their research is more in-depth than the general population. Medical bloggers may also be aware that their content is being assessed by peers in their field, who are more likely to verify the information with additional research. The general public content creator is likely being assessed by ordinary people, who may not know that they should verify the information elsewhere.

Building on the idea that medical bloggers create and share content as a means of sharing research, Davies, Jolley and Coiffait (2016) further explain that blogging can prompt discussion about current issues. Content creators expect the users of their sites to comment and ask questions on posts, thereby opening up a discussion between those interested in the topic, whether they consider themselves an expert or not (Veron, 2016; Meyers, 2012). Meyers (2012) explains that UGC sites have shifted the way in which mass content is shared, from the traditional approach of professionals providing information for passive audiences, to an interactive sharing of information. In contrast to a journalist allowing a reader to interpret the information based on the details provided, bloggers often interact with their readers (Meyers, 2012). This collaborative channel, as opposed to traditional passive reading of text, has the potential to improve information sharing and correcting of misinformation. However, there is still no way to control the quality of information, and comments can come from individuals who are less qualified than the original creator of the post. The content creator can also delete comments that might contradict their information.

As opposed to official government websites, medical websites, or other more official channels of information, blogs are often updated frequently (Nardi *et al.*, 2004), and whether accurate or not, give the reader of the information a sense that the content is the latest and most up to date.

In terms of providing proof of credibility, academic and credentialed medical professionals have been found to provide links to references and external resources (Davies, Jolley and Coiffait, 2016; Buis and Carpenter, 2009). This could be attributed to the fact that academics are accustomed to providing citations and references for their research. Members of the general public may not be aware that referencing their information may improve trust and help viewers of their content in making informed decisions. While in support of the role that blogs can play in the sharing of UGC for academic purposes, Dowling (2013) believes that when possible, content should be subject to some form of quality control. In scenarios such as schools, as discussed by Dowling, quality control is possible as teachers can potentially review content posted by students. However, in the broad sense of the general population, it is not possible to review and assess UGC sites, and might not be plausible from an ethical standpoint.

There are several ways in which unqualified content creators manage to gain the confidence of their audience. One example, whether used intentionally or not, is the endorsement of or sponsorship by popular products or brands. Lynch (2010) found that in regards to healthy living blogs, food companies will supply products to the content creator for the specific purpose of promotion and favourable reviews. In the case of content creators who start blogging as a hobby or as a transition into self-employment, sponsorship from large companies could encourage them to sway their own opinions in order to gain further support and popularity. Sponsorship has the potential to either increase or decrease user trust in blogs, depending on whether or not the content creator discloses the presence of sponsorship, as well as how they word the disclosure if they do use one (Gerrath and Ursey, 2016; Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Gerrath and Ursey (2016) found that users reacted negatively towards sponsored blog posts when the content creator was found out to have been sponsored only as a result of inquiry from users, such as a question in the comments, rather than offering the information voluntarily, using a tag or disclaimer. This is potentially

attributed to the users feeling that the product in question was forced upon them, rather than genuinely supported by the content creator. Colucci and Cho (2014) report that users are easily able to tell if a blog is sponsored whether the blogger has a disclaimer or not, and that frequent sponsorship has an increased negative effect on user trust in the blog. As UGC sites are commonly used by content creators as a platform for sharing personal accounts (Nardi *et al.*, 2004; Davies, Jolley and Coiffait, 2016), it is understandable that users of these sites might become accustomed to the narrative nature and implied sincerity of posts. Therefore, the use of sponsorship and endorsement might have an adverse effect on users. It could also influence users' ability to trust information as credible and accurate as it is coming from a sales based stance, or a marketing perspective (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Whether they trust the opinion of a sponsored post or not, it is important that users of UGC sites understand that if a content creator is receiving free goods in exchange for featuring a product, the information on the site might be biased. This can be complicated, as some content creators will disclose sponsorship, but will make the statement "all opinions are my own, although this is a sponsored post" (Hwang and Jeong, 2016, p.528). Though the intent of making this statement is to reassure the reader that they have not been swayed into a certain position by the sponsorship, it cannot be assumed that this is true, as the content creator may just want to retain followers and favourable opinion. Hwang and Jeong (2016) found that bloggers who made the claim that 'opinions are my own' did in fact have more positive interactions with followers than those who disclosed sponsorship without making the claim. Conversely, Colucci and Cho (2014) found that users were aware that content creators might post favourably for products they don't support, despite claiming to be honest, if they are motivated by financial gain. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission has instigated a policy wherein bloggers must disclose any incidence of sponsorship (Hwang and Jeong, 2016) though there is currently no similar rule in place in the UK.

## 2.6 Authority and Credibility

One's ability to assess credibility and accuracy of online information, especially that which is presented in UGC sites, is influenced by the degree to which the content creator is viewed to have authority. In order to understand how content creators assert authority and



credibility, it is necessary to understand the difference between these two concepts, while understanding, as recognised by Wilson (1983) that they are related. What people generally think of as authority, Wilson (1983, p.14) calls administrative authority, which “involves a recognized right to command others, within certain prescribed limits”. This type of authority is commonly appointed to people by others, whereas cognitive authority is not assigned, but recognised. This is supported by Lankes (2008) who explains that an authoritarian upholds policy, but an authoritative individual earns their status. Neal and McKenzie (2011) assert that cognitive authorities can be built by a group of individuals, such as those in an online environment, via the sharing of information. Cognitive authority occurs when an individual influences how others think, and where those being influenced acknowledge and accept the influence (Wilson, 1983). This is seen in the way blog users read, accept, comment, and share information found on UGC sites, thereby giving authority to the content creators (Neal and McKenzie, 2011). Wilson (1983) explains that the reason cognitive authorities have an influence on the thoughts of individuals is because they are believed to be credible. This is supported by Savolainen (2011), who states that cognitive authority is a significant factor in generating credibility of information. The main factors contributing to cognitive authority include an individual's perceived trust and perceived expertise (Wilson, 1983; Lankes, 2008; Rieh, 2002; Rieh, 2010; Fritch and Cromwell, 2002; Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953). According to Buis and Carpenter (2009) an individual with a high level of expertise can be expected to produce accurate content, and they are trustworthy if their intent was to provide accurate content. In the context of blogs, this can be related to the scenario of posting content based upon sponsorship provided by a company. Perhaps the content creator is an expert in vegan nutrition information, but if they intend to provide content that is influenced by sponsorship despite knowing the content is inaccurate, they are not trustworthy. Lack of trust decreases cognitive authority, and thus decreases credibility. While credibility is necessary for one to be a cognitive authority, it is possible to be credible but not be a cognitive authority, as not all credible individuals influence the thinking of others (Wilson, 1983).

Neal and McKenzie (2011) recognise the role that affective authority plays in UGC sites. Affective authority is defined by Neal and McKenzie (2011, p.131) as “the extent to which users think the information is subjectively appropriate, empathetic, emotionally supportive,

and/or aesthetically pleasing”. This relates to the findings of Colucci and Cho (2014) who found that Generation Y users find blog aesthetics, along with their ability to connect with content creators, as influential factors in establishing trust in a blog, and trust, as previously iterated, influences authority.

According to Cosenza, Solomon and Kwon (2014) credibility can be assessed based on the source (the content creator), the message (the content), and the site (the blog). This was reflected previously in the approaches of individuals in regards to assessing credibility of UCG and social media sites. If one of these three elements is weak, the individual will question the credibility, despite how strong the remaining elements are. Savolainen (2011) states that the most important aspect of content credibility is the extent to which the information can be deemed to be useful, accurate and specific, and the source is assessed based upon the reputation of the content creator. Previous literature is unified in identifying content of the blog and content creator of the blog as important criteria for determining credibility, with the visual element of the site itself also contributing to credibility perception.

Colucci and Cho (2014) found that Generation Y adults trust those blogs whose content creators are actively involved in the industry in which they post content about, or who have research related credentials in the specified field. This exemplifies the influence trust can have on cognitive authority. Colucci and Cho (2014) found that one means of assessing a content creator’s perceived trustworthiness was to check the number of followers a blog had. This method may show popularity, but popularity does not necessarily translate to trustworthiness. Trust in a blog can also be influenced by a users’ ability to relate to a content creator’s personal beliefs and qualities (Colucci and Cho, 2014). This may be a result of a natural tendency for people to trust those who they find themselves similar to.

## 3.0 Method and Methodology

The research undertaken for this study followed a qualitative, survey based approach. Initial research on cognitive authority was undertaken in order to understand the components that factor into cognitive authority, and the relationship between authority, credibility and trust.

Ethical approval was not necessitated, as no human subjects were contacted at any point during the study. Analysis was performed on publicly available blogs.

### 3.1 Sample Selection

For this study, an initial list of UGC sites was selected and carefully narrowed down to fit the criteria described hereafter. UK vegan blogs were discovered by searching Google using the following keywords: 'UK vegan blogs', 'UK vegan health blogs', 'UK vegan fitness blogs' and 'UK vegan recipes'. Search results on Google yielded popular sites and compilation sites such as 'Top 50 UK Vegan Blogs and Websites to Follow in 2019'. Based off of the results found from this search, an initial list was compiled of blogs and podcasts. Within the fifty UGC sites found from the compilation list as well as Google search results, there were approximately seventy five suitable sites. When creating the initial list, duplicate sites, and any sites that had Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) that led to dead links, were cut. Sites that were listed as blogs but were actually Pinterest pages were also excluded, as were any sites that required payment to access. The third criteria required that the sites feature an 'About Me' section. Finally, all sites were required to contain content within the recipe posts in addition to a list of ingredients and methods for the recipe. After these cuts, the list contained eleven possible UGC sites. To expand the results, relevant sites in the United States and Canada were searched for, using the keyword searches 'vegan blogs', 'vegan health blogs', 'vegan fitness blogs' and 'vegan recipes'. Sites from North America were added to the initial UK list, for a total of twenty two sites. After careful consideration on the focus of the research, the North American sites were discarded. In order to work within the time constraints and scope of this study, it was determined that a finer focus solely on UK based sites was adequate for the purposes of the research.

The eleven UK sites were first checked for frequency of posts, time of most recent post and relevance to the topic. The sites selected were required to have been in existence for at least one year from the time research began (they must have been established from May 2018, at minimum) and must have published content within three months from the time research commenced in May 2019. All content was required to have been written in English.

Sites were included in the final list if they contained content related to other topics, such as travel or fashion, as long as the predominant topic was vegan health. For the purposes of this study, health includes recipes, nutrition and fitness information. Podcasts had originally been included, but were cut as a decision was made to focus on blogs. This was due to the format that podcasts were available in. Podcasts could be downloaded or streamed online, but transcriptions were not available. Therefore, to analyse the content the selected podcast episodes would need to be manually transcribed. As an average podcast episode is one hour in length, this was determined to be infeasible for the time constraints of this study. From the remaining selection of blogs, one site was discarded as its purpose was to provide comfort food, thereby making no health based claims in the information provided. One was discarded as it was a sales based site with general vegan blog posts, but purchases required to access nutrition information. Additionally, recipes on this site were over two years old. One was cut as the 'About Me' section was no longer accessible, and this section of the blog had previously been determined to be a focus of analysis. Two sites were discarded as they contained mostly restaurant reviews. Two sites were included despite containing some posts that contained non-vegan (lacto-ovo vegetarian) ingredients. These two sites were determined to be predominantly vegan, and the non-vegan posts were older posts on the site. This left a total of six sites which met the established criteria for the study:

- Blog 1: Made by Luci, <https://madebyluci.co.uk/>

Luci lives with her family and two rabbits near Manchester. Luci began 'Made by Luci' in 2015. She posts both healthy recipes and less healthy baking recipes. She shares aspects of her personal life, focusing on the things she loves and enjoys. She wants vegans and non-vegans to enjoy her vegan recipes. In addition to recipes, Luci shares helpful guides on how

to eat and drink vegan at popular restaurants and cafes, vegan holiday tips and vegan gifts ideas.

- Blog 2: Romy London UK, <https://www.romylondonuk.com/>

Romy lives in West London, and began 'Romy London UK' in 2015, which is also when she became a vegan. She aims to keep her recipes healthy, but flavourful. Even with her baked goods, she tries to include healthy ingredients. Romy posts recipes, travel diaries, vegan restaurant reviews and recommendations, holiday favourites and personal posts such as her top memories of the year or her monthly favourite items. She is a self-described 'geek' and also loves plants and yoga.

- Blog 3: The Little Blog of Vegan, <http://www.thelittleblogofvegan.com/>

Holly Jade has won several awards for her 'The Little Blog of Vegan', which she started in 2015. Her recipes are featured on multiple vegan resource websites, and in several cookbooks and magazines. She shares healthy vegan meal recipes as well as indulgent desserts and simple snacks. In addition to recipes, she posts restaurant reviews, her favourite beauty products and tips for shopping for vegan food at popular shops.

- Blog 4: Everything's Peachy, <https://www.everythingspeachy.co.uk/>

Adele is from Liverpool, and started 'Everything's Peachy' in 2016. A strong ethical standpoint comes across in her posts, whether they are her recipes, beauty tips, restaurant reviews or vegan travel tips. She focuses on vegan recipes that are healthy and based around whole, natural foods. Her blog has a mindful, holistic feeling to it, and she seems focused on an overall approach to health and wellness.

- Blog 5: Nadia's Healthy Kitchen, <https://nadiashealthykitchen.com/>

Nadia lives in Manchester, and started 'Nadia's Healthy Kitchen' in 2013. Nadia grew up in Baghdad. Her father is from Iraq, and her mother is English. She tries to follow a healthy diet

and post healthy recipes, though she does include dessert recipes, and stresses that it balance is key. Nadia shares her story of moving to the UK, struggling with her weight and facing multiple health issues, including anxiety. She began focusing on a plant based diet in order to improve her health and lose weight. Nadia focuses her blog on recipes.

- Blog 6: Veggie Desserts, <https://veggiedesserts.co.uk/>

Kate was born in Canada and moved to the UK when she was a teenager. She spent years working as a journalist in London, and now lives in Somerset with her family. She began 'Veggie Desserts' in 2013, and now runs her blog full time. She is also a freelance food writer and regular contributor to a column on healthy family food. Kate has written a cookbook based on her vegetable baked goods. Her focus is on healthy food and vegetable based desserts that are enjoyable for the whole family, though she also includes travel tips, restaurant and product reviews.

The 'About Me' sections of text were selected for analysis as they contained information pertinent to each of the research questions. 'About Me' sections of blogs generally give a short biography of the content creator in a first-person narrative format, and as such, allude to their experience, training, passions and interests, and offer an opportunity for the user to 'get to know' the individual posting on the blog. This information is applicable to discerning creation of authority, presentation of credibility and impressions of trust and authenticity.

Two recipe posts from each sample were selected for analysis. The selected recipe posts were either the most recent entries that had 'healthy' in the title or that had 'healthy' in the post description. The selected recipe posts were listed as 'entrées' or 'mains'. Starters, desserts and beverages were excluded. This was done to maintain consistency. Two recipe posts were selected in order to gain a general sense of the content posted by the content creator. No more than two recipe posts were selected due to time restraints, and limitations in the scope of this study.

## 3.2 Approaches to Analysis

Content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis were the methods selected to analyse the data. Content analysis can be used to assess the topics focused on within a selection of text, such as a blog (Davies, Jolley and Coiffait, 2016). Wood and Kroger (2000, p.32) explain that content analysis is both qualitative and quantitative, as it applies statistics and the counting of the occurrences of codes and code categories. Codes can include “words, phrases, sentences, themes, or units specific to the type of material that is analyzed” (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p.32). Discourse analysis allows for a broader and more variable qualitative assessment of text than content analysis, and looks deeper into the effects of the text (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Potter and Wetherell (1987) also emphasise the value of discourse analysis in understanding the variable functions of language. Thematic analysis is a qualitative tool used to draw upon “implicit and explicit ideas” from within the text, as interpreted by the researcher (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012, p.10).

### 3.2.1 Content Analysis

Davies, Jolley and Coiffait (2016) used content analysis to examine the blogging experiences of UK psychologists, and to categorise topics discussed in the blogs and reasons for blogging. In a similar vein, for this study content analysis was completed using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) 2015 (free version) to identify emotional context, presentations of authoritative writing, cognitive processes and presentations of trust and authenticity.

There is no minimum requirement for word count when using LIWC. However, LIWC2015 (How it Works, n.d.) states that samples with under 50 words have a higher chance of producing skewed results. The maximum word count allowed by LIWC2015 is 500. LIWC2015 (How it Works, n.d.) “reads a given text and counts the percentage of words that reflect different emotions, thinking styles, social concerns, and even parts of speech”. Areas assessed by LIWC2015 are categorised into ‘Traditional LIWC Dimensions’ and ‘Summary Variables’. ‘Traditional LIWC Dimension’ data includes: I-words (I, me, my), social words, positive emotions, negative emotions and cognitive processes (LIWC Results, n.d.). The ‘Traditional Dimensions’ are given as percentages of total word count of the text (Interpreting LIWC Output, n.d.). ‘Summary Variables’ include: analytic (formal thinking),

clout (authoritative and confident writing), authenticity (personal and sincere), and emotional tone (high is upbeat and low is negative) (LIWC Results, n.d.). The 'Summary Variables' are presented as scores along a 100-point scale, with zero being low and 100 high (LIWC Results, n.d.). Each score for 'Traditional Dimensions' and 'Summary Variables' was compared to the average for the selected classification of text.

### 3.2.2 Discourse Analysis

In a case study conducted on blogs of women with endometriosis, Neal and McKenzie (2011) applied discourse analysis to understand how content creators present their information and how they validate the authority of the information they post. Discourse analysis is used to interpret the construction and function of language, and to analyse how people portray issues (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012). As blogs are used as a voice for individuals to express opinions and share information (Nardi *et al.*, 2004; Veron, 2016), examining the text segments using discourse analysis was used to establish patterns in the presentation of information. Discourse analysis is flexible, and can be used to assess text in segments as short as several words up to multiple paragraphs, as well as graphics (Wood and Kroger, 2000).

Discourse analysis was selected as a method for analysing patterns in wording used, and also not used, by content creators in the selected text segments. Potter and Wetherell (1987, p.7) state that discourse analysis is used to "gain a better understanding of social life and social interaction from our study of social texts". The text to be analysed can be in any format, whether spoken or written (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wood and Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis was selected for this study, as it aims to assess what is being done with the language in question, and particularly in gauging the context of the language (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wood and Kroger, 2000). It is also stated by Wood and Kroger (2000) that in cases where there is a high degree of variation in samples, discourse analysis is a highly useful form of assessment. As each of the samples in this study is written by a different content creator, it is assumed there will be variability amongst the texts.

While analysis for this study was based on the model set out by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and further detailed by Edwards and Potter (1992), the approach taken was described by



Wood and Kroger (2000) as discourse analysis in social psychology (DASP). According to Wood and Kroger:

Some of the central concepts and notions of DASP are interpretive repertoires, attitudes and attributions as discursive accomplishments, accountability, practices of fact construction, the working of descriptions, the management of stake and interest, and emotion categories (Wood and Kroger, 2000, pp.20-21).

Due to the focus on accountability, fact construction, and emotion categories, DASP was determined to be the most suitable form of discourse analysis for this study. DASP takes non-linguistic components of the sample into consideration to a greater extent than other discourse analysis methods, such as critical discourse analysis (Wood and Kroger, 2000), which is useful for analysing blog content. As content creators of blogs share personal as well as informative content with their users, it is possible that meanings might be more implied than in an academic or professional text format. DASP encompasses those elements looked at by critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis and post structuralism: the interaction of talk, language use, written text and media (Wood and Kroger, 2000). When using DASP, there is a focus on “attributions of accountability and responsibility” (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p.102). This is relevant for looking at the methods used by content creators to create an air of authority. Within analysis, looking at ‘footing’ as described by Wood and Kroger (2000) will assist with assessing the degree to which content creators display accountability for their words. The process of using DASP is broken down into several steps, though Wood and Kroger (2000) stress that the steps are fluid and cyclical. In this study, the process undertaken involved several stages. As this study aims to look at the presentation of authority by content creators, it was important to take into account “the potential importance of absence, of “what is not there,” in both selected discourse excerpts and the discourse as a whole” (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p.91), as the lack of references to experience or education might indicate a lack of credibility, and thus authority.

### 3.2.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was completed through careful readings of the text samples to look for key concepts and to identify patterns in the content. Joffe (2012) explains that thematic

analysis is used to determine important themes within the phenomenon studied. In this study, language use, especially the use of positive and negative language in the posts and in the portrayal of vegan nutrition information, was expected to be an important theme, as were examples of community, support and networking within posts.

Dickinson, Watson and Prichard (2018) assessed the content of blogs claiming to post clean eating recipes, intending to discern the validity of the claims by analysing keyword use. The blogs studied by Dickinson, Watson and Prichard (2018) were reported to be authored by individuals with an avid interest in food and health, rather than an education in nutrition. None of the UGC sites in this study is managed by a content creator who is qualified in health or nutrition. One states that she is in the process of working towards a qualification. As the vegan UGC sites assessed in this study are managed by individuals who are passionate about but unqualified in nutrition, claims to the nutritious nature of the content were used to identify patterns in language use by content creators.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Primary areas assessed in each sample included: use of language, particularly in terms of positive and negative emotions; use of authoritative language (or lack thereof); use of language that insinuates credibility (or lack thereof); reference to experience or qualifications; use of common keywords; and use of language or narratives that perpetuate authenticity and trust. Looking at the presence or absence of authoritative language was decided upon in order to assist with understanding the methods used by content creators to create an air of authority in the presentation of their content. Cognitive authority was the focus of this research. Reference to experience, knowledge and expertise was selected to understand the presentation of credibility in UGC sites, and how this differs from academic or institutional sources. Assessing positive and negative language use, and language that perpetuates feelings of trust was expected to assist in determining the role of personal stories in creating an impression of trust and authenticity. This research focused on the ways in which content creators present themselves as trustworthy and authentic through their posts, not on the reactions of users to the content.

### 3.3.1 Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2015

The text from each sample was copied from the blog and pasted into the LIWC2015 generator, which produced data, as seen in Figure 1.1. The samples for this study were classified as 'Social Media: Twitter, Facebook, Blog'. The LIWC data for each sample was compared to the average score for 'Social Media: Twitter, Facebook, Blog', as calculated by LIWC, as well as the average score for 'Professional or Scientific Writing', as calculated by LIWC. While 'Professional or Scientific Writing' was not the focus of this study, it was used to provide a point of comparison to the blog content.

**Figure 1.1- LIWC2015 Analysis Made by Luci 'About Me'**

liwc.wpengine.com		
 		
TRADITIONAL LIWC DIMENSION	YOUR DATA	AVERAGE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA: TWITTER, FACEBOOK, BLOG
I-WORDS (I, ME, MY)	7.9	5.51
SOCIAL WORDS	9.8	9.71
POSITIVE EMOTIONS	5.0	4.57
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS	1.5	2.10
COGNITIVE PROCESSES	11.1	10.77
SUMMARY VARIABLES		
ANALYTIC	60.3	55.92
CLOUT	50.8	55.45
AUTHENTICITY	65.4	55.66
EMOTIONAL TONE	85.9	63.35
<p>Traditional LIWC dimensions reflect percentage of total words within the text you provided. The Summary Variables (new to LIWC2015) are research-based composites that have been converted to 100-point scales where 0 = very low along the dimension and 100 = very high. Analytic refers to analytical or formal thinking. Clout taps writing that is authoritative, confident, and exhibits leadership. Authenticity refers to writing that is personal and honest. Emotional tone is scored such that higher numbers are more positive and upbeat and lower numbers are more negative.</p>		

In two cases, the word count of the 'About Me' section went significantly over the limit (doubled and tripled, respectively). In these cases, for blogs three and five, the sections were divided into two and three sections, and the average was obtained. This option was decided upon rather using the first 500 words, as the content was deemed important. If the

word count went over by less than 100 words, the first 500 were used, as the remaining words were not vital to the overall context of the post (they contained social media handles).

The recipe posts did not exceed the word count allowance. Ingredients and methods for the recipe posts were excluded from analysis, as they were determined to be irrelevant to the descriptive content of the post.

The 'About Me' samples and recipe post samples were assessed separately, as the content differed within these sections. The 'About Me' samples contained a significant amount of biographical information and personal stories, whereas the recipe posts contained some personal stories, but to a lesser extent. In general the recipe posts contained more information relating to health and nutrition. The 'Traditional LIWC Dimensions' and 'Summary Variables' were looked at separately for both the 'About Me' and recipe post samples. This was in part due to the fact they are separated by headings within the LIWC results, as well as due to the different nature of the two sets of data, as emphasised by the 'Summary Variables' greater in-depth descriptions from LIWC2015.

### 3.3.2 Discourse Analysis in Social Psychology

Discourse analysis was used to analyse both the text sections of each sample: the 'About Me' and the recipe post.

Following the instructions outlined by Wood and Kroger (2000) multiple readings were undertaken. As suggested by Wood and Kroger (2000) the process was not carried out in a strict order: some samples required more time and were reread more than others. An initial reading was conducted, and the text scanned for examples of authoritative language. Wording and phrases looked for included examples such as 'in my experience' or references to the length of time they have been vegan and/or making vegan food. These examples were highlighted in green. A secondary reading was conducted to find examples of references to credibility, and that made claims to be accurate and informative. The text was scanned for wording or phrases that could be interpreted as useful, or that are specific, such as references to nutrient content, health benefits, and referrals to specific products. For this

stage it was useful to look at the text in terms of footing. Footing is used to assess whether the individual conveying the words claims the words as theirs, or if they are presenting the words of others (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p.102). These examples were highlighted in blue. A third reading was conducted to look for examples of trust building in stories, by looking for words or phrases such as 'I personally' or those which emphasis personal attributes. These examples were highlighted in pink. Following each highlighted word or phrase, notes were made in red to describe what was interpreted from the text, as seen in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.2- DASP Analysis Romy London UK, Recipe Post 1**

Personally, my body always struggles with quick weather and climate changes. It's my season of migraines and my immune system always seems to be weaker during this time of year – but it seems that I'm not the only one: within the past weeks pretty much everyone I know has been getting through a cold and I have also been feeling under the weather at times. Luckily I have still gotten through it without any major health blackouts (touch wood!)  
 sharing personal stories, refers to others

There are a bunch of things I do during this time of year to try and avoid being completely knocked out by the flu. Increasing my intake of Vitamin C & adding more things like Apple Cider Vinegar & Turmeric to my foods is only one of them. Apparently when the first signs of a cold approach it's already too late to up your vitamin C, so I like to be preventative and automatically start with it as the days get colder.  
 nutrition information, but uses hesitant language  
 Specific, useful

My diet around this time of year also switches to more warm and comforting foods, such as soups and stews. It's simply what feels good, especially after a walk in the cold, fresh air.  
 personal  
 Useful, but also personal

I've recently been loving to combine both warming foods with a good serving of Vitamins – like I have done in this deliciously fruity curry soup.  
 good serving of Vitamins –  
 Specific nutrition information, confident language

The idea for this soup actually goes back to my uncle, who made this soup for Christmas a couple of years ago and I've simply adapted his recipe to include more fresh ingredients and make it vegan (he used honey in the original, as well as store bought orange juice, curry paste and powdered ginger & garlic).  
 personal connection, sharing about family  
 accurate and specific

Patterns were then identified and categorised. A final reading was done to ensure relevant elements were not missed. After reviewing the initial highlighted material, themes were pulled out and codes determined. At this point, it was decided that the absence of information, such as claims to have experience or educational qualifications, was also

important, as advised by Wood and Kroger (2000). Samples from the text were categorised into the codes. DASP was further used as a means to identify interpretive repertoires within the blogs. Potter and Wetherell (1987) explain that interpretive repertoires are used to characterize and understand actions and events. The interpretive repertoires were assessed in conjunction with the codes.

Ingredients and methods for the recipe posts were excluded from analysis, as they were determined to be irrelevant to the descriptive content of the post.

### 3.3.3 Thematic Analysis

For this study, three readings of the 'About Me' and the recipe sections were undertaken in order to identify key themes and concepts. During the initial reading, words and phrases related to health, nutrition, or experience of the content creator were highlighted in purple. These words tended to be of a positive nature. Words and phrases relating to unhealthy lifestyle or lack of experience were highlighted in orange. These words tended to be of a negative nature. During the second reading, words were recorded that occurred in multiple samples. The third reading was undertaken to ensure key words hadn't been missed. There had initially been intent to compare keywords found as part of the thematic analysis to word clouds generated using Voyant Tools. However, while undertaking the initially intended approach, it was discovered that the underlying concepts presented by the content creators were more relevant to understanding themes than the most frequently used words. This resulted in a different approach being taken to thematic analysis, with a focus on identifying concepts instead of keywords. Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012, pp.10-11) explain that when themes are the focus of analysis instead of words, reliability may be more of a challenge, but also has a greater potential to explain meaning in text.

The analysis shifted to focus on the following three themes: building a connection, making content personal, and focusing on positivity, which were identified and noted in red, as seen in Figure 1.3.

### Figure 1.3- Thematic Analysis Veggie Desserts 'About Me'

Hi, I'm Kate, an award-winning top UK food blogger, cookbook author, magazine columnist and freelance food writer **offering info that builds a connection**. I'm unashamedly obsessed with vegetables **personal sharing**, whether they're in my breakfast, dinner or desserts! If you're looking for kale cupcakes, you've come to the right place. **Inviting, friendly, positive**

I also write recipes for vegetarian and vegan breakfasts, meals and snacks.

But there's not just hidden veg in my recipes, I like to promote veggies loud and proud! **Personal, positive about the recipes.**

#### WHY VEGETABLE DESSERTS?

I'll happily **positive** admit that I have an obsession with making vegetable desserts **personal**. Spinach cake, parsnip spice loaf, chocolate beetroot cupcakes... I could go on and on with my list of favourite vegetable cake. And I don't hide them, the veggies stand loud and proud in desserts and cakes around this house. **Confident, positive, makes it personal by referring to her home.**

I'm a mum of two, so I try to give my children healthy, fresh food **Refers to family, makes herself relatable to other parents**. My love of vegetable desserts started with the cake for my son's first birthday. It was to be his first taste of chocolate, and although I wasn't going to begrudge him that, I wanted it to be a bit better for him **personal story, referring to family, sharing opinion**. After a few trials, his birthday vegetable cake was ready: one layer of chocolate beetroot and one layer of chocolate butternut squash. **Sharing personal memories** It wasn't exactly healthy, but it was a big step up from a shop bought cake. They went down well with everyone and my love of vegetable cakes began. **Positive.**

These themes were assessed using examples from the samples, and drawing on the approach to applied thematic analysis as described by Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012). The focus of this approach is to go deeper than the assessment and quantitative occurrence of keywords, and instead assess and understand the "implicit and explicit ideas within the data" (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012, p. 10). Words and phrases were identified and categorised into the relevant theme, and the potential meanings and purposes of these themes were described.

Ingredients and methods for the recipe posts were excluded from analysis, as they were determined to be irrelevant to the descriptive content of the post.



## 4.0 Analysis

Analysis was undertaken in several steps, beginning with LIWC analysis, followed by DASP then thematic analysis. Certain elements were present across all samples, such as positivity, referring to experience, writing with confidence and posting content that provides opportunities for users to build connections with the content creator. Findings for each type of analysis are discussed below, with their implications on the research questions.

### 4.1 LIWC

The 'Traditional LIWC Dimensions' and the 'Summary Variables' for the 'About Me' samples and the recipe post samples provided insight into the differences between the writing styles of the two forms of content (biographical and recipe information) and how the different sections of a blog can be used to give impressions of authority, credibility, and trust. The 'Traditional LIWC Dimensions' demonstrated that overall, 'About Me' samples were more narrative, and used a higher rate of I-words, social words and cognitive processes than the recipe post samples. The recipe post samples were more information-oriented, and used a higher degree of positive emotions and fewer negative emotions than the 'About Me' samples. The 'Summary Variables' demonstrated that overall, recipe post samples had higher rates of analytical thinking and emotional tone compared to 'About Me' samples. 'About Me' samples had higher scores of authenticity than recipe post samples. Clout was similar between the 'About Me' and recipe post samples. While this study is not focused on the reasoning behind scores for professional or scientific writing (PSW), this variable was included as a point of comparison between the blogs studied and the average for social media (SM).

#### 4.1.1 Traditional LIWC Dimensions for 'About Me' Samples

Within the 'Traditional LIWC Dimensions' for 'About Me' samples, each of the blogs had a higher percentage of I-words than the average for SM, which may indicate that vegan blog writers refer to personal experience more than bloggers of other topics. I-words can be attributed to writing styles that express opinions, thoughts and feelings (descriptive writing) rather than facts (Meer, 2016). The 'About Me' section of a blog could be expected, based off of its title, to be written in the first person, provide a brief biography of the content

creator and a chance for them to share some personal experiences, so a high use of I-words and social words is logical, as exemplified in the following examples:

“That crazy face you see there is (somewhat unfortunately) mine. My name’s Luci. I’m a twenty-going-on-thirty-something food fanatic” (Made by Luci). This content creator introduces themselves using ‘mine’, ‘my’ and ‘I’m’.

“I was inspired to make this life change after I became unwell a few years back and was told I have food intolerances” (The Little Blog of Vegan). This content creator tells their story in the first person.

“All my life my mum and sister have been keen vegetarians which I thought was weird and didn't understand why they didn't eat meat like me and my dad. This is something I shared with my dad until recently when I watched a documentary on animal cruelty” (The Little Blog of Vegan). This content creator uses social words to describe connections and relationships with their family.

In contrast, PSW will be more factual, containing less personal opinion (I-words) than a biography in a blog. The high use of I-words in the ‘About Me’ and related sharing of personal experience could also contribute to an increase in relatability of the user to the content creator. As explained by Colucci and Cho (2014) users have an increased likelihood of trusting content creators who possess personal traits that they too possess. Therefore, those users who establish a self-perceived personal connection with the content creator also develop trust in the blog as a whole.

Social words were higher on average for SM than for PSW. Three of the samples (1a, 2a, and 4a) had higher percentages of social words than the average for SM and PSW, and three of the samples (3a, 5a and 6a) had lower percentages of social words than the average for SM and PSW. As social words are used to describe family, friends, and other individuals (Comparing LIWC2015 and LIWC2007, n.d.) variation in the use of these words is natural, as content creators have different approaches to writing. Some content creators might refer to friends and family as part of the narrative aspect of their posts, while others will focus on

themselves or solely their blog content. In regards to the blogs used in this study, Everything's Peachy is the only sample that did not make reference to friends or family in their 'About Me' section. The social words score for this blog may be explained by their use of 'you' and 'your' which qualifies as referencing other individuals, as evidenced by the statement: "when you nourish your body, you also nourish your soul" (Everything's Peachy). The lower scores seen in samples 3a, 5a and 6a, despite their references to family and friends, may be explained by the fact the 'About Me' samples for these blogs were longer than those of 1a, 2a and 4a, making the overall percentages lower.

In PSW, writers might also refer to other studies or individuals. For this reason, the use of social words can be viewed to have less of an impact on credibility and authority than other variables, such as I-words, as referencing other individuals does not necessarily relate to use of opinion and lack of factual information. However, the context of the content must be taken into account.

Positive emotions were higher than the average for SM in two samples (4a and 6a), lower than average for SM in two samples (3a and 5a) and average in two samples (1a and 2a). In all samples positive emotions were higher than the average for PSW. Positive emotions can be seen in the terminology and tone used by content creators, such as 'loving/love', 'believe', 'heal', 'bring people closer together' and 'happily':

"I've recently been loving to combine both warming foods with a good serving of Vitamins – like I have done in this deliciously fruity curry soup" (Romy London UK).

"I really believe that food has the ability not just to fuel, but to heal, change lives and bring people closer together. When you nourish your body, you also nourish your soul" (Everything's Peachy).

"I'll happily admit that I have an obsession with making vegetable desserts" (Veggie Desserts).

Negative emotions were lower than the average for SM in five of the samples, with one sample (3a) rating average. The content creator for The Little Blog of Vegan made multiple references to personal struggles in their 'About Me' as demonstrated by the following examples:

"I became unwell" (The Little Blog of Vegan).

"I would suffer from daily symptoms" (The Little Blog of Vegan).

"After struggling with my intolerance's, I was frightened to try new foods and was very stubborn on what I chose to eat" (The Little Blog of Vegan).

While sample 3a had the highest score for negative emotions, the fact that it rated average and that the other samples rated below average indicates that the content creators of vegan blogs may be making a conscious effort to give a positive tone to their blogs. Three of the samples (2a, 4a and 6a) had lower negative word use than the average for PSW. The combination of average to high positive word use and overall lower negative word use in comparison to the average for SM indicates that vegan blogs might be written with more positive language than blogs in general. This may be attributed to the efforts of content creators in creating a sense of authenticity and approachability in relation to veganism. Negative emotions do not relate directly to the credibility of writing. Negative emotions could be due to the sharing of a story which required negative words to describe. According to LIWC (How it Works, n.d.) use of anger related words does not necessarily mean an author was angry or writing in a negative frame of mind. What can be derived from the use of negative emotions is that there is a potential to have inaccuracies when writing is fuelled by emotion. However, as one of the main uses of blogs is the sharing of stories (Colucci and Cho, 2014) negative emotions can be expected in the sharing of past experience, trauma or struggles, which may be present in the biographies of content creators. Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010, p.33) reported that "deceptive statements compared with truthful ones are moderately descriptive, distanced from self, and more negative". All samples had lower negative emotion scores than the average for SM, demonstrating a trend towards honesty and authenticity in 'About Me' samples.

Cognitive process scores for vegan blog 'About Me' samples were higher than the averages for SM and PSW in five of the six samples, with sample 6a having the lowest overall score for cognitive processes, at 6.6. The cognitive processes score for average PSW (7.52) was lower than all but 6a. The SM average of 10.77 was lower than all blog samples, with the exception of 6a. According to LIWC (Comparing LIWC2015 and LIWC2007, n.d.), the cognitive processes score is designed "to restrict all the constituent words to true markers of cognitive activity" and looks at insight, cause, discrepancies, tentativeness, certainty and differentiation. Cognition is defined as "the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses" (Dictionary Cognition, 2019). Cognitive processes are those activities observed by LIWC to contribute to understanding and assessment, and can be observed in instances such as these:

"Whether you are a vegan body builder, simply into all the healthy food or like to stick to the comfort foods that you've always known - there's no missing out!" (Romy London UK).

"We each only get one body; we may as well take care of it" (Everything's Peachy).

"Through becoming vegan, I have found a new interest for healthy eating and different types of food, which I would have never have known about otherwise" (The Little Blog of Vegan).

In these examples, the content creators demonstrate insight into what healthy living means to them, and the knowledge and interests they have gained from their experience of living a vegan lifestyle.

A higher degree of cognitive processing demonstrates that content creators utilise experience and personal interpretation of information to influence their writing, which in turn indicates a lack of scientific backing to their statements. Cognitive processes may be lower in PSW as writers of those styles of content are generally not assessing thought and experience. The use of experience over scientific evidence demonstrates that content

creators of vegan blogs may rely on personal experience as a means to present their information as credible.

**Table 1.1- Traditional LIWC Dimension Scores for 'About Me' Samples**

Sample	Traditional LIWC Dimensions				
	% I-Words (I, Me, My)	% Social Words	% Positive Emotions	% Negative Emotions	% Cognitive Processes
Average Social Media	5.51	9.71	4.57	2.1	10.77
Average Professional or Scientific Writing	0.63	7.62	2.32	1.45	7.52
1a	7.2	10.5	4.6	1.5	11.0
2a	5.8	11	4.5	0.6	19.5
3a	10.6	5.6	3.2	12.1	13.65
4a	6.1	11.4	6.8	0.8	17.8
5a	6.7	5.3	3.3	1.8	14.3
6a	8.3	6.6	5.9	0.7	6.6

#### 4.1.2 Summary Variables for 'About Me' Samples

Analytical thinking is defined by LIWC as:

The degree to which people use words that suggest formal, logical, and hierarchical thinking patterns. People low in analytical thinking tend to write and think using language that is more narrative ways, focusing on the here-and-now, and personal experiences. Those high in analytical thinking perform better in college and have higher college board scores (Interpreting LIWC Output, n.d.).

The scores for the samples ranged from 39.3 to 66.3. Three of the vegan blog samples were below the average for SM of 55.92, with one very close to average, and two above average. All samples scored well below the PSW average of 92.8. This demonstrates that blog writing for 'About Me' sections is consistent with analytical thinking scores for narrative, personal writing. As half of the blogs in this study were below average for SM, this may indicate that vegan blog content creators rely upon and utilise personal stories to connect with their users. However, a larger sample size is needed to further assess this finding. This is also an assessment of the content creator's use of narrative, and not the user's reactions to the content.

Individuals who write with clout are observed to demonstrate confidence and leader-type characteristics in their writing or speaking (Interpreting LIWC Output, n.d.) The highest clout score was for average PSW, which is consistent with the LIWC definition, as a professional or scientific paper should be written with confidence and a degree of leadership in the topic. Similar to analytical thinking, three of the vegan blog samples were well below the average for SM (3a, 5a and 6a), with one very close to average (1a), and two above average though still below the PSW average (2a and 4a). This demonstrates that in some cases content creators imbue confidence in their writing, and others lack that confidence. Presenting an air of confidence may be a result of those content creators genuinely believing in and feeling confident in their writing, or it could be a conscious approach used to pervade authority. Lack of confidence may be unintentional, or may be intentionally used to indicate that they are not trying to convey that the information they present is credible.

“When people reveal themselves in an authentic or honest way, they are more personal, humble, and vulnerable” (Interpreting LIWC Output, n.d.). The authenticity scores for average PSW (24.84) was considerably lower than the scores for all other variables, with the second lowest score being 55.66 (average SM). This is consistent with expectations for PSW, as the intent of that style of writing is to provide factual, accurate information. All of the blogs in this study scored higher in authenticity than the average for SM. This supports the findings from clout scores, and the idea that vegan content creators utilise personal connection to generate trust from their users.

LIWC2015 uses the emotional tone variable to summarise both positive and negative emotion scores, and explains that “the higher the number, the more positive the tone. Numbers below 50 suggest a more negative emotional tone” (Interpreting LIWC Output, n.d.). The emotional tone score for PSW average is below 50, which, according to the LIWC description, suggests a negative tone in the writing. However, in PSW that score may be based more on an absence of positive emotion, rather than a presence of negative emotion. While PSW is not the focus of this research, it is worth noting the score in comparison to the blogs. Samples 3a and 5a scored below the SM average of 63.35, with scores of 46.5 and 58.9, respectively. Samples 1a, 2a, 4a and 6a all scored above the average for SM, with 4a rating highest at 96. The positive tones demonstrates the use of encouraging language and pro-vegan positivity, which may be indicative of efforts by the content creators to shed a positive light on the vegan experience, which in turn contributes to the creation of an air of authority, as users will possibly interpret the experiences of the content creators as trustworthy.



**Table 1.2- Summary Variable Scores for 'About Me' Samples**

Sample	Summary Variables			
	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone
Average Social Media	55.92	55.45	55.66	63.35
Average Professional or Scientific Writing	92.57	68.17	24.82	43.61
1a	66.3	56.1	63.2	81.5
2a	49.2	62.7	69.3	90.3
3a	33.3	21.7	79.3	46.55
4a	35.4	64.8	74.8	99
5a	54	28.1	64.5	58.9
6a	60.4	30.8	57	96

#### 4.1.3 Traditional LIWC Dimensions for Recipe Posts

The recipe post samples that were analysed predominantly contained recipe background information. Ingredients and methods were excluded from LIWC analysis as the intent was to analyse the stories and information provided alongside the recipes.

I-words were lower than the SM average in all but 3 recipe posts (1c, 2c and 3b). This may be attributed to the instructive nature of recipes, rather than as channels for narrative, personal sharing.

Social words were lower than the averages for both PSW and SM for all recipe posts. Again, this may be attributed to the instructive nature of recipes, which results in fewer references to friends and family.

Positive emotions were higher than the PSW and SM averages in all but two of the recipe posts (2b and 6c). Those two scores were only slightly lower than the SM average of 4.57, at 4.3 and 4.5, respectively, and still higher than PSW average of 2.32. Positive emotions in vegan blog post may demonstrate an encouraging, uplifting attitude by content creators, potentially used to gain trust in the ease of leading a vegan lifestyle and the potential positive benefits of using vegan recipes. Consistent with this theory, negative emotions in posts were lower in all samples than the averages for PSW and SM. Whereas some of the 'About Me' samples some were close to the average for SM, that is linked to the sharing of personal stories and histories that are described using negative words, such as struggles with weight, body image and health. For recipe posts, content creators might be attempting to present their recipes in a positive light. As with 'About Me' samples, positivity may be linked to honesty (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010).

Cognitive processes for recipe posts were split, with five scoring above the SM average (1b, 1c, 2c, 4b and 4c), and seven below (2b, 3b, 3c, 5b, 5c, 6b and 6c). With a score of 7, sample 3c was the only to rate below the PSW average of 7.52. As with the 'About Me' samples, a higher degree of cognitive processing demonstrates that content creators utilise experience and personal interpretation of information to influence their writing, which in turn indicates a lack of scientific backing to their statements. In contrast to the 'About Me' samples, there was a higher incidence of samples scoring below the SM average amongst the recipe post samples. This may be attributed to more concrete information, such as nutrition information, being present in the recipe posts. Presenting information in an authoritative manner may be one way that content creators aim to present their content as credible.

**Table 1.3- Traditional LIWC Scores for Recipe Post Samples**

Sample	Traditional LIWC Dimensions				
	% I-Words (I, Me, My)	% Social Words	% Positive Emotions	% Negative Emotions	% Cognitive Processes
Average Social Media	5.51	9.71	4.57	2.1	10.77
Average Professional or Scientific Writing	0.63	7.62	2.32	1.45	7.52
1b	5.2	5.2	6.6	0.9	11.7
1c	6.6	6.3	5.4	0.9	14.5
2b	4.5	4.3	4.3	0.9	10.7
2c	6.8	3.8	6	0	14.1
3b	9.7	1.4	8.6	0	7.9
3c	2.6	1.8	9.6	0.9	7
4b	1.6	4.8	6.8	0.4	13.5
4c	1.5	4.6	7.6	0.8	12.1
5b	2.3	2.6	5.6	0.3	10.6
5c	2.3	5	8.4	0	9.6
6b	2.5	4.6	8.7	0.5	9.5
6c	4.5	7	4.5	0.5	9.6

#### 4.1.4 Summary Variables for Recipe Posts

Analytical thinking was higher overall with recipe posts than with ‘About Me’ samples, with one recipe post (3b) surpassing the average for PSW of 92.57 with a score of 96.5. Two

recipe post samples (2c and 3c) fell below the SM average of 55.92 with scores of 47.6 and 45.9, respectively. This may be explained by a higher degree of formal language and a less narrative approach to describing the recipes. Content creators included nutritional and health benefits when describing recipes, such as “hearty protein-rich black beans, gut boosting alfalfa sprouts” (Everything’s Peachy) and “quinoa is considered to be a complete protein” (The Little Blog of Vegan) which, regardless of accuracy, presents the information in a factual manner. The use of language which implies logical thinking demonstrates how content creators of vegan blogs may attempt to establish themselves as authorities, and concurrently present their content in a credible light.

Clout scores for recipe post samples were consistent with those of ‘About Me’ samples, with no samples surpassing the average for PSW, and only two surpassing the average for SM. This is demonstrated by the hesitant wording used by content creators when describing nutrition and health benefits, as seen in the following examples:

“It *can* be really healthy as well” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

“I have been trying to up my protein recently and quinoa is *considered* to be a complete protein which is amazing” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“Heating the fresh orange juice *might* break down some of the Vitamin C content” (Romy London UK).

This choice of language is likely used to take the onus off of content creators, as they are never directly implying that the information they have supplied is indeed fact. This in turn may reduce the impression of credibility in their content.

In contrast to the ‘About Me’ samples, which all scored near the SM average, authenticity scores were lower overall in recipe post samples, with only one recipe post (2c) scoring above the SM average of 55.66, with a score of 73.4. This could be attributed to the more factual, straight-forward nature of presenting recipe information. Some content creators

share personal stories in their recipe posts, which explains those posts that did obtain higher scores.

Emotional tone was overall higher for recipe post samples than 'About Me' samples. All recipe post samples exceeded the average scores for PSW (43.61) and SM (63.35), with scores ranging between 85 (2b) and 99 (2c, 3b, 3c, 4b, 4c, 5c and 6b). Consistent with the scores for positive and negative emotions under 'Traditional LIWC Dimensions', this indicates that content creators of vegan blogs may use positive language in order to gain trust and understanding of the ease and benefits of veganism, thereby increasing trust and asserting an air of authority.

**Table 1.4- Summary Variable Scores for Recipe Post Samples**

Sample	Summary Variables			
	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone
Average SM	55.92	55.45	55.66	63.35
Average PSW	92.57	68.17	24.82	43.61
1b	59.3	32.3	32.9	98.6
1c	58.9	37.6	55.1	94
2b	76.3	42.6	42.5	85
2c	47.6	21	73.4	99
3b	96.5	38.7	10.8	99
3c	45.9	46.5	15.5	99
4b	64.5	52.4	14.6	99
4c	69.5	50	9.7	99
5b	59.3	39.5	26.4	97.9
5c	72.2	62.1	30.9	99
6b	63.1	54.3	21.9	99
6c	65.2	56.5	12.5	91.1

## 4.2 Discourse Analysis in Social Psychology

Five codes emerged from the discourse analysis of the blog samples: avoiding factual statements, making factual statements, referring to experience, referring to lack of experience and sharing personal stories. These five codes were underpinned by two interpretive repertoires: a knowledge based approach to providing content, and an intuitive approach to providing content. Content creators use a blend of the knowledge based and

intuitive based interpretive repertoires, based on what they are discussing in a specific post. Potter and Wetherell (1987) explain that different repertoires are used in different situations, and that individuals might call upon a different repertoire to suit the same need at a different point in time. If the knowledge or experience of a content creator changes, then the repertoires they use in the creation of their content might change, too.

Elements of cognitive authority and affective authority were also recognised through analysis.

#### 4.2.1 Interpretive Repertoire 1: Knowledge Based Approach

Within the 'About Me' and the recipe post samples of the blogs, the content creators used terminology and phrasing that invoked an air of authority, and that presented their content in a credible way. Content creators shared information in a factual manner, made statements with confidence and referred to experience in order to imply a degree of knowledge on the topic of their posts. Four of the blogs were devoid of any disclaimer stating a lack of formal education or training in the field of health, food science or nutrition. Two of the blogs contained disclaimers stating that they were not certified nutritionists, with one of these stating that the blogger was in the process of becoming a naturopathic nutritional therapist. However, it is unclear when the statement was made, and if that blogger was still in that process, was now fully qualified but had not updated the 'About Me' page, or if they had stopped their training, so for the purposes of this study it is assumed that they had some education, but that all content creators were uncertified. As advised by Wood and Kroger (2000, p.91) assessing absence can be useful in discourse analysis. In this case, the absence of disclaimers regarding lack of training could be because the content creators simply chose to leave that information out, or, as assumed, because they lack qualifications and do not wish to draw attention to that fact. Content creators utilise their understanding of health and their personal experience in order to relay a sense of knowledge on the topic of vegan health and nutrition.

#### ***Making factual statements***

There is a degree to which we can accept information as common knowledge. This was observed in the way in which some of the content creators made claims referring to health:

“[Appletiser] also added some healthy 1-of-your-5-a-day to this dish” (Romy London UK).

“I love pairing this dish with a refreshing drink that also adds 1-of-your-5 a day” (Romy London UK).

“It's a salad that can be whipped up fast and enjoyed whenever as its healthy & guilt-free” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“This super-tasty vegan chickpea curry is easy, healthy and absolutely delicious!” (Veggie Desserts).

In these examples, the content creators make claims that can be accepted as accurate, without a need for evidence or formal training to back them up. It can be accepted as common knowledge that people should consume five fruits a day, that salad can be healthy and guilt-free and that chick peas are healthy. In these instances, it is not the information itself that is important to assess, it is the presentation of the information. The confidence with which the information is presented is a key influencing factor in giving the content creators an air of cognitive authority.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, content creators present information with bold claims of nutrition and health, which may require further support. This was seen when the information provided made specific health or nutrition claims:

“Being vegan its hard to get a substantial amount of protein unlike meat eaters. This is because there is more protein in meat, fish, dairy products and poultry than vegetables, grains, soya...Ect.” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“With protein, fibre, vitamins and nutrients, there are a lot of health benefits of chickpeas” (Veggie Desserts).



“[Quinoa] it's also high in vitamins and nutrients, great for a vegan diet!” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“Buddha bowls...contain a bit of every macro, ensuring you get a healthy, non-complicated, well balanced meal” (Everything’s Peachy).

“A lovely combination of starchy carbs, protein, fibre and healthy fats” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

These statements contain claims that are less likely to qualify as common knowledge, and may be inaccurate. Stating that vegans struggle to consume adequate protein, and that eating certain foods will provide users with the correct balance of nutrients and vitamins are questionable claims for non-professional and untrained individuals to make. These claims are not followed by links to external sources or references to the original source of the information. As with the previous statements, the confidence and factual manner of presenting this information gives it an air of authority. This, combined with references to experience, is one way in which content creators of vegan blogs present their information in a credible light.

### ***Referring to Experience***

Wilson (1983) explains that having authority in a subject and being an expert in that subject are not synonymous. According to Wilson (1983), an expert in a particular field may not be recognised as such, and those who are authorities to others may only impact those individuals to a certain degree. In the case of vegan blogs, the user group visiting them may not know anything about the vegan lifestyle, vegan nutrition, or vegan recipes. In these scenarios, the content creators of vegan blogs become cognitive authorities to these individuals, whereas they are likely not cognitive authorities for professional nutritionists or dietitians.

The content creators of these blogs presented their experience in various ways. Some referred to the length of time they had been vegan:

“Both my partner and myself are vegans, and have been enjoying this way of eating for over a year now!” (Made by Luci).

“I have discovered my love for cooking after going vegan in 2014 and have since spent more time in my kitchen than anywhere else” (Romy London UK).

By pointing out to users that they have been practicing a vegan lifestyle for over a year, they are relaying to their audience that they have found success in leading a vegan lifestyle. This implies that they have managed to cook, eat and write vegan recipes as well as maintain at least an adequate level of health and quality of life.

Some referred to the benefits they had experienced after converting to a vegan lifestyle:

“Through becoming vegan, I have found a new interest for healthy eating” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“I am enjoying the benefits so far. I have lost weight, I have more energy during the day and my skin is also healthier. My hair is now recovering from that period of time when I was deficient in protein” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“I’m still not 100% eczema free and IBS free, but they’re both so much better than they once were. I get the odd flare up every now and then, but no where near as bad as I used to” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

By implying that their interest in nutrition, their weight loss and their decreased health concerns are a direct result of following a vegan lifestyle, content creators infer a level of expertise by having directly experienced these phenomena. However, following a vegan lifestyle may have only been a factor in these events. Vegans can follow unhealthy diets, and weight loss and improvements in health could be the result of multiple lifestyle factors, including increased exercise and improved sleep. The insinuation that becoming vegan will improve one’s overall health, backed with personal evidence, is how content creators create an impression of authority, and in turn how they present their content as credible.

Some content creators referred to the work they do in the vegan community, such as writing, cooking and educating:

“3 time award winning vegan recipe, beauty, advice, lifestyle blog and FOOD BLOGGER OF THE YEAR 2017” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“When not cooking, photographing or writing about food...” (Everything’s Peachy).

“I’m...an award-winning top UK food blogger, cookbook author, magazine columnist and freelance food writer” (Veggie Desserts).

In addition to showcasing their expertise, when content creators share that they cook, write about, and photograph food, they are letting users know that their skills are in demand. Whether professionally or as a hobby, they have enough of a skill base and following for their services to be requested, which implies expertise and a positive reputation in the field. According to Colucci and Cho (2014) members of Generation Y find that when content creators are active in the field in which their blog is based, they are more likely to be a trustworthy source of information.

Referring to the length of time they’ve spent as a vegan, the health benefits they’ve undergone and struggles they’ve overcome, as well as mentioning work they do in the field contribute to the air of authority. These references to experience are also ways in which content creators of vegan blogs present their information as credible. As explained by Savolainen (2011) content is interpreted by users as credible when the information is useful, accurate and specific, though in this study it is unclear if users verify the accuracy of the information they read on vegan blogs with reputable sources, or if they found the information useful. If the content creators have imbued themselves as authorities on the topic of vegan health and nutrition, then those users who have accepted them as authorities are more likely to readily accept their information as credible (Wilson, 1983; Savolainen, 2011). This is especially true when the content creators have experience to back up their claims, as experience may give an impression of expertise to users, and expertise in turn

one of the influencing factors of cognitive authority (Wilson, 1983; Lankes, 2008; Rieh, 2002; Rieh, 2010; Fritch and Cromwell, 2002; Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953). By referencing experience, the content creators do not directly state that they are experts, rather, it is implied by insinuation and the absence of disclaimers stating that they are unqualified.

When making factual statements, it is demonstrated that the confidence with which the content creators make their claims contributes to creating an air of authority. This confidence paired with reference to experience as a vegan, writing recipes, cooking and personal accounts of improved health and weight loss contribute to the credibility of the claims.

#### 4.2.2 Interpretive Repertoire 2: Intuitive Approach

When unable to refer to accepted common knowledge or knowledge gained through experience, content creators rely on an intuitive approach to relaying their information. Intuitive is defined as “using or based on what one feels to be true even without conscious reasoning; instinctive” (Dictionary Intuitive, 2019). Vegan content creators can be observed to use their instinctive understanding of health and nutrition to guide the content they post. By sharing stories that portray them in a potentially vulnerable light such as admitting a lack of experience, or relaying memories of times of struggle, content creators are sharing with users that their knowledge has been gained through trial and error, and following what feels right.

#### ***Avoiding factual statements***

In contrast to the confidence with which the common knowledge statements were made (i.e. salads are healthy), when making some health claims content creators avoid a confident, firm position:

“I have been trying to up my protein recently and quinoa is *considered* to be a complete protein which is amazing” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

*“My personal view is that it’s better to gain our daily fats from whole, minimally processed ingredients that come as ‘package’ foods (meaning they contain other nutrients and macros besides fat)” (Everything’s Peachy).*

*“It can be really healthy as well” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).*

The hesitant wording of the above examples (i.e. ‘considered’, ‘my personal view’ and ‘can be’) insinuates that the statements made by the content creators are only possibilities, not facts. Rather than informing users that what they are saying is accurate, in these cases the content creators are stepping out of the authoritative role. By doing so, if users were to challenge their statements, they could point out that they never claimed that these statements were accurate, and that ultimately, it is up to the user to decide what to believe. This is an example of the concept of footing, wherein the content creators are simply passing on someone else’s information, which serves the purposes of distancing themselves from accountability to its accuracy (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p.10). Though this style of presenting information with a lack of confidence was observed to a lesser extent than presenting information with confidence, it may decrease the impression of credibility of the content.

### ***Referring to lack of experience***

In addition to highlighting their experience with veganism, content creators also draw attention to their lack of experience and knowledge inadequacies:

*“I was not a child who cooked. Nor was I a child who liked food of all types. I certainly didn’t develop a love it as a teenager, either...no, my love of food and cooking was a slow burner” (Made by Luci).*

*“I’ve actually never been that knowledgeable with Singaporean food” (Romy London UK).*

*“I’m not a dietician/nutritionist (yet!) but I’m well on my way to becoming a fully qualified naturopathic nutritional therapist and I’m still learning about food and nutrition” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).*

“Since then, I’ve had ups (parsnip and lavender cupcakes) and downs (beetroot custard... shudder)” (Veggie Desserts).

By acknowledging their lack of expertise, content creators showcase their ability to learn from trial and error, and to acquire knowledge as they themselves practice cooking and developing recipes. By mentioning their lack of experience, content creators allow users to see that they gain knowledge through experience. When the content creator of Made by Luci explained that their interest in food and cooking came on slowly, they emphasised that it is a passion, rather than a profession. This exemplifies that what they lack in formal training, they make up for in genuine interest. The content creator of Romy London UK confesses their lack of knowledge on Singaporean food in a recipe post that instructs the user on how to make a Singaporean dish. This indicates that they conducted some form of research in order to create the recipe. The examples from Blogs 5 and 6 exhibit that despite lacking expertise, the content creators are in the process of actively learning.

Despite drawing attention to lack of experience, these statements contribute to the creation of an air of authority, as they demonstrate that the content creators started from a baseline of little knowledge but have accumulated enough combined knowledge and experience to be in a position to confidently and publicly share information with others.

### ***Sharing personal stories***

The examples of lack of experience also function as a means to make content creators relatable to users, rather than permeating themselves as examples of living unattainable vegan lifestyles. Sharing personal stories has a similar effect. Colucci and Cho (2014) found that when assessing blogs, members of Generation Y value an ability to connect with and relate to a content creator’s personal qualities. When content creators share their struggles and the challenges they’ve overcome, they allow their users to see that they are not perfect, and they make veganism seem accessible.

Content creators make themselves relatable by sharing that they do not constantly maintain a perfectly healthy vegan diet:

“We like to indulge with chocolate and such occasionally too – we’re only human!” (Made by Luci).

“I try to be ‘good’ most days, but I do let my hair down every so often” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

Phrasing that suggests the content creators behave like the general population (i.e. ‘we’re only human’ and ‘I do let my hair down’) makes them seem like a real person, rather than a social media or internet celebrity.

Some refer to their struggles with body weight and health:

“I was also a pretty chubby child and teenager, to be perfectly honest” (Made by Luci).

“I was inspired to make this life change after I became unwell a few years back and was told I have food intolerances. The intolerance’s I have are wheat, gluten, yeast, high sugars & cows milk” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“I started piling on the weight and my IBS became ten times worse” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

By sharing the struggles that they have overcome by choosing a vegan lifestyle, content creators validate the information that they share, as they are able to demonstrate improvements to their health and well-being. While there might be multiple factors that contribute to the improved health of the content creators that users are unaware of, what users do know is that becoming vegan may have positive effects on their weight and health concerns. Not only do content creators give users a chance to relate to the struggles that they have undergone, but they allow them to see evidence of the positive effects of veganism by relating the outcomes that they have experienced.

Content creators also mention their family when explaining their reasons for choosing a recipe, or why they were inspired to create a certain dish:

“I asked my OH what kind of soup he wanted, and this was his request” (Made by Luci).

“The idea for this soup actually goes back to my uncle, who made this soup for Christmas a couple of years ago” (Romy London UK).

“The hubby is more of a savoury person in general and prefers savoury breakfasts, so on weekend mornings he takes over the kitchen” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

“I’m a mum of two, so I try to give my children healthy, fresh food” (Veggie Desserts).

Sharing intimate details humanises content creators, and provides further opportunities for users to create a connection with the content creators. Content creators also demonstrate that it is possible to maintain healthy relationships and have a family while following a vegan lifestyle, which may contribute to the impression of authenticity that they emit in their content. However, further research is required on the perceptions of users to this information.

### 4.3 Thematic Analysis

Themes were identified by reading the text and drawing on the concepts and ideas that were being implied by the content creators. Although initially keywords were the focus, as analysis progressed topics emerged that were consistent throughout the samples and which tied into the interpretive repertoires and codes observed with DASP, as well as scores and findings from LIWC analysis. The main themes identified in these blogs were: intent to build a connection with users, making the blog personal and instilling a positive quality into the writing. Using the approach to thematic analysis outlined in Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012, pp.10-11) the themes were assessed to determine what the content creators were attempting to convey with their choices, implicitly or explicitly, of wording and phrasing.



#### 4.3.1 Intent to Build a Connection

Intent to build a connection was observed in each of the blogs. This is seen when content creators prompt users to share their opinions and feedback on the recipe in the comments section:

“What did you guys think of this recipe? Let me know by leaving a comment below, or sharing your version with me on Instagram” (Everything’s Peachy).

“I hope you enjoy my recipes. I am very much looking forward to interacting with you on here (via comments), Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

“Did you make this vegan curry recipe? Please let me know how it turned out for you! Leave a comment and star rating below and share a picture with the hashtag #veggiedesserts” (Veggie Desserts).

Sometimes content creators asked users questions in relation to the post:

“Don’t forget to let me know what your favourite combinations are in the comments below” (Made by Luci).

“Do you have any odd food preferences?” (Made by Luci).

“On that note – if you know of anything I should definitely check out whilst I’m there, or have any advice on Netflix shows to watch on the 13 hrs flight, send me a message” (Romy London UK).

One of the content creators simply stated that they wanted their ‘About Me’ to help users get to know them and understand their intentions:

“I thought I would write this post, so you can get to know me a little better, and understand or maybe relate to why I have chosen to make this blog” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

What can be derived from this theme of attempting to connect with users is that content creators intend to build a foundation of trust and relatability with those who visit their blogs. They want them to interact, ask questions and share their own experiences. This demonstrates that content creators attempt to engage with users as a means to create an impression of trust and authenticity, in addition to sharing personal stories.

#### 4.3.2 Making the Content Personal

Another theme that presented itself through the narratives of the blogs was the effort to make the content personal. This was observed when content creators used terminology such as ‘I love’ and ‘personally’, indicating that what they have shared is their own opinion, and authentic to their personality. This is seen in the following examples:

“Personally, I’m not biased against any soup. I love them all equally” (Made by Luci).

“Personally, my body always struggles with quick weather and climate changes” (Romy London UK).

“The main thing I love about this sweet & sour recipe...” (Everything’s Peachy).

“My love of vegetable desserts started with the cake for my son’s first birthday. It was to be his first taste of chocolate, and although I wasn’t going to begrudge him that, I wanted it to be a bit better for him” (Veggie Desserts).

By conveying a sense of personal opinion to their users, content creators add authenticity to their posts and build a foundation for trust. Colucci and Cho (2014) observed similar findings from their interviews with Generation Y users, who reported that when content creators included personal experience and perspectives in their posts, they found the content more authentic.

#### 4.3.3 Adopting a Positive Approach to Writing

The third theme identified as strongly recurring throughout each blog was positivity. By using a positive approach in their writing, content creators demonstrate that veganism is easy, that there are many options available and that anyone can do it. This is powerful in combating outdated views that vegans are ascetics, as described by Cole and Morgan (2011) in their study on the discourses of veganism in UK national newspapers. Instead, the content creators of these blogs advise users that veganism is healthy, enjoyable and fulfilling:

“This salad is absolutely divine, fresh and extremely tasty!” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“I believe that balance is the key - and that everything is possible on a vegan diet: whether you are a vegan body builder, simply into all the healthy food or like to stick to the comfort foods that you've always known - there's no missing out!” (Romy London UK).

“Through becoming vegan, I have found a new interest for healthy eating and different types of food, which I would have never have known about otherwise” (The Little Blog of Vegan).

“I have an obsession with all things natural, vegan and cruelty-free, and am on a mission to show people how awesome eating plant-based can be” (Everything’s Peachy).

“I slowly started changing my diet and eating habits and slowly started noticing a difference” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

“Healthy, wholesome food can be simple, quick and tasty! It’s not about living on salads and fruit...It’s all about finding a healthy balance and enjoying food and life :D” (Nadia’s Healthy Kitchen).

“This super-tasty vegan chickpea curry is easy, healthy and absolutely delicious! The tasty curry sauce is so easy to make and takes just 20 minutes in one pot. Perfect for a midweek meal” (Veggie Desserts).

This positive approach to presenting vegan content is important in conveying a sense of ease and approachability to veganism. Cole and Morgan (2011, p.143) found that veganism is often viewed to be a difficult lifestyle to follow. When content creators offer easy and flavourful recipes, they are demonstrating that being vegan is not difficult, thereby creating trust in the information they present. Using positive language also assists in moving away from the stereotypes of vegans as aggressive and operating from a place of hostility, which, according to Cole and Morgan (2011, p.146) is a view that non-vegans can have of vegan activists. By presenting veganism in a positive light, content creators contribute to creating an air of authority, as they can be viewed to have experience in maintaining a successful and fulfilling vegan life, which in turn increases their credibility. In addition to the words and phrasing that are present to imply the theme of positivity, the absence of negativity is also influential in establishing a positive online environment.

#### 4.4 Summary of Analysis

Consistent across LIWC analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis was the use of confidence, terminology that removes the content creator from responsibility, sharing of personal stories and information, and creating a positive view of veganism.

LIWC analysis conveyed that 'About Me' samples contained high use of I-words, which indicates a narrative style sharing of personal stories and experiences. While I-words were lower than the SM average in the majority of the recipe post samples, this is accounted for by the instructive nature of recipes. While personal information is shared by content creators in recipe posts, they are in general more instructional. LIWC analysis also found that positive emotion scores were similar or higher than the SM average in most cases for both 'About Me' samples and recipe post samples, and that negative emotion scores were below the SM average for all samples. DASP further unveiled that content creators share personal stories as part of an intuitive based approach to conveying information. Thematic analysis found that content creators attempt to connect with users, make content personal, and aim to present content in a positive way. Together, this information indicates that content creators use personal stories within the 'About Me' sections of their blogs as well as within recipe posts to create a connection with users. By sharing personal stories, content

creators offer a chance for users to connect with and relate to them, and to understand that they too have overcome challenges and obstacles. Content creators share stories of struggles with body weight and personal health, which provides users with an opportunity to see that the information they share is useful and effective, thereby establishing themselves as trustworthy. By sharing that they chose veganism as a way to lose weight and improve their health, and by providing users with an opportunity to relate to and connect with them, content creators create a sense of authenticity in their posts, improves trustworthiness. However, user reactions to authenticity and efforts to build trust were not analysed in this study.

Referencing experience, whether in terms of years spent as a vegan, contributions to the vegan community, or overcoming health and personal challenges plays a role in the presentation of credibility in vegan blogs. Being active in the community through writing, contributing to magazines and cookbooks, as well as winning awards, gives the impression that these content creators are valued by others in the industry. Vegan blog content creators take on the role of cognitive authorities when they become the source for vegan health, nutrition and recipe information to users who do not themselves possess the information. Content creator's use of experience to add insight to their information was also observed in the cognitive process scores of the 'About Me' samples, which demonstrated that content creators are able to gain practical knowledge from their experiences of being a vegan. Although seven of the twelve scores for recipe post samples were below the SM average for cognitive process, this may be due to the differing purpose of 'About Me' sections of blogs compared to the purpose of recipe posts. In addition to referring to their experience, content creators present their information with confidence, which conveys to users that the information is accurate and useful, regardless of whether or not the information is indeed accurate. As confidence in writing was observed more often throughout the samples than lack of confidence, it was determined that content creators in vegan blogs rely on confidence as a tool to portray their information with an air of authority, which is further backed up by their references to experience, as it implies a certain level of success at navigating vegan cooking and nutrition. However, there are occasions when content creators avoid a confident stance in the presentation of their information, which serves to take the responsibility for credibility off of the content creators.

The greatest similarity between each of the blogs was a positive stance on veganism, and a welcoming quality in the presentation of content. There were no cases in which the content creators spoke negatively of those who choose to eat animal products. While each blog had a focus on health, different approaches to veganism were present. Everything's Peachy had an ethical and environmental stance, Made by Luci and Nadia's Healthy kitchen had a focus on weight loss, and The Little Blog of Vegan referred to her love for animals. While all the content creators were female, some had children, some mentioned significant others, and others did not refer to their relationship status. The content creators had varying approaches to writing, and differing degrees of experience as vegans.

## 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Research Question 1

What methods do content creators of vegan blogs use to create an air of authority in the presentation of their blog content?

The research uncovered several methods used by content creators to present their information with an air of cognitive authority. The main methods derived from the analysis were writing with confidence, using a positive approach to writing and referring to personal experiences.

Writing with confidence was observed through LIWC analysis and DASP. Clout scores of LIWC analysis demonstrated that content creators write with confidence in the majority of their posts, though there are cases where they lack confidence (4.1.2, 4.1.4). This is consistent with DASP findings that showed content creators mainly using firm, concrete language, while sometimes using hesitant language (4.2.1, 4.2.2). Writing with confidence gives the information they are presenting an air of authority, regardless of the accuracy of the information, and regardless of whether or not the content creators are aware that the information may be inaccurate. While hesitant, non-committal language and the associated lack of confidence decreases sense of authority, it was observed to a lesser extent than presence of confidence was.

Positivity in writing was discerned with LIWC analysis and thematic analysis. LIWC analysis showed consistently high scores of positive emotions and emotional tone for both 'About Me' samples and recipe post samples (4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4). Thematic analysis determined that instilling a positive quality into writing was visible in each of the blogs studied (4.3.3). A positive writing style, as demonstrated by encouraging, welcoming language and an upbeat persona, indicates efforts by the content creators to shed a positive light on veganism. This imbues a sense of trust in the benefits of following a vegan lifestyle, which in turn contributes to the creation of an air of authority.

Referring to personal experience was viewed in LIWC analysis, DASP and thematic analysis. LIWC analysis conveyed that use of I-words was higher than the SM average in all 'About Me' samples, indicating a high degree of first person narrative information sharing (4.1.1). DASP demonstrated that as part of a knowledge based interpretive repertoire, content creators make reference to the amount of time they have spent as a vegan, the health benefits they have experienced, and their contributions to the vegan community (4.2.1, 4.2.2). As part of the intuitive approach interpretive repertoire, content creators share personal stories on how being a vegan has helped them overcome challenges and obstacles (4.2.2). Under this interpretive repertoire, content creators also refer to their lack of experience, showing users that they have gained knowledge throughout their experience as a vegan to the point where they are confident in publicly sharing information. Thematic analysis identified that building a connection with users and making the blog personal were recurring themes (4.3.1, 4.3.2). By relaying their personal stories of improved health, weight loss, overcoming challenges, as well as their involvement in the vegan and health communities, content creators use experience, despite lack of formal education or professional qualifications, to create an impression of cognitive authority.

## 5.2 Research Question 2

How does the presentation of credibility of user generated content in vegan blogs differ from academic or institutional sources?

The research uncovered several ways in which the presentation of credibility in vegan blogs differs from academic or institutional sources. Vegan blog content creators have a tendency to use confidence, a positive approach to writing and personal experience to present their information as credible. This differs considerably from methods used by academic or institutional sources, which include providing proof of formal education, professional qualifications, and lists of sources used in the creation of the content (Neal and McKenzie, 2011; Fergie, Hunt and Hilton, 2013).

As with creating an air of authority, confidence plays a role in presenting information as credible. This is due in part to the fact that credibility influences authority: if the information



is found to lack credibility, users will not view the content creator as an authority on the topic (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Clout scores from LIWC analysis (4.1.2, 4.1.4) combined with findings from DASP showed a mix of confidence and lack of confidence in writing, though confidence was more prevalent. Confidence was demonstrated in DASP under the knowledge based approach interpretive repertoire, which, similar to evidence for creating authority, showed a use of factual statements (4.2.1). The use of factual statements in an authoritative manner has the effect of presenting the information as credible. Countering this, under the intuitive approach interpretive repertoire, content creators were observed to use hesitant language (4.2.2), insinuating a lack of confidence, which may indicate that they are actively avoiding making claims that the information is credible.

A tendency to write in a positive style was observed with LIWC analysis and thematic analysis, as described in the explanation of how content creators create an air of authority. Positivity also contributes to the degree to which users might view the information as useful, which is an influencing factor in credibility (Savolainen, 2011). As LIWC analysis and thematic analysis determined that instilling a positive quality into the content was visible in each of the blogs, this allows the content creators to be observed as possessing an ability to maintain a happy, balanced life while sustaining a vegan lifestyle. This implies that the information they share is accurate and useful, and therefore credible.

Referring to personal experience to imbue credibility was viewed in LIWC analysis, DASP and thematic analysis. Using I-words, as depicted by LIWC analysis shows that content creators utilise personal stories, referencing their successes in leading a vegan life (4.1.1, 4.1.3). LIWC analysis also demonstrated a high degree of cognitive processing, indicating use of experience and personal interpretation of information in creation of content (4.1.1, 4.1.3). This was further supported by DASP, under the intuitive approach interpretive repertoire (4.2.2). The information shared in personal stories implies expertise and presents content in a credible light, despite the fact that the content creators do not directly claim to be experts in the field of vegan health and nutrition. Without formal education and professional qualifications to back up the accuracy of their information, content creators of vegan blogs rely heavily on experience to present their content as credible. The experiences are told through personal stories and are supported by evidence of successful outcomes, implying

expertise. Involvement in the vegan community as evidenced by DASP under the knowledge based interpretive repertoire (4.2.1) further contributes to the reputation of the content creators, which is an important factor in credibility (Colucci and Cho, 2014).

### 5.3 Research Question 3

What role do personal stories related in 'About Me' sections or within posts play in creating an impression of trust and authenticity in vegan blogs?

Personal stories are utilised by content creators to share autobiographical information, their motivations for leading a vegan lifestyle, the inspiration behind recipes, challenges they have overcome and the health benefits they have experienced as a result of being vegan. These stories create an impression of trust and authenticity by providing opportunities for users to relate to and make personal connections with the content creators. Content creators allow users to build connections by providing anecdotal evidence as to the positive effects of following a vegan lifestyle, and by showcasing the ways in which they have gained a positive reputation in the vegan community.

The narratives used by content creators were observed by DASP to focus on overcoming challenges (4.2.2). By allowing users to see how they have struggled in the past, content creators provide opportunities for users facing similar struggles to build a connection based on trust with the blog. Thematic analysis demonstrated that all content creators made attempts to build a connection with users (4.3.1). This was evidenced by content creators directly opening dialogues with users and asking them to make comments or get in touch. This is a method used to engage with users as a means to create an impression of trust and authenticity.

Within the stories, LIWC analysis found an average to high rate of positive language, and an overall low rate of negative language when compared to the average scores for SM (4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4). This positivity was observed through thematic analysis to be a common concept underlying all of the blogs (4.3.3). Positivity is used to make the vegan lifestyle seem easy, attainable and enjoyable, and adds a sense of authenticity to the content creators, as

they are sharing how their experiences as vegans have been rewarding. As negative language is associated with deceptive information (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010) the high use of positive language is indicative of honest statements. LIWC scores for authenticity were higher than the average for SM in all blogs (4.1.2, 4.1.4), further supporting the authenticity observed in the content creators' personal stories.

Referring to their involvement in the vegan community as observed with DASP under the experience based approach interpretive repertoire (4.2.1) makes content creators reputable. When content creators refer to their experience as writers, photographers and contributors to books and magazines, they imply that they have a positive reputation in the field. While this does not mean that their information is accurate, as anyone can self-publish a book or share photographs, it does build a foundation for a trustworthy reputation, and demonstrates authenticity, as they practice what they preach.

While these methods were recognised by the research as ways in which content creators create an impression of trust and authenticity, it is important to note that the perceptions and reactions of users to the content was not a focus of this study.

## 5.4 Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The sample was small, and the content from each sample selected for analysis was limited in size. A larger sample, or a greater degree of content from each sample, would be beneficial for generalising the findings of this study. While the samples selected were those determined to meet the criteria for the study, greater time to conduct a more in-depth search may uncover additional eligible samples.

Analysis of the photographs present in the blogs would further add to the interpretation of the content and assist in answering the research questions. Photographs were originally intended to be included in the analysis, but were excluded after the study commenced in order to allow for more intensive focus on the textual content.

At the outset of the study and during initial collection of the samples, the goal was to use Taporware, an online textual analysis tool, for analysis of the content. However, when it came time to look further into the use of Taporware, the URL for the website previously used to access the program produced an error message. After several checks in the following days which yielded the same result, Taporware was discarded. Use of NVivo, a software program used for qualitative textual analysis, was also considered, but was excluded in order to allow for a more in-depth focus on discourse analysis. The free online version of LIWC2015 was used. Using the full version was considered, at least for a portion of the samples, but purchase was required to access the full version.

It may not be appropriate to generalise the findings of this study to other countries, as the samples were all from the UK. However, parallels can be assumed between the UK and other developed nations.

There was potential for bias on the part of the researcher, who follows a vegan lifestyle, as well as restrictions due to the novice status of the researcher.

## 5.5 Future Research and Recommendations

Future studies should look at a larger sample of blogs from within the UK, and look at more content within those samples. It would be valuable to contact content creators in order to gain insight into their intentions for using blogs, to obtain information regarding their training, education, and professional experience, and to ask questions that are not easily answered by assessing their posts. Speaking to content creators would also be valuable for following up on information provided in 'About Me' sections, such as when a content creator states that they are working towards a qualification. This could be done through questionnaires or interviews. Analysing the comments sections of blogs has the potential to provide insight into the reactions that users have to the content, which may assist in understanding what information users question, and what they find informative. Analysing comments or interviewing users would also assist in understanding the reactions of users to personal stories, and their perceptions on the trustworthiness and authenticity of the content creators. Future research should look at the demographics of the content creators,

as well as the users, in order to help those who value this channel of information think critically about how they interpret the content.

## 5.6 Final Thoughts

The consistent findings of sharing personal stories to build trust, imbuing positivity into the writing and writing with confidence were strong factors in answering the research questions as best as could be done with the approaches taken in this study. Trust and credibility were found to be influential in creating authority, and the relationship between these factors indicates that they are important aspects of vegan blog content.

With veganism becoming more prevalent as a dietary and lifestyle choice, this information will be useful for members of the vegan community who may search for vegan health and nutrition information online. It is therefore important that information professionals are able to provide these users with the tools and knowledge to disseminate the information they come into contact with. This information will be useful in particular to those information professionals who work in health care and in public libraries, as they are likely to be helping researchers who are in need of vegan information for patients, or for the vegan individuals themselves.

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# Appendices


## Appendix 1- Screenshot of Made by Luci Blog




Search 

RECIPES ▾ REVIEWS ▾ OTHER ▾


### MY TOP PICKS FOR VEGAN EASTER EGGS (2019)



Can you believe that **four years** have passed since my original [vegan Easter eggs](#) post, back in 2015? A lot has changed since then! Never mind my own personal life – the vegan world has gotten much, much bigger. I can buy a vegan sausage roll from Greggs. I can buy a pizza with vegan cheese from Papa John's. I can buy vegan protein cookies from My Protein. So, are you really



Hi, I'm Luci, I'm a plant-based food lover from the UK. I post up anything that I love: from healthy dinners, to not so healthy baking adventures... Plus the occasional review, and the odd ramble.



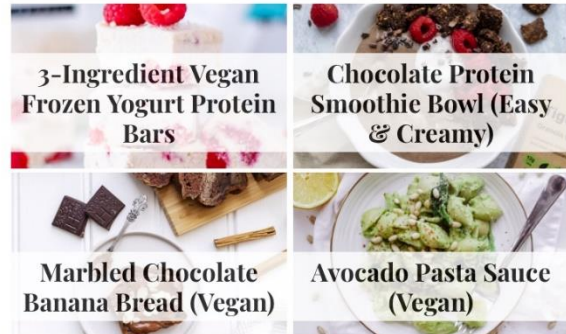
## Appendix 2- Screenshot of Romy London UK Blog

*RomyLondonUK*

### RECENT POSTS



### YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



### POPULAR POSTS



## Appendix 3- Screenshot of The Little Blog of Vegan

# THE LITTLE BLOG OF VEGAN

BY HOLLY JADE

Search The Little Blog of Vegan...


WEDNESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2015

### Pink Protein Packed FlapJacks recipe

Healthy Vegan Flapjacks, packed with Protein, Strawberries, Lime, coconut and Spice..


What more would you want!

Vegan, Dairy-free, Egg-free, Wheat-free, Gluten-free, Yeast-free, Gullit-free



READ MORE »

MEET THE AWARD WINNING OWNER



Hi, my name is Holly Jade and welcome to 'The Little Blog of Vegan'. A 3 time award winning vegan recipe, beauty, advice, lifestyle blog and FOOD **BLOGGER OF THE YEAR 2017**. I have a passion for food photography & styling, raw baking and all things pretty! All of my recipes are 100% vegan and delicious, beauty 100% cruelty-free


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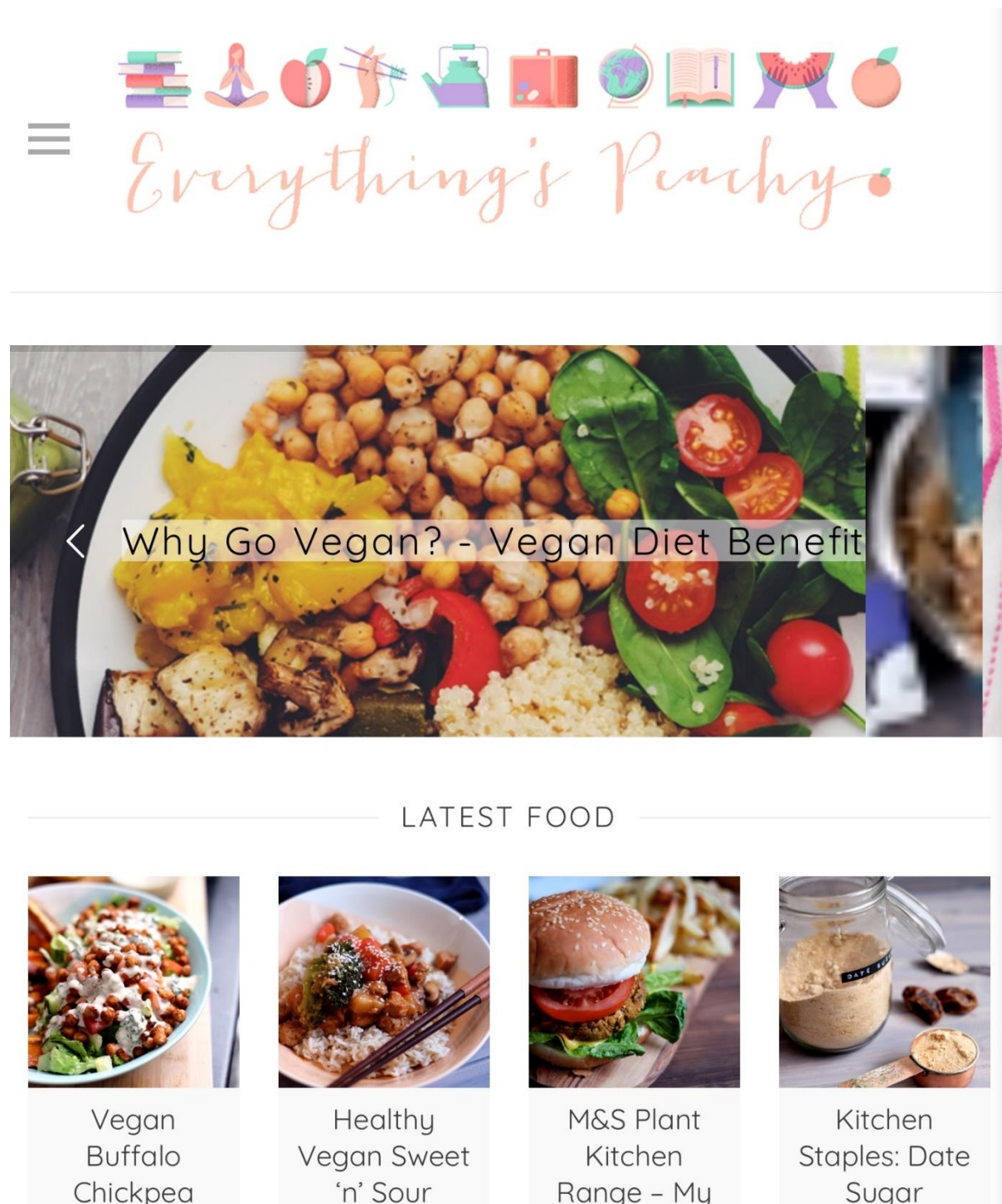
Email address...

I AM THE FRONT COVER OF VEGAN FOOD + LIVING CHRISTMAS 2018

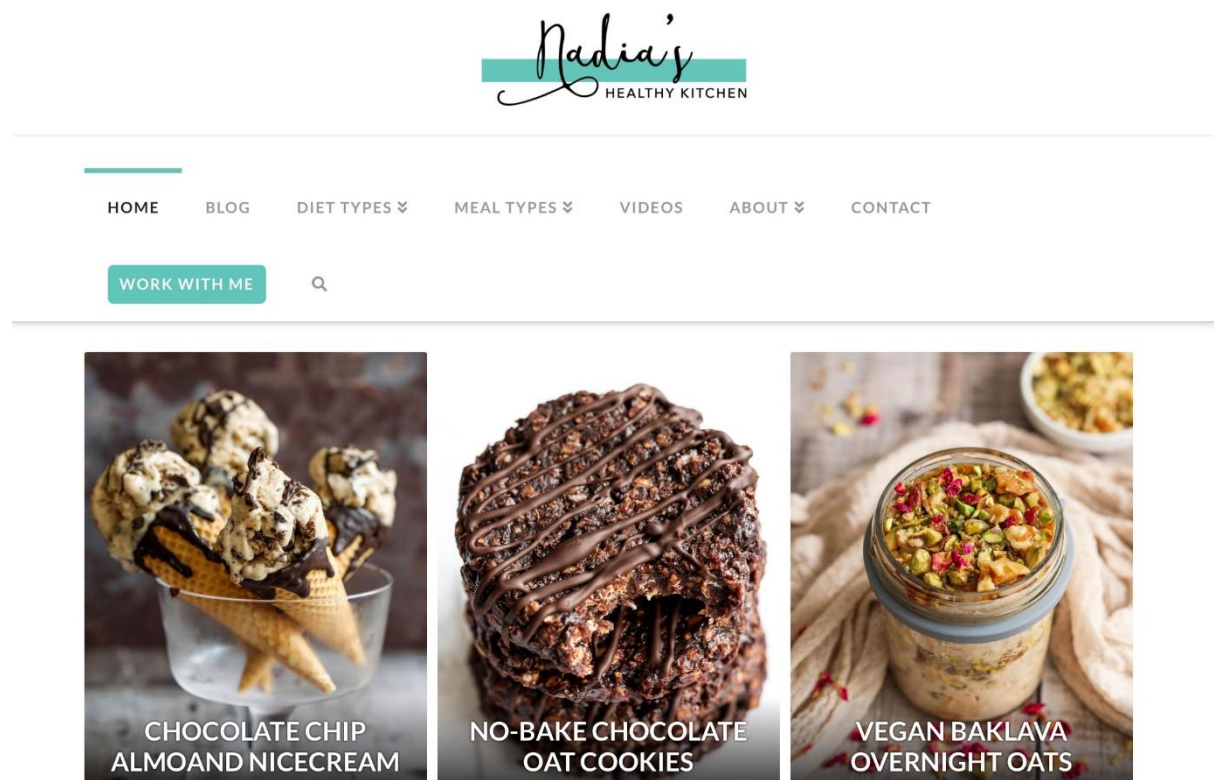




## Appendix 4- Screenshot of Everything's Peachy Blog



## Appendix 5- Screenshot of Nadia's Healthy Kitchen Blog



## Appendix 6- Screenshot of Veggie Desserts Blog

### veggie desserts




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HOME   RECIPE INDEX   VEGAN RECIPES   COOKBOOK   ABOUT ME   TRAVEL   GIVEAWAYS

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#### VEGAN MEALS







Looking for tasty vegan meals? You've come to the right place! I have loads of easy and delicious recipes. Be sure to try my [Red Lentil Dahl](#), [Mushroom Pasta](#) with Squash and Sage and [Vegan Peanut Stew](#) - a flavourful (and easy!) West African inspired dish.




MANGO SALAD WITH  
LIME GINGER  
DRESSING

GREEN SALAD WITH  
PUMPKIN SEED  
(PEPITA) DRESSING

MINI LENTIL TACOS





Kate Hackworthy - Journalist, author and award-winning food blogger. Canadian based in the UK.

FIND A RECIPE!

Search this website 