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Bringing Suffering Closer: A Proximization and Affect Analysis of Vegan Digital Activism

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***Abstract*—This study explores how Earthling Ed, a prominent vegan activist, uses language on Instagram to construct emotional urgency and moral responsibility regarding animal rights. Combining Proximization Theory (Cap, 2013a) with Affect Theory (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012), the research analyzes how three core emotions — guilt, fear, and compassion — are discursively constructed and proximized in Ed's posts. Drawing on a sample of Instagram posts published over the past two years, the study applies a qualitative framework to identify linguistic carriers of emotion (e.g., deictics, modality, narrative framing) and their proximization across spatial, temporal, and axiological axes. Findings indicate that Earthling Ed consistently uses second-person address, emotive storytelling, and moral appeals to collapse symbolic distance between the audience and the suffering of animals. Guilt is proximized through ethical contradiction, fear through vivid representations of harm, and compassion through personalization of animals.**

***Index Terms*—Proximization Theory, affect theory, vegan activism, emotional framing, animal rights**

I. Introduction

In recent years, animal rights advocacy has become an increasingly visible component of digital activism, with social media serving as a powerful tool for disseminating ethical messages and mobilizing public engagement. Online platforms allow activists to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, reaching global audiences directly with messages that foreground the suffering of nonhuman animals and call for transformative change in human behavior (Gruen, 2011; Hancox, 2020). Through emotionally charged narratives, visual storytelling, and direct moral appeals, animal rights activists work to shift public perception and draw attention to systemic cruelty in industries such as factory farming, vivisection, and fashion (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Laestadius, 2016).

Animal advocacy has emerged as a powerful subfield within digital activism, especially through social media platforms like Instagram. Scholars such as Freeman (2010) and Cole and Morgan (2011) argue that the visual and linguistic strategies employed by activists are central to how animal suffering is made visible and morally urgent. Platforms like Instagram offer users the ability to construct emotionally charged, visually evocative narratives that aim to disrupt normative ideologies around human-animal relationships.

Among the most influential digital voices in this space is Earthling Ed (Ed Winters), a British animal rights educator and vegan advocate whose online presence, particularly on Instagram, has garnered widespread attention. His posts are designed not only to inform but also to provoke emotional responses, foster ethical reflection, and encourage lifestyle change. Like many digital activists, Earthling Ed employs a combination of storytelling, moral questioning, and rhetorical strategies to challenge normalized practices of animal use and consumption.

Accordingly, this research aims to investigate how Earthling Ed's Instagram posts construct emotional and moral urgency through language, focusing on the emotions of guilt, fear, and compassion. Drawing on Affect Theory, the study explores how these emotions are discursively produced and circulated as part of activist messaging. Simultaneously, it applies Proximization Theory to examine how symbolic distance is compressed—spatially, temporally, and axiologically—so that distant animal suffering is made to feel immediate and personally relevant to the audience. The overarching objective is to analyze how these two frameworks interact to create compelling moral appeals in digital animal rights advocacy.

In order to fulfill the previous objectives, the research seeks to answer several key questions concerning the emotional and discursive strategies used in Earthling Ed's animal rights posts on Instagram. First, how are the emotions of guilt, fear, and compassion constructed and conveyed through linguistic choices, and what role do these emotions play in shaping the ethical stance of the audience? Second, what specific linguistic features—such as pronouns, evaluative language, narrative framing, or modality—function as carriers of affect and contribute to the circulation of moral sentiment? Third, in what ways are spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization strategies employed to symbolically reduce the distance between the audience and the suffering of animals, thereby increasing the sense of urgency and moral relevance? Finally, how do these affective and proximizing strategies interact to produce persuasive moral discourse within the broader context of digital vegan activism?

Therefore, this study contributes to multiple intersecting fields, including discourse studies, critical animal studies, digital activism, and emotion research in linguistics. By applying Proximization Theory (Cap, 2013a) and Affect Theory (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012) to the context of animal rights advocacy on social media, the research offers an original analytical framework for understanding how emotional and moral appeals are constructed in digital discourse. While Proximization Theory has traditionally been used in political or conflict-related narratives, this project expands its scope to include ethical and interspecies activism, showing how ideological, spatial, and temporal proximity can be discursively manufactured to position animal suffering as an urgent, personal, and morally relevant threat.

From a broader social perspective, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to understand how activist narratives influence public perception and behavior, particularly in relation to nonhuman animal rights. As platforms like Instagram continue to shape public discourse, analyzing how influencers like Earthling Ed frame ethical issues becomes essential for understanding the emotional strategies that motivate change. Ultimately, the findings of this research may inform not only scholarly discussions in discourse and affect studies but also the strategic communication practices of social justice movements seeking to generate empathy, challenge normative ideologies, and promote compassionate action.

II. Literature Review

While most existing literature on proximization theory has focused on political discourse, scholars have increasingly explored its application in social fields such as environmental activism, and pandemic discourse. Below are selected studies reflecting this shift.

Abdel Meguid Abdel Kader (2024) examines a TED Talk on plastic pollution, where both spatial and temporal proximization are used to evoke urgency. The speaker frames plastic waste as something infiltrating “our beaches” and harming “our water,” using immediacy markers like “today” and “right now” to press for action. The axiological dimension is conveyed through moral contrasts, positioning pollution against values like health and ecological duty.

Liu and Cheng (2023) apply Cap’s three-axis model to TED Talks on the environment, identifying how speakers use spatial metaphors and axiological binaries—such as “protect vs. destroy”—to symbolically collapse the distance between environmental issues and the audience. The frequent use of personal deixis (“our future”) increases proximity and moral relevance.

Cap and Zhang (2022) analyze speeches from the European Parliament, focusing on how climate change is spatially proximized through expressions like “fires on our doorstep.” They also highlight axiological proximization, showing how threats are aligned against European values like solidarity and environmental stewardship.

Hegyaljai (2021) investigates bushfire coverage in Australian media, where wildfires are metaphorically described as “invading” and “creeping” toward homes, collapsing the spatial distance and evoking urgency. This language fosters solidarity while also othering nature as a dangerous external force.

Chovanec (2021) studies early COVID-19 communication in Czech government briefings, identifying how temporal proximization was used to compress future risk into present urgency. High-modality language and second-person deixis framed the audience as direct targets of the virus, mobilizing emotional response.

Demata (2020) focuses on Italian Prime Minister Conte’s pandemic discourse, showing how COVID-19 was proximized both spatially and axiologically. Descriptions like “invisible enemy” and time-sensitive calls to action (“now is the time”) worked to unite the public emotionally and morally under a shared threat.

Mando and Stack (2018) explore how Asian carp were discursively constructed as a threat in U.S. media. The use of spatial metaphors and axiological contrasts framed the carp as both physically and morally threatening, shifting public sentiment from curiosity to moral panic.

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Emotions and Digital Activism

In the contemporary landscape of social media, emotions have become essential tools for digital activism, shaping not only the content of advocacy but also the ways in which audiences respond to and interact with ethical campaigns. Online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok serve as powerful vehicles for affective expression, allowing activists to craft emotionally resonant narratives that connect with users in immediate and often visceral ways. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, social media fosters the emergence of "affective publics"—networked groups organized not just around shared political views, but around shared emotional experiences such as outrage, grief, or compassion. These affective publics are vital for sustaining attention, encouraging participation, and spreading activist messages beyond traditional organizational boundaries.

In digital animal rights activism, emotion is not simply an expressive outlet—it is central to the strategic communication of injustice. Animal suffering is often physically and psychologically distant from the everyday experiences of most people. Thus, emotional discourse functions as a bridge between abstract knowledge and moral engagement. According to Jasper and Nelkin (1992), successful animal advocacy relies on evoking moral shock—the emotional jolt that challenges a person’s habitual worldview and compels ethical reflection. These emotional appeals

often operate through images, videos, and especially language that personalizes animals, highlights their victimhood, and frames the audience as morally implicated.

Compassion, for example, is evoked by presenting animals as sentient beings with desires and emotions, while guilt is induced through rhetorical contrast between the audience's values and their consumer behaviors (Gruen, 2011). Fear may be mobilized by portraying the scale and brutality of animal agriculture as a moral emergency requiring immediate action. Such emotional strategies are not accidental; they are part of what Hutchinson (2016) calls "affective practices"—deliberate, patterned uses of emotion that build solidarity and provoke ethical transformation.

Importantly, digital platforms intensify the visibility, repetition, and immediacy of these affective messages. Content algorithms favor emotionally charged posts, and users are more likely to engage with material that elicits strong reactions (Papacharissi, 2015). Thus, emotional discourse becomes both the medium and the message: it spreads because it moves people, and it moves people because it spreads. Within this ecosystem, figures like Earthling Ed have mastered the affective affordances of platforms like Instagram, using emotive posts and captions, moral appeals, and direct language to construct powerful emotional narratives around animal suffering and human responsibility. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to analyzing how moral persuasion and ethical proximity are discursively produced in digital animal rights campaigns.

B. Proximization Theory: Framing Moral Urgency

Proximization Theory (PT), developed extensively by Piotr Cap (2006, 2008, 2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2016), is a discourse-analytical and cognitive-linguistic model that explains how speakers represent external threats as progressively approaching the audience's personal, temporal, or ideological space. This symbolic "closing in" of threat actors, identified as ODCs (Outside Deictic Centers), toward the speaker and audience—IDCs (Inside Deictic Centers)—enables the legitimization of defensive actions. Originally developed in the analysis of political and war discourse, PT offers a flexible tool for investigating how different types of threats (physical, temporal, or ideological) are linguistically constructed and emotionally charged (Cap, 2013a).

Cap (2007) defines proximization as a discourse strategy aimed at depicting external events and actors as increasingly affecting the addressee, effectively placing them at the center of unfolding negative developments. The theory identifies three major axes of threat construction: spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization. In spatial proximization, the speaker constructs the ODC as physically advancing toward the IDC space (e.g., "they are coming into our communities"). Temporal proximization refers to representing threats as no longer distant in time but imminent or already active—compressing the timeline of danger. Axiological proximization, by contrast, centers on moral and ideological conflict, framing the ODC's values as fundamentally opposed to those of the in-group and potentially infiltrating or corrupting them (Cap, 2013a, 2013b).

The origins of this triadic structure trace back to Chilton's (2004) cognitive model of discourse, which proposed that language encodes meaning along three intersecting axes: space (s), time (t), and modality (m). These axes revolve around a deictic center—the perspective of the speaker—linguistically signaled through first-person pronouns ("I," "we"), spatial adverbs ("here"), and temporal markers ("now"). According to Chilton, participants positioned further from this center—through second or third-person reference or spatial and temporal distance—are perceived as symbolically "other," laying the foundation for proximization strategies.

Each axis contributes distinct discursive functions. Spatial proximization manipulates locative language to suggest encroachment (e.g., "they are crossing into our space"), whereas temporal proximization relies on framing future dangers as imminent, often by shifting reference from the past or future into the present. Cap (2013b) describes two specific types of temporal compression: a past-to-present shift, where previous harmful actions are reframed as still operative or repeating, and a future-to-present shift, where near-future threats are treated as unfolding consequences of current behaviors. Both mechanisms aim to heighten urgency and justify immediate action.

Modality, as proposed by Chilton (2004), complements these proximization processes by signaling certainty (epistemic modality) and necessity (deontic modality). High modality use (e.g., "must stop," "will happen") contributes to the perceived inevitability and severity of the threat, reinforcing legitimization of action.

Among the three axes, axiological proximization plays a particularly critical role in constructing moral urgency. It involves the symbolic representation of value-based antagonism, where the ODC's ideology is depicted as violating the ethical framework of the in-group. Cap (2013a) outlines four linguistic structures that indicate this type of proximization: (1) noun phrases reflecting the IDC's values (e.g., "justice," "compassion"), (2) noun phrases denoting ODC ideologies (e.g., "violence," "cruelty"), (3) discursive sequences showing the movement from ideological threat to conflict, and (4) lexical expressions indicating the outcomes of ideological clashes (e.g., "loss of empathy," "moral collapse"). This model becomes especially powerful in legitimization discourse, where perceived value erosion by ODCs warrants a moral or ideological realignment—from an initial state of stability (Phase One) to a reactive ethical stance (Phase Two).

In sum, Proximization Theory offers a multidimensional framework for understanding how symbolic distance is narrowed through discourse. It enables analysts to explore how speakers create urgency and legitimization by constructing threats as spatially close, temporally immediate, and morally unacceptable. This approach has proven effective in the analysis of political, media, and activist discourses—and is particularly suitable for contexts where the goal is to mobilize emotional responses and ethical action, such as digital animal rights campaigns.

C. Affect Theory and the Circulation of Emotion

Affect Theory is an interdisciplinary framework that examines how feelings, emotions, and bodily intensities shape human experience, social relationships, and political structures. Rather than treating emotions as merely internal or psychological, affect theory highlights their social, cultural, and discursive nature. It explores how emotions circulate between individuals and texts, become attached to ideas or bodies, and ultimately participate in the construction of power and identity.

Affect theory draws a distinction between emotion (often personal, named, and socially recognized) and affect (pre-conscious, bodily, and processual). As Massumi (1995) argues, affect refers to "intensity" — a bodily response that occurs prior to cognition or linguistic labeling. Affect exists between bodies, not solely within them, and precedes conscious emotional interpretation. For example, the flinch before fear, or the warmth before joy, are bodily intensities that constitute affect.

This pre-cognitive and relational model of affect contrasts with traditional psychological models that locate emotion within the individual mind. Massumi (1995) suggests that affect is "autonomous," meaning it is not wholly reducible to rational thought or language. However, in applied discourse analysis, scholars often treat affect and emotion interchangeably when they become textually mediated or socially constructed, especially in the work of Ahmed (2004).

Ahmed's (2004) The Cultural Politics of Emotion is central to affect theory's social turn. Ahmed argues that emotions are not private feelings that arise from within a person; rather, they are produced in social interactions and become meaningful through repetition and circulation. She introduces the concept of "affective economies," where emotions "stick" to signs, bodies, and ideas over time. For instance, national pride may become attached to flags, while fear may stick to racialized or foreign bodies.

According to Ahmed, emotions are performative: they do not merely describe a state of being but actually do something — they align individuals with groups, orient them toward or away from others, and help create boundaries between "us" and "them" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 12). Affect theory places strong emphasis on orientation — a concept Ahmed develops through phenomenology. Emotions direct our attention, shape our bodily posture, and position us socially. She explains that emotions "move us" in particular ways: we might lean away from what disgusts us or move toward what we desire. This directional quality of affect creates patterns of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion in both everyday life and ideological structures (Ahmed, 2006).

While early affect theorists emphasized the non-discursive aspects of affect (e.g., bodily intensities, visual stimuli), later scholars such as Wetherell (2012) argue that affect is deeply embedded in language and discourse. From this view, emotions are performed through speech acts, images, narratives, and gestures, making them highly analyzable in discourse studies. Thus, affect theory has become a valuable tool in analyzing media, politics, protest, advertising, and activism.

IV. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach, combining insights from Proximization Theory (Cap, 2013a) and Affect Theory (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012) to examine how emotional and moral appeals are constructed in digital animal rights advocacy. The focus is on the linguistic strategies used in Instagram posts by the prominent vegan activist Earthling Ed, particularly how language is mobilized to evoke guilt, fear, and compassion. This methodology is suitable for uncovering the symbolic, affective, and ideological mechanisms embedded in short-form social media texts.

B. Subjects

The "subjects" in this research are 13 **Instagram posts by the prominent vegan activist Earthling Ed**. These posts are published between 2023 and 2024. A close reading process was employed to identify and select the most suitable posts that contain multiple linguistic devices related to proximization theory, emotional appeals and affective language. Only the **linguistic content** of the posts was analyzed; images, captions, emojis, and hashtags were excluded.

C. Instruments

Although the study does not rely on physical instruments, it uses two interrelated analytical tools. The first tool is the affective discourse analysis theory by Ahmed (2004) which enables the researcher to identify linguistic carriers of emotion, including expressive vocabulary, evaluative or judgmental phrases, and personal pronouns that directly address the reader. The second tool is Cap's (2013a) that elaborates how threats were constructed and brought closer to the audience through three axes: spatial (suggestions of physical or symbolic intrusion), temporal (collapsing past or future threats into the present to create urgency), and axiological (lexical patterns signaling a clash between the moral values of the in-group and the out-group).

D. Procedures

All data were collected manually from the official public Instagram account of the vegan activist Earthling Ed (@earthlinged). Each post was read multiple times and annotated for proximization elements and affective carriers. Excerpts were grouped thematically to allow a nuanced interpretation of recurring patterns. Throughout the process, the analysis remained interpretive, seeking to understand how language positions the reader emotionally and constructs a sense of moral urgency around animal suffering. Key examples were selected for in-depth discourse analysis to demonstrate the interplay between affect and proximization.

V. Analysis and Results

The findings of the study show that through strategic deictics, metaphorical framings, and emotionally charged lexicon, the Instagram posts depict animal suffering as a proximate, ethically loaded crisis. The findings show that affect is not merely a product of persuasion but a device that positions the viewer within a shared moral framework. Thirteen posts have been selected and thematically grouped under three dominant affective frames: **Theme 1: compassion and empathy, Theme 2: guilt and moral complicity and Theme 3: cognitive dissonance and ethical discomfort**.

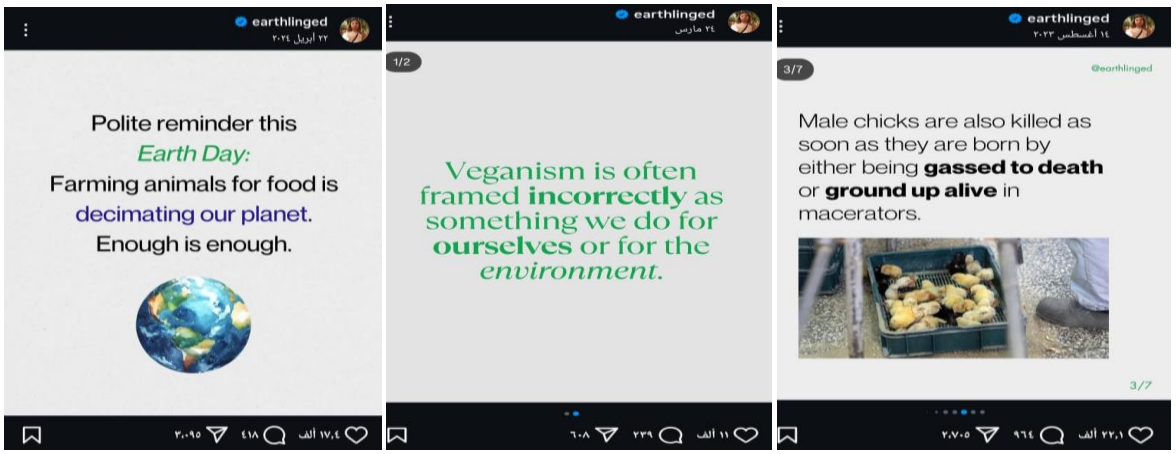
A. Theme 1. Compassion and Empathy

This theme captures how Earthling Ed's posts use emotionally charged language to foster affective alignment with animals, emphasizing shared vulnerability, and the moral imperative of care. Through personalization and inclusive appeals, these posts encourage viewers to adopt empathetic identification with nonhuman others.

Post 1 constructs an urgent ideological threat through *axiological proximization*. The noun phrase "farming animals for food" is positioned as an ODC (Outside Deictic Center) practice that symbolizes ecological destruction. The verb "decimating" serves as a metaphorical construction encoding violence and imminent damage, indicating not just a distant, abstract harm, but one intruding on the moral and spatial boundaries of the IDC (Inside Deictic Center)—presumably the environmentally conscious audience. The modal construction "Enough is enough" introduces deontic modality, demanding immediate action and framing the threat as no longer tolerable. The affective positioning relies on collective guilt and moral urgency, subtly implicating readers in systemic harm. Earth Day—normally a symbol of environmental solidarity—is recontextualized here as a scene of accountability, with emotional resonance intensified through the juxtaposition of celebration and destruction. The phrase "our planet" places the environmental threat within the Immediate Discourse Space (IDS) — it's not a distant, abstract concept but shared, local, and personal. This deictic construction collapses the spatial distance between individual behavior and planetary consequences. The word "farming" (often imagined as rural and distant) is juxtaposed with "our planet," bringing the consequence of a distant action into the physical and ethical space of the audience. The use of present progressive ("is decimating") implies an ongoing, immediate crisis. The crisis is not projected — it's unfolding *now*. The final sentence "Enough is enough" functions as a temporal threshold — marking a shift, suggesting that we've passed the limit of tolerance.

Post 2 repositions the moral center of veganism by challenging normative identity narratives. It introduces *affective dissonance*—a core concept in Affect Theory—by subverting the audience's assumed moral stance. The use of "incorrectly" critiques the dominant framing, and the repetition of "for ourselves" and "for the environment" taps into familiar ethical justifications, only to unsettle them. The underlying affective force here is *shame or discomfort* tied to misaligned moral reasoning. This scene evokes affective alignment by suggesting that true moral engagement lies beyond selfish or instrumental motives, thereby reconfiguring emotional norms around vegan identity as justice-oriented.

Besides, this post subtly refers to mis framing in the public discourse. While it doesn't use overt spatial markers, it critiques a distancing strategy — one where veganism is pushed outward into abstract or self-interested ideological spaces ("ourselves," "the environment"), rather than being seen as an immediate moral necessity involving animals. The implied spatial aspect is ideological distancing: the shift in framing detaches veganism from its moral proximity to animal suffering. The adverb "often" suggests a recurring but ongoing issue — a habitual misframing happening in the current discourse. The present tense "is" anchors the statement in contemporary time, reinforcing that this misconception is currently influencing how people view ethical choices.



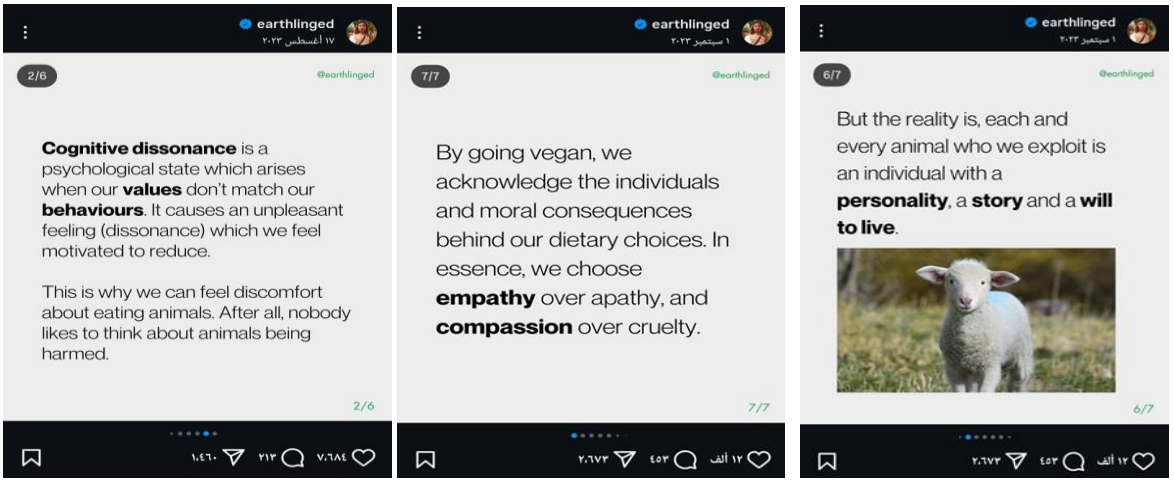
Post 1 Post 2 Post 3

In post 3, the concept of proximal threat is vividly conveyed through a series of violent and specific lexical choices such as "gassed," "ground up alive," "macerators," and "killed." These terms exemplify nominative violence—grammatical constructions that frame brutal actions as routine industrial procedures, thereby normalizing cruelty. From a proximization perspective, these practices expose how systemic violence is not distant or abstract but embedded within everyday systems. They break into the Inner Deictic Center (IDC)—the perceived safe moral space of the audience—by showing that these acts are not remote but standard operations within the industry.

The use of concrete, immediate language intensifies this effect. These are not vague references but graphic, tangible depictions that collapse the psychological and moral distance between consumer behavior and slaughterhouse reality. Visual elements further this proximity. The background image of yellow crates and chicks evokes recognizable industrial environments, signaling that such practices occur not in faraway places but in familiar, local systems supported by consumer demand. The temporal phrase "as soon as they are born" underscores both immediacy and inevitability, suggesting that violence begins at the earliest point of life. The absence of future or past tense markers like "used to" or "will be" indicates that this cruelty is not a historical issue or future risk—but a current, systemic reality.

The post also uses modality implicitly—these are not rare atrocities but legal norms. Affectively, the post aims to elicit horror, shock, and moral disgust, deliberately triggering empathic activation by referencing baby animals. Wetherell's (2012) view of affect as practice is evident here, as the viewer's likely response is shaped by emotional norms that value innocence and vulnerability.

Post 4 functions as a cognitive-affective diagnostic. The term "cognitive dissonance" is introduced to explain internal conflict when "values don't match our behaviours." From the perspective of Proximization Theory, this is an *inward axiological proximization*, where the threat is not external (ODCs) but internal: within the reader's own ethical misalignment. The modal clause "nobody likes to think about animals being harmed" reinforces the ideological denial mechanism, subtly accusing the reader of emotional avoidance. Affect Theory is central here, as the post explicitly describes how emotions like *discomfort and denial* are sociopsychological practices shaped by cultural norms of meat consumption. The call is not merely to act differently but to feel differently. There are no geographical markers here, but the ideological distance is narrowed between beliefs (values) and daily actions (behaviors). This constructs an internal conflict within the individual's moral space. Proximization here is inward and personal — the threat is not external but part of the individual's identity, creating internal proximity between conflicting self-images. The use of present tense verbs ("don't match," "feels," "likes") signals that the emotional and ethical tension is current and ongoing. It doesn't describe a past problem or a future solution — the reader is placed in the active moment of ethical discomfort.



Post 4 Post 5 Post 6

The audience in post 5 is positioned affectively as ethical agents capable of choice. The paired phrases—"empathy over apathy," "compassion over cruelty"—use *parallelism and repetition* as emotional amplifiers. These lexical contrasts encode ideological differences between IDC values (empathy, compassion) and ODC ideologies (apathy, cruelty). The structure also performs *ideological movement*: the speaker invites the reader to cross over from one value system to another. From a Proximization standpoint, this is a shift from symbolic distance to moral closeness with the Other (animals). It makes affect visible as both a cause and consequence of moral transformation. The phrase "by going vegan" suggests a current and ongoing decision with future implications, drawing the audience into a temporally charged call to moral realignment. The use of present tense verbs ("acknowledge," "choose") emphasizes the immediacy of agency and the moral stakes of the present moment (Cap, 2013b). Here, spatial distance is dissolved through the personal "we," which includes both speaker and audience in the IDC. By using inclusive pronouns and referring to "our dietary choices," the post reduces symbolic distance between audience action and its consequences. It makes the issue close, personal, and morally relevant. Emotion is performed explicitly through evaluative and emotive lexis like "empathy," "compassion," and "cruelty." The repetition of binaries frames the scene morally, shaping the audience's affective positioning by invoking guilt, compassion, and the desire to belong to the 'moral' side of the conflict.

Post 6 humanizes animals via *discursive anthropomorphism*, invoking Affect Theory's central interest in how subjects are emotionally constructed. The nouns "personality," "story," and "will" are loaded affective terms that reposition animals not as commodities (ODC framing) but as subjects deserving empathy (IDC values). This lexical structure dramatizes the value conflict central to axiological proximization. The affective work lies in reconstituting animals as moral beings, inviting the reader to emotionally identify with the exploited subject. It also performs *proximal intimacy*, reducing the ideological and emotional distance between humans and animals. The phrase "we exploit" performs collective guilt, implicating both speaker and audience and inviting transformation through recognition. The use of the present tense—"the reality is," "we exploit"—frames animal suffering as ongoing and immediate, not relegated to a distant past or hypothetical future. This compresses the time axis (Cap, 2013a), compelling the reader to recognize the urgency of the issue. The temporal immediacy activates moral discomfort and invites reflection on current practices. The language bridges the emotional and moral distance between the audience (IDC) and the animals (ODC). By humanizing the animals ("personality," "a story," "a will to live"), the speaker symbolically collapses the distance between humans and non-humans, encouraging the audience to recognize shared traits and moral status. This collapse of distance is a spatial strategy (Cap, 2008), moving the ODC closer to the IDC's ethical concern.

B. Theme 2. Guilt and Moral Complicity

This theme focuses on how the posts invoke self-reflection and ethical discomfort by highlighting contradictions between professed values and consumer behavior. Through strategic use of proximity, emotional cues, and accusatory structures, the discourse mobilizes guilt to prompt moral accountability and lifestyle change.

Post7 exemplifies a discursive defense and reframing of ideological identity (IDC). The speaker performs emotion through calm assertion and direct eye contact, while simultaneously countering ODC framings (oppositional discourse constructions) that label veganism as "classist." The use of first-person plural pronoun *"we"* is a clear spatial deictic that constructs a collective identity (IDC) and delineates in-group values. While the emotional intensity is controlled, the sentence invokes social exclusion, which frames the vegan subject as unjustly marginalized. This is a move of *proximal victimhood*—a common strategy in proximization theory—where the ideological threat (ODC) (i.e., mainstream discourse that criticizes veganism) is symbolically brought close to the speaker's in-group. The affective goal here is to evoke empathy and solidarity, not guilt or fear, shifting the emotional terrain to one of defensive compassion. The present-tense "get labelled" implies a current, ongoing ideological conflict, suggesting that the threat (i.e., social misrepresentation) is actively occurring and must be addressed now. Moreover, the passive construction

"get labelled" implies a lack of control or agency over public narratives, intensifying emotional stakes. Vegan audiences are positioned as victims of misjudgment, creating a shared emotional experience of being *unfairly targeted*. Non-vegan viewers may feel invited to reconsider their judgments.

Post 8 features a moral appeal that invites the audience to evaluate the consistency between their professed values and their actions regarding animals. The post opens with a rhetorical question: *"What are our values and do our actions actually contradict them?"* This framing uses the inclusive deictic pronoun "our" to draw the audience into the Inside Deictic Center (IDC), aligning the speaker and reader in a shared moral community. The spatial dimension of proximization is therefore internalized rather than externalized—the conflict is not with a foreign outgroup but within the self, between one's ethical ideals and one's lived behavior. Unlike traditional proximization which often locates danger externally (e.g., immigrants, terrorists, outsiders), this post reorients the threat inward, portraying cognitive dissonance as a destabilizing ideological force encroaching on the self's integrity.

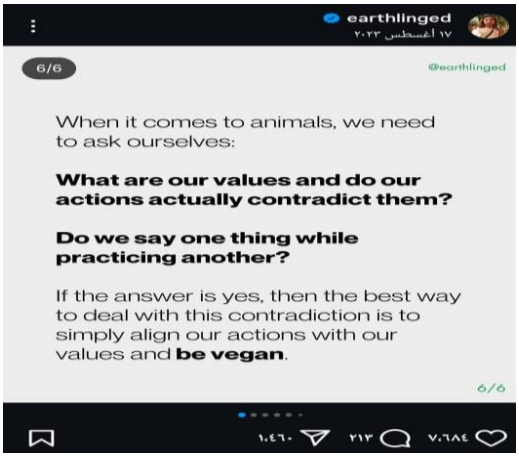
Temporally, the post is rooted in the present, as seen in phrases like "do our actions contradict" and "do we say one thing while practicing another." These real-time inquiries elicit immediate introspection and convey urgency. The conditional phrase "if the answer is yes…" marks a critical moment of ideological reckoning, leading to the imperative conclusion: *"be vegan."* This future-directed resolution constructs a moral timeline in which the present contradiction must give way to future consistency through lifestyle change. Thus, the temporal axis functions to compress the gap between reflection and ethical action.

The axiological axis of the post is sharply delineated. On one side are values like honesty, compassion, and ethical coherence (associated with the IDC). On the other side lies hypocrisy, contradiction, and moral compromise (implicitly attributed to the current state of non-veganism). Veganism is framed not merely as a diet but as the only ideologically coherent position—a necessary action to bridge the gap between values and practice. By anchoring the "correct" action in a set of desirable and widely accepted values, the post constructs a moral binary in which failing to act (i.e., not going vegan) becomes an ethical failing.

From the perspective of Affect Theory, the emotional performance is subtle but potent. Rather than expressing anger or shame explicitly, the speaker adopts a tone of moral seriousness and rational appeal. The use of rhetorical questions functions to provoke internal discomfort, a form of emotional labor that the audience is invited to perform themselves. The discomfort is not imposed but *elicited* through identification with the speaker's values. The affective positioning of the audience is therefore one of moral responsibility—they are not accused, but they are held accountable.

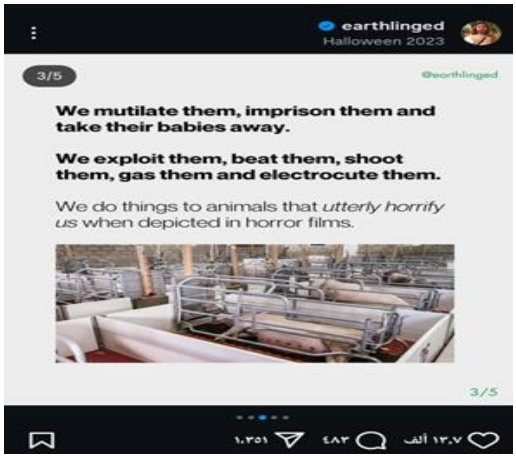
The post's use of modality and framing devices—such as the repeated use of second-person plural deictics ("we," "our"), the rhetorical format, and the assertive solution ("be vegan")—serves to mobilize emotion while maintaining a veneer of logical neutrality. The emotional consequence is a gentle, yet firm push toward ethical transformation. In this way, Post 8 exemplifies how digital vegan activism leverages proximization and affective framing not through alarmism, but through rational moral alignment that demands both emotional and ideological self-reckoning.

Post 7



Post 8

Post 9



post 10

Post 9 utilizes a strong metaphorical frame through the phrase "*horror show*," which is not just a vivid image but a powerful rhetorical device drawing from the cultural semantics of terror and emotional repulsion. The use of the metaphor places the viewer in an emotionally heightened scene of violence, aligning with the affective framing strategies in Affect Theory. By invoking "horror," the speaker positions the audience to experience disgust, fear, and urgency. Axiologically, this post sets up a clear moral contrast: "*horror*" (negative, morally reprehensible) vs. "*vegan*" (positive, morally aligned). The noun phrase "the horror show" functions as a nominalization that compresses complex systemic violence into a compact, affect-laden image. "Make the switch to vegan" offers a resolution, positioning veganism as a moral and emotionally responsible choice, reinforcing in-group (IDC) values of compassion and non-violence, while the *horror* signifies the ODC threat (those complicit in cruelty).

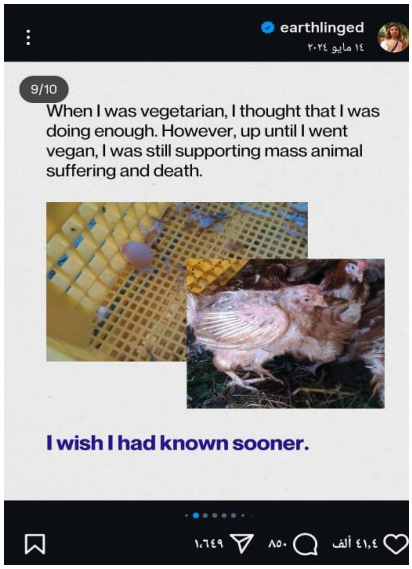
This post uses graphic enumeration and violent action verbs—"mutilate," "imprison," "beat," "electrocute"—to construct a scene of intense brutality, grounding it in specific, repeated present-tense actions that communicate both immediacy and normativity. The verbs are high-agency, with "we" as subject, which not only signals accountability but also directly implicates the audience. The spatial axis brings the violence "here"—it's not distant or abstract; it is happening in legal, normalized spaces, such as farms or factories, metaphorically "next door." This evokes a moral shock, aligning with Affect Theory's focus on how emotions structure attention and response.

Temporally, the use of present simple tense ("We mutilate…") suggests ongoing, systemic violence, not something in the past or a distant future—further collapsing the temporal gap between act and consequence. The axiological axis is starkly divided: the actors (consumers and producers) are the agents of violence, while the victims are animals who suffer in ways that would be horrifying "when depicted in horror films." This comparison positions the events within a moral contradiction—the cognitive dissonance that something we accept in real life would be intolerable as fiction. Here, metaphor and normative inversion drive the affective force: cruelty becomes normalized, and the moral standard is compared against fictional thresholds of tolerance, which paradoxically seem higher than for real-life treatment of animals.

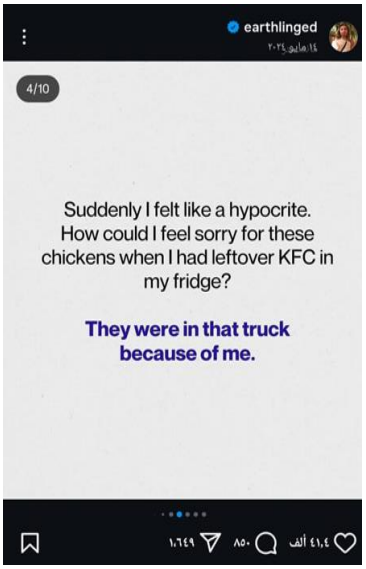
The emotional appeal is deepened through horror, guilt, and complicity, framing veganism as not just an ethical alternative but a necessary escape from participating in what is framed as cultural psychopathy. The juxtaposition of "we do things to animals..." with the emotional intensity of "utterly horrify us" triggers self-reflection and moral urgency, fulfilling the affective aim of repositioning the audience emotionally. Affectively, this scene positions the audience in a state of shock, intended to provoke moral outrage and emotional rupture. The use of "utterly horrify us" transforms the private experience of horror into a shared emotional standard, which is key in Affect Theory's focus on collective emotions (Wetherell, 2012).

C. Theme 3. Cognitive Dissonance and Ethical Discomfort

This theme explores how posts expose the internal conflict between individuals' values and their actions, foregrounding emotional tension as a catalyst for change. By dramatizing moments of realization and discomfort, the discourse constructs a moral rupture that invites the audience to resolve dissonance through ethical transformation.



Post 11



Post 12

Post 13

Post 11 exemplifies temporal deictics ("up until I went vegan"), which mark a movement from past ignorance to present moral awareness—shifting the ideological conflict from distance (ODC – passive complicity) to proximity (IDC – moral realization). The verb phrase “was still supporting” nominalizes harm, embedding the speaker's indirect involvement as structurally passive yet ideologically complicit. This indicates proximal ideological danger, moving the ODC ("passive vegetarians") closer to the threat zone of mass suffering. There is a verb of motion implied in the ideological shift (“went vegan”) showing mental/spatial transition away from complicity. Noun phrases like “mass animal suffering and death” construct the ideological threat, while “I wish I had known sooner” places the speaker as a remorseful, reformed IDC voice.

Emotion here is performed through personal regret and remorse, framing veganism as a moral epiphany. The affective language “I thought I was doing enough” evokes dissonance, while “I wish I had known sooner” performs mourning for past ignorance. This aligns with norms of ethical self-awareness, expecting moral consistency. The audience is positioned to feel guilt and moral urgency—not merely empathy for animals but a deep reflection on their own misaligned values and complicity. The speaker reflects on a past moment of perceived moral adequacy—being vegetarian—juxtaposed with a later realization in the present that even this “lesser evil” contributed to animal suffering and death. This use of reflective temporal framing (from "thought" to "was still supporting") shifts the viewer’s moral awareness from the past to the imperative of present action. While the spatial setting is not explicitly marked, the imagery of chickens in crates and the mention of mass suffering conjures a distant yet accessible space where industrialized violence is concealed from daily life. Yet, this spatial boundary collapses as the speaker’s personal journey bridges the distant slaughterhouses and their own plate.

Post 12 uses an immediate present (“suddenly I felt”) that suggests a jarring confrontation between the speaker’s past apathy and an emerging moral clarity. The temporal marker “suddenly” implies a rupture in habitual thinking. The “truck” becomes a loaded metaphor for the unseen spaces of animal suffering. The speaker spatially aligns themselves with the perpetrators through the phrase “because of me”, collapsing any comforting distance between consumer and victim. It is also a case of ideological proximization. The pronoun “they” (ODC = the chickens) and the spatial phrase “in that truck” uses spatial deictics to bring distant suffering into the speaker’s moral and physical world. The modal past “could” in “How could I feel sorry…” reveals cognitive dissonance, suggesting an internal ideological conflict. The explicit self-blame in “because of me” erases the distance between the action and its consequence, collapsing the ODC-constructed “normal consumption” into an IDC recognition of causality. This shift from *observer* to *cause* moves the ideological threat from an external to internal agent. Emotion is performed as self-directed guilt. The narrative creates a strong affective arc—from dissonance to emotional collapse. The audience is expected to identify with this discomfort, producing a shared moral responsibility. The use of “I felt like a hypocrite” primes viewers to examine their own behaviors under the light of ethical alignment, encouraging norm-driven emotional reevaluation. This post aligns affectively with guilt, regret, and moral self-interrogation.

Post 13 constructs nominalizations of violence—“painful procedures,” “crowded conditions,” “bone fractures”—to background human agency and foreground the resultant suffering. This indirectness paradoxically amplifies ideological threat by framing systemic abuse as normalized. There’s no direct perpetrator, which intensifies the horror through passive proximization—it’s happening now, widely, and invisibly. Adjectives like “stressful” and “painful” invoke an embodied experience, aligning with verbal proximization of the other’s suffering. The lack of spatial or temporal distancing implies immediacy and normalization of cruelty. Emotion here is not overtly performed but elicited through graphic lexical choice. The repetition of distressing adjectives aims to trigger disgust, shock, and sorrow in the audience. By emphasizing conditions over direct violence, the post appeals to ethical sensibilities about care, vulnerability, and

systemic neglect—evoking compassion as well as moral urgency. The linguistic strategy is one of factual affect, using impersonal structures to enhance the emotional weight of the content. The suffering described—"are often kept," "subjected to," "prone to"—is framed as ongoing and habitual, not incidental. This constant present makes the crisis urgent and unresolved, pressing upon the reader's current ethical position. Though farms are not physically visible to most readers, the post's descriptive intensity brings these sites of violence metaphorically "closer". The affective weight of "crowded," "painful procedures," and "bone fractures" creates a sensory landscape that overcomes the physical distance.

VI. Discussion

This study demonstrates how digital vegan activism on Instagram mobilizes affective discourse and proximization strategies to construct moral urgency and emotional engagement. Drawing on Cap's (2013a) tri-axial proximization model and Affect Theory (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012), the analysis shows how ideological, spatial, and temporal distances are collapsed to reposition audiences as morally implicated rather than passive observers.

Spatial proximization emerges prominently through deictic expressions such as "our planet" and "in that truck," which symbolically bring distant suffering into the audience's moral and perceptual space. By framing systemic violence as present and familiar, the captions dissolve physical and ideological distance. Posts like 3, 6, and 13 make strategic use of nominalizations ("mutilation," "painful procedures") that conceal agency yet heighten threat perception by normalizing cruelty, thereby reinforcing the urgency of ethical re-evaluation.

Temporal proximization functions by compressing past and future harm into the immediate present. Verbs such as "is decimating" or "we exploit" suggest ongoing harm requiring immediate redress. Reflective expressions in Posts 11 and 12—like "I wish I had known sooner"—create affective timelines that frame veganism as the endpoint of moral evolution. These devices amplify a sense of ethical urgency by aligning present inaction with complicity.

Axiological proximization is particularly central. The use of moral binaries such as "compassion vs. cruelty" or "vegan vs. horror" dramatizes ideological conflict between in-group values (IDC) and out-group norms (ODC). These binaries are affectively loaded and strategically employed to guide emotional alignment. The audience is prompted to adopt a morally coherent identity by aligning with IDC values and rejecting normalized cruelty.

Affect is not just represented but circulated. Emotions such as guilt, shame, empathy, and horror function as organizing forces within the discourse, shaping how readers relate to animals and their own actions. The posts foster emotional investment through linguistic carriers like second-person address, metaphors, and inclusive pronouns. Moreover, the emotional mapping of themes shows that affective registers are purposefully distributed. Posts under *compassion and empathy* promote affiliative identification with animals. Those addressing *guilt and moral complicity* elicit discomfort and moral reflection. Posts themed around *cognitive dissonance* invoke introspection and challenge perceived moral coherence. This progression from affective engagement to ethical transformation highlights how digital vegan activism uses proximization and affect to move audiences from awareness to accountability.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how affect and proximization are co-articulated in digital vegan activism, offering new insights into how ideological persuasion operates in visual-social media contexts. The integration of Proximization Theory with Affect Theory enabled a nuanced examination of how spatial, temporal, and axiological elements interact with emotional discourse to produce moral urgency and encourage behavioral change.

Through strategic deictics, metaphorical framings, and emotionally charged lexicon, Instagram posts reconfigure animal suffering from a distant or abstract phenomenon into a proximate, ethically loaded crisis. The data shows that affect is not only a byproduct of persuasion but a structuring force—carefully curated to reposition the viewer within a shared moral framework. This affective positioning often blurs the lines between information and emotion, amplifying the ethical imperative toward veganism.

This study contributes to existing literature by applying Cap's Proximization Theory outside of political or health discourse, demonstrating its utility in examining environmental, ethical, and social justice communication. It also shows how emotion is deployed as a tool of ideological realignment. Future research could expand this analysis by examining how audience responses (likes, comments, shares) reflect or resist these affective proximizations, offering a fuller picture of discursive influence in digital activism.

Future research may expand the scope of this study in multiple ways. One important aspect involves examining audience responses—such as comments, shares, and engagement patterns—to determine how viewers accept, negotiate, or resist affective proximizations. Another direction is to compare proximization axes across different activists, or platforms (e.g., climate justice, public health, feminist activism) to identify whether similar emotional and proximization strategies recur or whether they are confined to specific context.

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