Chapter 22

Marketing Meat Alternatives: Meat Myths and Their Replication in Advertising for Plant-Based Meat

Malte B. Rödl
The University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Meat alternatives have been proposed as one solution to decrease meat consumption and thus its negative effects on individuals and the environment. Using three meat myths identified in literature on meat consumption—meat eating is normal, natural, and necessary—this chapter discusses how they emerge in six selected print adverts: (1) normal: dishes containing meat alternatives are portrayed as traditional, perpetuating normality; (2) natural: the myth that it is natural to eat meat is not explicitly opposed, but bypassed; (3) necessary: meat alternatives are portrayed as even more necessary for good health than meat. The author proposes changes to neutralise these meat myths; but they are unlikely to be adopted by advertising due to its commercial goals. Although meat alternatives are theoretically preferable over meat (and can help individual transitions to vegetarianism), their marketing perpetuates meat myths, and may therefore reinforce a meat-centred culture.

INTRODUCTION

Meat is a centrepiece of Western culture, deeply entangled with the structure and culture of our society (Leroy & Praet, 2015), and despite many negative criticisms, is consumed on a frequent basis (Holm & Møhl, 2000). Those negative criticisms are mainly related to the impact of meat consumption on individual health (Battaglia Richi et al., 2015), the impacts of animal farming on the environment (Steinfeld et al., 2006), and animal welfare (Verbeke & Vlaene, 2000). Meat alternatives, i.e. commercial products that are meant to replace meat, are proposed as suitable to solve these issues conveniently for some consumers (Hoek, 2010; Wild et al., 2014), while others prefer foods without any reference to meat (Elzerman, Boekel, & Luning, 2013).

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Due to their increased prevalence in British and Western diets (Beckett, 2013; Elzerman et al., 2013), this chapter aims to contribute to the sparse understanding of the cultural context of meat alternatives (see Nath & Prideaux, 2011). More specifically, this chapter explores how advertising for meat alternatives deals with meat myths, which are understood here as widely-held beliefs about why meat eating is justified (Joy, 2009).

The chapter proceeds as follows. Firstly, meat alternatives are defined, followed by a summary of the state of current knowledge on these products. The main section of this chapter introduces myth in relation to meat, and the three meat myths, discusses the role and context of advertising, and then proceeds with investigating selected adverts along the myths. The discussion aims at finding solutions and recommendations for advertising of meat alternatives. Lastly, future research pathways are highlighted, and the chapter is concluded.

The main aim of this contribution is to investigate whether meat myths can be found in the marketing for meat alternatives, and to which extent they are embedded into their marketing strategy. Secondary aims are an introduction to the state of knowledge on meat alternatives, and a discussion for how to remove the identified myths from advertising for meat alternatives. The author acknowledges the clear significant positive impacts of meat alternatives, and as such, the findings are not intended to condemn meat alternatives themselves. Rather, it is their marketing and perpetuation of meat myths that is under scrutiny for their potential negative cultural impacts.

BACKGROUND

Meat alternatives—sometimes also called meat substitutes, meat analogs, vegetarian meat, or similar (Sadler, 2004)—are meat-like food products. They are “something that looks, tastes, and feels like meat” (Zorpette, 2013, p. 64), that “should have a certain resemblance to meat in order to replace meat on the plate” (Hoek, Boekel, Voordouw, & Luning, 2011, p. 371). Other definitions propose meat alternatives to have “approximately the same taste, appearance, and texture of a related food made from meat, poultry, fish or shellfish … [while their] nutritional value is, in general, approximately equal to (or sometimes greater than) that of the related food, including essential vitamin B-12” (Shurtleff & Aoyagi, 2014, p. 5), or as “products that fulfil consumer demands of healthy and tasty products which both replace the function of meat in a dish and contribute a similar high protein nutritional value” (Wild et al., 2014, p. 45).

All these various definitions describe food items which relate to meat in ways that consumers can observe; including sensory aspects and experiences, the function of meat in meals, as well as nutrition and health. Consumers were found to understand novel products as relating to established ones on the basis of ‘similarities’ and ‘analogies’; similarities are shared attributes, such as colour or texture, analogies are shared relations, such as goals or scripts (Michaut, 2004). This chapter understands meat alternatives as commercial products which are portrayed as sharing attributes, such as physical properties, or their product name with meat, or sharing relations, such as their function for nutrition or in a meal.

Being generally proposed as a viable alternative to the issues of excessive meat consumption (Hoek, 2010; Wild et al., 2014), research describes the consumption of meat alternatives as healthier (Sadler, 2004) and more environmentally-friendly than meat: carbon emissions are found equal or lower to that of chicken and fish, and substantially lower than those of pigs or cattle. Land use requirements are lower than those of all meats (Nijdam, Rood, & Westhoek, 2012). Among meat alternatives, different ingredients and production methods lead to different footprints, with soy-meal-based meat alternatives appearing the