What's Hiding in Your Plant-Based Meat? A Communicative Lens on How People Decide What is (Un)healthy Food

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Abstract

With the rise of vegetarianism and veganism in the United States, there have been new plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA) on the market. People often struggle with making food decisions (despite being able to situate healthy from unhealthy food). PBMA such as Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods aid in confusing a consumer's ability to make this distinction. Due to persuasion and influence from relationships and advertising, including food labeling, consumers shape their identities and behaviors. This study highlights how individuals inform their understandings of (un)healthy food and the difficulties they encounter in their food decision-making processes. This study utilizes qualitative research methods including one-on-one interviews and textual analysis of advertisements. Participants correlated plant-based foods as healthy and processed foods as unhealthy. As a result, the interview findings showcase the contradiction consumers face in regard to PBMA as processed plant-based foods. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the impact that communication has on decision-making, and suggest that processed "health" foods can be misleading for a consumer's understanding of what (un)healthy food is.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Have you ever been told that eating plants is unhealthy? The answer is probably no. So, how can plant-based foods be unhealthy if they are strictly made out of plants? Afterall, if a food is vegan, then that means that it is made out of plants, and therefore it is healthy? However, when we think of plant-based foods, we are most likely thinking of products that are farm to table. We are thinking of foods that are freshly grown in a field, not a lab. This is the problem at stake — "Plant-based" foods like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are produced in a lab, not on a farm. Would you rather have your product read and contain "100% organic, grass-fed beef" or "expeller-pressed canola oil, methylcellulose, potato starch, and sunflower lecithin?" One of the best ways to obtain a healthy diet is to eat real foods. Foods with ingredients that are recognizable and easy to pronounce, foods that have hardly been altered from the field to your fork.

I barely remember a time in my life when I used to eat meat because I have been a vegetarian for over 14 years. For as long as I can remember, I always wanted to be like my mom when I was growing up. I wanted to be like her so much that I became a vegetarian at the age of 8 years old. Since I have been one for so long, I cannot imagine switching back to eating animal meat. Although, I wish I never became a vegetarian in the first place because it can be difficult to eat an adequate amount of protein and get essential nutrients that can only be found in animal meat, such as vitamin B12. However, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods products contain B12 through highly processing different ingredients. Likewise, I have never tried these products because the concept grosses me out and I personally feel so much better when I do not eat processed foods. The influence that my mom had on me at such a young age and processed

"health" foods, specifically plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA), sparked my interest in this study.

The example of my mom influencing me to become a vegetarian is one of many examples of the impact that relationships have on food decisions. The people we surround ourselves with can strongly influence our food decision-making processes. Relationships with family, friends, and significant others can help establish norms, shape our identity, and ultimately influence our decisions. This study will explore the role of communicative networks in an individual's food decision-making process.

In addition, advertisements, including food labeling, are prominent factors for persuading a consumer's behavior in terms of food and diet choices. Oftentimes, consumers rely heavily on food packaging as educational mechanisms to inform their decisions. While food packaging and labeling can be helpful, it can also be misleading. As previously mentioned, products like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods use health claims, such as "plant-based, non-GMO, gluten-free, or dairy-free." My interview findings demonstrate how consumers correlate these attributes with healthy food. However, my findings also indicate how consumers believe that processed foods are unhealthy. As a result, the contradicting health claims of these PBMA make it difficult for consumers to recognize what (un)healthy food is.

Vegetarian and vegan diets are exponentially rising in the United States due to health and environmental concerns. As a result, so are PBMA. Companies like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods create lab-grown meat alternatives in order to appeal to a consumer base besides vegetarians and vegans. Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods were introduced in 2009 and 2011, making them relatively new. Their products are different than traditional plant-based products like tofu or tempeh because these PBMA are designed to mimic the traits of animal

meat. In relation to animal meat, these have an almost identical texture, taste, aroma, appearance, and nutritional facts (Zhao, 2022, par. 1). Through the usage of strategic health claims on the food labeling and in advertisements, these products are intended to persuade traditional meat-eaters to switch to a plant-based diet. Due to how highly processed these PBMA are, questions remain if they are a healthier alternative to animal meat.

Further, we need to understand how communication, persuasion, food labeling, and other advertisements' roles in shaping a consumer's identity, behavior, and food decision-making process. We need to investigate the new PBMA on the market and how they can contradict a consumer's understanding of unhealthy versus healthy food. A qualitative approach is necessary in order to accomplish this because it allows me to better understand how participants' personal experiences alter and shape the ways in which we live and communicate.

Preview of Study

Having explained the premise of my study and provided a rationale for my project, in chapter 2, I review existing literature on food and identity to see how the food we eat and the relationships we create can influence our decisions. Next, I relate healthy and unhealthy foods are defined in the United States. This section also dives into processed foods and the negative effects they can have on an individual. I then look at previous literature on plant-based eating and the new PBMA on the market. Lastly, I investigate advertising and persuasion. I primarily focus on "traditional" and social media advertising, food labeling as a form of advertising, and the persuasion tactics used by advertisers.

In chapter 3, I describe the research methodology for my study. This is a qualitative study completed through interviews with college students, recent college graduates, and a professional nutritionist. I used recruitment methods composed of snowball sampling, emails, and peer

networks and associations. Chapter 4 illustrates my findings from my interviews through a set of four themes I developed through coding. There are four main themes: education about food, difficulties defining (un)healthy food, food decision-making, and Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods. Chapter 5, an additional findings chapter, investigates the persuasive strategies of Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger's food labeling and advertisements. This additional chapter is necessary to my research because it further demonstrates how consumers might internalize these advertisements as a way to affect their food decisions. Finally, chapter 6 discusses how my findings contribute to answering my research questions:

R1: What are factors affecting people's perspectives and decisions about food choices?

R2: How do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?

Before approaching my own qualitative study, in chapter 2, I must study information from previous literature on food and identity so that I can see the similarities and differences to my own research. Then, I'll look at food and health in order to further develop an understanding of how government policies and individuals define (un)healthy food. I also need to further my knowledge about plant-based eating and PBMA. Lastly, advertising and persuasion must be analyzed in order to recognize the influence that they have on consumers. Chapter 2 will showcase the areas needed to inform my own research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Past literature has heavily examined people's relationship with food, how people make food buying decisions, the health implications of processed foods, and food labeling and advertisements as persuasive tools. Additionally, there has been some research done on the perception of healthy food by different individuals, particularly why people think that plant-based diets are healthy. However, there has been little research done on how people make their food decisions surrounding PBMA, specifically Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods.

In this literature review, I first review research about food and identity. It is important to understand the ways that food impacts a person's identity in order to understand how individuals make their buying decisions about food. I then examine the impact that relationships can have on an individual in regard to their behavior, specifically looking at relationships with family and friends.

Food and Identity

Oftentimes, people hear the saying "You are what you eat." People may assume this literally or figuratively. However, previous research shows that this metaphor can indeed signify a person's identity. Many factors contribute to how food constitutes one's identity. From biological, cultural, nutritional, and symbolic functions, food aids in constructing a person's individual, collective, psychological, and social identities (Fischler, 1988, p. 275). Food is central to a person's cultural identity because people grow up eating foods belonging to their cultures (Fischler, 1988). Culture can be defined as "the beliefs, values, and attitudes practiced and accepted by members of a group or community" (Almerico, 2014, p. 6). In addition to helping construct one's cultural identity, food also aids in constructing a person's social identity.

Stano (2016) states, "Food not only is an instrument of cultural identity, but it also represents a powerful means of contact with different cultures" (p. 83). Eating is a social activity, as it is oftentimes done in social settings. Food can help contribute to a person's sense of belonging, which brings me to my third point of food contributing to a person's collective identity. Fischler states, "Food and cuisine are a quite central component of the sense of collective belonging" (Calvo, 1982). Food has the power of creating a collective belonging which binds people together.

A way for a person to build their individual identity is based on the types of foods that one consumes. Caplan (2013) found that whether vegetarians sometimes eat meat is less important "than that people define themselves as vegetarians in the first place as part of their individual identity" (p. 15). Other studies have specifically researched vegans and their identities. There is a continued rise in the United States of self-identified vegans, as they have "tripled from 1% in 2012 to 3% in 2018, now comprising about 10 million Americans" (Gheiman, 2021, par. 1). Literature found that vegans have strong beliefs about not eating animal products (Phua, et al., 2020). However, many individuals who follow a vegan diet may not adhere to being fully vegan. In other words, "the fact that many people who follow a plant-based diet call themselves 'vegan' while not necessarily eschewing behaviors beyond diet, such as avoiding wearing leather, going to zoos, or horseback riding" (Gheihman, 2021, par. 18).

Family, Friends, and Food Choices

Family and friends have a strong impact when it comes to making decisions not only in life, but also with food. It can be argued that the aspects of human interaction are motivational towards behavioral outcomes. There are many factors that contribute to food decision making, including, but not limited to, cultural, personal, and social influences. Previous studies have

demonstrated that cultural ideals are the most important influence for making food decisions.

Cultural ideals are defined as "the learned systems of rules, maps, and plans by a group of

people" (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009, par. 28). Different cultures will assess and judge food behaviors

to their understanding. When "people are socialized and accultured into cultural and subcultural

ideals, they selectively invoke and perform in constructing food choices" (Sobal & Bisogni,

2009, par. 28). For example, previous research on Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods

demonstrated that a barrier these companies face is due to "deep-rooted cultural identity of meat"

(Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 2). People may be hesitant towards adapting a new diet or food choice

because it can be seen as abandoning that sense of belonging to culture.

Every person is different, meaning that every person has their own opinions about the

types of foods they consume. Personal factors are constantly developing and changing overtime

and acting as an influence for food decisions and behaviors. These factors include "physiological

factors (e.g., genetic predisposition to disease, sensory sensitivity to food tastes), psychological

factors (e.g., food preferences, personality), and social factors (e.g., gender roles, parent

responsibilities)" (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009, par. 29). Personal factors are important in food

decision making because it allows an individual to define their food behaviors. For example,

some common ways that people may describe their food behavior and choices are "vegetarian,"

"picky eater," "healthiest eater I know," "good cook," or "flexible eater." Although otherness

affects food decision making, at the end of the day individuals have the power to make their own

decisions.

Lastly, previous research has demonstrated that social factors are responsible for

constraining or facilitating food choices because eating can be seen as a social activity. Previous

literature reveals, "most eating occurs with others in commensal units where the interests of

many people are negotiated and managed, and food choice decisions are made not as individuals but as groups" (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009, par. 31). Groupthink might permit or inhibit an individual's choices in regard to food. Studies have shown that some relationships can "provide opportunities for making food decisions, such as supportive families that encourage individuals to make healthy choices" (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009, par. 31). For example, oftentimes when people are wanting to improve their diet, they are encouraged to find a friend or someone who shares that common goal. Although relationships have the power to encourage healthy eating choices, they also have the power to discourage them. Sobal and Bisogni (2009) demonstrate, "other relationships constrain food choices, like obligations to eat with coworkers, and may inhibit selection of settings and foods that are tasty or considered healthy" (par. 31). For this study, it's important to understand the impact that relationships can have in terms of making food decisions.

Food and Health

In this section, I analyze previous literature in order to help define healthy and unhealthy diets in the United States. I also examine research about processed foods and the negative impacts that they have on people.

Healthy Diet

Not only do people from different cultures eat different foods, but they also consider different food attributes with healthfulness. A study examined Eastern and Western cultures, specifically India and the United States, and how consumers from these countries perceive health differently. This study revealed that consumers from India "believe that taste is intrinsically embedded in healthiness, therefore, associate healthiness and taste in a positive way" (Dubé, et

al., 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the authors concluded that individuals from the United States, correlated unhealthiness with the food being "tasty" (p. 2). What counts as a "healthy" diet varies culturally and nationally (Almerico, 2014, p. 6).

For the purpose of this research, I will refer to how the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) defines a healthy diet, which is updated every 5 years by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and of Health and Human Services (HHS). They have established four dietary guidelines for Americans: "follow a healthy dietary pattern, customize and enjoy food and beverages to reflect, focus on meeting food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages, and limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium, and limit alcoholic beverages" (U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, p. 4). The current DGA has noticed that certain foods are associated with positive health outcomes. Healthy foods are "vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, lean meats and poultry, seafood, nuts, and relatively lower consumption of red and processed meats, sugar-sweetened foods and beverages and refined grains" (U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, p. 23). In contrast, the DGA has studied detrimental health outcomes related to unhealthy eating patterns. Based on previous research, processed foods are generally unhealthy and have many adverse side effects.

Processed Foods

Many studies have been completed on processed foods and the negative effects that these foods have on people, both physically and mentally. Processed foods can be defined as "the alternation of foods from the state in which they are harvested or raised to better preserve them and feed customers" (Weaver, et. al, 2014, par. 2). These foods are viewed as easy, convenient, and sometimes even healthy foods (Warner, 2013). However, Sadler et al., (2021) argues that

"their healthfulness has increasingly come under scrutiny" (p. 1). Both processed foods and ultra-processed foods pose a threat to a person's health (Gramza-Michalowska, 2020, par. 2). In Gómez-Donoso's (2020) article, ultra-processed foods "typically contain little or even no intact food, and are depleted in dietary fiber, micronutrients, and other bioactive compounds" (par. 4). These foods provide little to no nutritional value and have adverse effects on mental and physical health, but are rising in popularity throughout the United States (Gramza-Michalowska, 2020, par. 1).

Effects of Processed Foods

The consumption of processed food can be directly related to diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Gramza-Michałowska, 2020, p. 1). The dangerous food additives in processed foods have resulted in a link to cancer (Monge & Lajous, 2018, par. 5). Other systemic effects in relation to processed foods include high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol. For instance, Oliveira (2020) indicated that systolic and diastolic hypertension in adolescents was directly associated with processed foods, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, pizza, chips, and sausages (par. 5). Processed foods tend to increase low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL), whereas plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables decrease LDL. Due to Americans' high consumption of processed foods, citizens tend to have higher LDL. (Rahkovsky & Gregory, 2013, par. 8).

In addition to processed foods having a direct link to different diseases, they also are correlated with obesity. A study found that "ultra-processed foods provide 58% of energy intake and 89% of added sugars in the American diet" (Juul, et al., 2018). This consumption of processed foods is not only increasing in the United States, but also globally (Cordova, et al., 2021, p. 1). The intake of these foods is a major issue today in regard to COVID-19 because

obese patients diagnosed with the disease are strongly associated with intubation or mortality (Palacios, et al., 2021, p. 8). Furthermore, processed foods can be linked to obesity, which increases one's risk for other health consequences.

While there are many facts about the negative impact that processed foods have on physical health, it is even more astonishing that they can be detrimental to mental health. Through cooking and processing fruits and vegetables, many of the nutrients are depleted. As a result, Brookie et al., (2018) explained that raw foods are more beneficial to a person's mental health (p. 1). Depression is very common in the United States and can be linked to processed foods (among many other reasons). Gómez-Donoso, et al., (2020) found that "participants with the highest UPF [ultra-processed foods] consumption showed a 31% higher risk of developing depression" (par. 43), although the reasons for this are unclear. In the big picture, processed foods can negatively affect an individual's mental and physical health.

Why are people consuming these foods despite how they negatively affect their health? People still choose to consume highly processed foods because they are typically cheaper than healthy, nutrient dense foods (Powell & Chaloupka, 2009). Additionally, Nicole (2013) found that few people are knowledgeable about the ingredients in their foods. In order to prevent this problem, another study suggested that education is needed on processed foods, especially in low-income areas in the United States (Samuel et al., 2014). Likewise, the regulations around these types of foods are weak in the United States. Mesnage and Antoniou (2018) claim, "Despite the known toxicity of adjuvants, they are regulated differently from active principles, with their toxic effects being generally ignored" (par. 1). Although there is a general lack of awareness about the negative effects of processed foods, there is, conversely, also a marked increase in people

adopting vegetarian and vegan diets. A vegetarian diet is one that eliminates the consumption of

animal meat, whereas a vegan diet prohibits the consumption of any and all animal products.

Plant-Based Eating

According to Joshi (2020), vegetarian and plant-based diets are growing in popularity,

and as a result, so are the substitutes for animal meat (par. 1). These diets are rising due to

people's environmental concerns about the effects that meat has on the planet, as well as for

other health related reasons (Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 1). Additionally, plant-based diets are

becoming more popular because research has shown that they provide "treatment for a wide

range of lifestyle-related diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, and obesity" (Joshi, et al.,

2020, par. 1). Traditional plant-based meat/protein substitutes such as tofu, tempeh, and seiten,

and processed vegetarian meat products have been present in society for centuries (Zhao, et al.,

2022, par. 1). Although studies have shown that vegetarian diets can better a person's health and

the environment, these traditional plant-based products often fail to persuade meat lovers (Zhao,

et al., 2022, par. 1). However, technological advances are pushing omnivores to make this

switch. Recently, "with advances in food processing technology, a new generation of plant-based

meat alternatives (PMBA) have entered the market with meat-like texture, appearance,

nutritional facts, aroma, and especially taste" (Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 1). Due to the growing

demand in meatless meat products, the companies Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods launched

their mimicry of meats.

Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods

Beyond Meats and Impossible Foods are different traditional plant-based meat products.

Their products are "expected to be appealing to a broader consumer base, including not only

vegetarians, but also traditional meat-eaters... and new consumers represented by meat reducers

and flexitarians" (Szejda, et al., 2020, as cited in Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 2). In order for these new creations of meat-like products to exist, they are ultra-processed. Research reveals that,

> "Beyond Meat products use a mixture of plant proteins such as peas to create a meat-like texture and apply beat extract to present the pink color; Impossible Foods are made from a blend of soy and potato protein with the inclusion of soy leghemoglobin to create the characteristics of meat" (Fraser et al., 2018, as cited in Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 3).

Studies have shown that PBMA are intended to benefit economic, social, and environmental concerns, but they still face some barriers (Zhao, 2022, par. 8). Previous research notes "given the fact that ultra-processed food causes excess caloric intake and weight gain in general, it still remains unclear if PBMA can be considered the absolute healthy alternative relative to meats in daily consumption" (Hu, et al., 2019, as cited in Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 8). According to Zhao (2022), these new imitations of animal meat products are wanting to appeal to a new generation of meat-eaters by offering them benefits of animal meat and plant-based eating, but it is questionable if they are the solution due to how highly processed they are (par. 8).

Advertising and Persuasion

Although there are multiple factors at play for how a consumer makes food choices, advertising is influential in this process. Advertising is important because it can increase a product's brand awareness and purchase intent. Persuasive communication is utilized by advertisers because it

> "has the potential to attract customers and develop brand awareness and loyalty, which can be achieved by using persuasive strategies, i.e., a set of actions to convince consumers to buy a product based not exclusively on rational factors, but especially on emotional and sentimental ones" (Silva, et al., 2021, p. 1).

These persuasive communication strategies are seen in advertisements because they can relay an emotional and functional benefit to the consumer in order for them to buy the product.

In regard to food advertising, advertisers must be creative in order to change a consumer's behavior. Previous research demonstrates the following as popular and persuasive advertising campaign strategies:

"communicate directly with the target population in order to change their behavior, use the strategy of advocating for policy changes with policy makers, involved professionals, businesses, and the general public, and include the goals of increasing access to more healthful food, increasing healthful food options when eating out, encouraging healthful food choices through price structures, and providing easy or free distribution of vitamin and mineral supplements" (Snyder, 2007, p. 36).

In order for advertisers to get their message across, they must use different communication channels. For example, "communication channels may include media (such as television and pamphlets) and interpersonal sources of information (such as counselors, friends, and doctors)" (Snyder, 2007, p. 36). From television to friends, advertisers need different ways to pass-on their information. Furthermore, advertising campaigns are utilized to convey new information to a target group in order to promote behavior change.

"Traditional" and Social Media Advertising

When talking about advertising, most people probably think of traditional advertising channels such as (but are not limited to) television, radio, print, and outdoor. More than twenty years ago, traditional advertising was seen as how "the consumers have no control over the order in which they are exposed to information" (Bezjian-Avery, et al., 1998, p. 24). With growing technological innovations, advertisements are different from how they used to be. Nearly two

decades ago, mass media advertising was being recognized as decreasingly effective and could even be said to be "on its deathbed" (Rust & Oliver,1994, p. 1). While traditional advertising strategies are still effective, newer research has shown the rising popularity and effectiveness of social media as a means for increasing consumers' desire.

Social media advertising is distinct from traditional advertising because "they boost interactivity and active communication among users in real time (Owen & Humphrey, 2009)" (Yoo et al., 2018, par. 5). Audiences are able to interact with advertisements that are portrayed on social media platforms. Interactive marketing allows for a consumer to directly connect and communicate with a company. Bezjian-Avery et al., (1998) exhibited that interactive marketing is much more superior than traditional advertising when comparing their influences on consumers (p. 24). Many companies today are utilizing social media as a means for advertising because it is a quick, simple, and cheap process for conveying information. Researchers Balaban and Racz (2020) claim, "To take advantage of the large-scale use of social media, the relatively low costs of campaigning in this particular virtual space almost every brand is present on at least one of the popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. (Voorveld, 2019)" (p. 46). With an increase in technology development and usage, many brands use social media to publicize their products.

While social media is growing in popularity, it can be difficult to assert what is 'real' and what is 'fake.' As with anything, people should not believe everything that they read or see to be accurate. Social media advertising can be dangerous because "any individual can share content without 'fact-checking or editorial judgement' (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017a)" (Chiou & Tucker, 2018, p. 3). Correspondingly, Chiou and Tucker's (2018) study has examined anti-COVID-19 vaccination movements and how misinformation on these types of advertisements

can spread like wildfire on social media. The same can be seen for food advertisements on social media.

Food and Health Advertising

When examining food choices in the United States, it is also important to examine the effects that advertisements have on these decisions. Advertisements have the power to not only convey information, but also persuade and influence behavior. Companies utilize different advertising strategies in order to affect a person's buying practices. In terms of food advertising, "strategic product naming influences consumers' perceptions of snack food products' healthfulness and nutritional content" (Verrill, et al., 2020, par. 1). This can be a problem because a consumer might believe that a product is healthy based on the name. While persuading may seem similar to influencing, it differs in that persuasion requires trust in order to change a consumer's behavior (O'Shaugnessy, 2003, p. 8). Effectively persuading an audience can be tough because "it must do so without disinformation, without deliberately omitting any of the products' fundamental properties, and without generating or accentuating misunderstandings or errors that affect the way we prepare and plan our diet" (Arnaiz, M., 2001, par. 36). In order to successfully persuade a consumer's attitude, advertisers become strategic.

When analyzing food and health advertising, previous research demonstrates the methods used to persuade a consumer's point of view about a product. As for any type of product, "food marketing channels include television advertising, in-school marketing, product placements, kids clubs, the Internet, toys and products with brand logos" (Story & French, 2004, par. 1). In addition to influencing consumers' perceptions about products, previous research explains how food advertisements can promote unhealthy lifestyles. Arnaiz (2001) insists that food advertising "encourages homogenization of the diet, consumption of foods that are hardly nutritious or are a

completely innutritious, and disinformation about the characteristics, properties and functions of the goods it promotes" (par. 3). In other words, food advertisements have the power to convey unhealthy diets.

Food Labeling

In order to communicate product benefits to a target market, advertisers must be well aware of what and how they want to convey their message. Oftentimes, advertisers use a wide variety of media as means for communication, including how food is labeled. Previous research demonstrates, "television commercials may be used for product demonstrations, print advertisements may be used to communicate more detailed information and to establish a brand image, *and product packaging may be used to attract consumers at point of scale*" (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 10, emphasis added). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is more concerned with regulating advertising of food products, whereas the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) concerns itself surrounding the labeling of food. Understanding food labeling is helpful to my own research because consumers respond to these labels differently based on how reliant they are on health claims and nutrition information (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 12).

Health claims on food labeling can oftentimes be misleading, as advertisers are wanting to promote any health benefits on a food product (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 13). A study demonstrated how product naming and advertisements can influence a person's decision when choosing a product. This study illustrated that consumers who identified the word "vita" on foods believed those types of foods to be more healthful, but in reality, the nutrient contents were the exact same. Verrill et al., (2020) claims, "product names have the potential to appear to a variety of consumer values" (par. 3). Previous research demonstrates that food labeling can be a

form of advertising because "while food labels are required to include nutrition information, some consumers ignore this information and rely primarily on advertising claims and on personal experience in forming judgements about food products" (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 15). Food labeling pushes consumers to form their opinions and decisions based on the advertisements they have seen about a product.

There have been countless studies on food labeling and the impact that food packaging has on a consumer's buying decisions (Mazis & Raymond, 1997; Aday & Yener, 2014; Bandara, et al., 2016). Although there are many factors that contribute to a consumer's buying behavior, previous research has demonstrated that packaging and labeling are the most important communication and informational tools in understanding why people buy or try certain foods (Aday & Yener, 2014, p. 385). Food labeling aims at helping consumers make informed decisions about the food they buy, but also serves as a marketing tool (Aday & Yener, 2014, p. 385). In addition to the vita example above, researchers also saw how consumers look at food package labeling and "buzzwords," such as natural, healthy, organic, dairy-free, and non-GMO. These words "demonstrate the halo effect of 'clean' and 'natural' products – 'naturalness' is often equated with healthfulness" (Negowetti, 2020, p. 130). Although consumers believe these features to be 'healthier' and 'safer to eat,' there is a lack of scientific support to support their beliefs. This research demonstrates that consumers can be misguided by food labeling if they are only relying on words that they equate with healthfulness to inform their buying decisions.

If people do not research a type of food before buying it, their exposure to a new food may be solely from the packaging they see. By law, packaged foods in the United States must include the name of the food, amount of product, nutrition facts, ingredient and allergen statement, and the name and address of the manufacturer. As of 2018 and 2019, there are new

federal "meat" labeling restrictions and state meat labeling laws. For more legal aspects of labeling PBMA as "meat" see Negowetti (2020). Working within those limitations, advertisers and marketers utilize strategic approaches in order to promote and persuade a consumer's interests or concerns, despite whatever is in a food product.

Consumers often utilize food labeling to try and make informed decisions that will benefit their health and personal values. Bandara et al., (2016) found, "respondents tend to examine the labels when making the purchasing decision due to evaluate the suitability of the food product for vegetarians, religious reasons, to avoid diseases related to food and to check whether the food is organically grown or not" (par. 1). It's important to understand what consumers seek out when they are observing food labels. Previous research demonstrated, "name of the food was rated the most important mandatory labeling information. Food safety, environmental protection, origin of the food and brand reputation were the most concerning factors when observing food labels in the process of purchasing food products" (Bandara, et al., 2016, par. 1). Consumers heavily rely on food labeling as a means for buying decisions because they seek out the health and nutritional benefits of a product through this channel. Furthermore, health is an important factor to consumers when making quality perceptions of a food product.

In order to understand how consumers are informing their buying behavior for food products, we must look at the communication exchange between the food labeling of packaged products and the consumer's willingness to buy. Previous research indicates, "package elements involved visual and informational attributes. Visual attributes (colour, shape, image, design, logo and illustration) were associated with affective side of decision making, while informational elements (labels, instructions, cultural context and segmentation) were related to the cognitive

side of determination" (Aday & Yener, 2014, par. 3). Both visual and informational elements of

product packaging aim at positively persuading a consumer's behavior.

Chapter 3: Methods

Qualitative research "allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events, or objects" (Hennick, et al., 2020, p. 10). I used qualitative research methods of in-depth interviews and textual analysis, applying an interpretive approach in order to understand how my participants' lived experiences and behavior are altered and determined through the many aspects of how they live (Hennick, et al., 2020, p. 10). Observing how people perceived healthy or unhealthy foods personally interests me, but acting as a researcher forced me to disregard my biases and be open-minded throughout the process. My goal was to answer the research questions:

R1: What are factors affecting people's perspectives and decisions about food choices?

R2: How do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?

In this chapter, I detail how I selected participants for this study, as well as who participated. I then describe the IRB approval process I underwent in order to conduct individual in-depth interviews, how I analyzed these interviews, and my coding process. In the following chapter, interviews findings and analysis, I detail the four themes that participants pinpointed in the interviews. During my interviews I learned of the advertisements that participants had seen related to PBMA, which I address in detail in chapter 5 by using methods of textual analysis.

Participants

Sixteen individual interviews were held with college students and recent college graduates (ages 18-25) and one CU Boulder nutritionist between January 12 to February 7, 2022. I set this age limit because this age group is very active on social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021, par. 10) and I was curious to see how young adults make nutrition choices when living on their own. The interview with the nutritionist was conducted in order to gain further insight beyond college students' perspectives about my research questions. The recruitment methods used were snowball sampling, emails, and peer networks and associations. For example, during my sorority's chapter, I made multiple announcements about my research project and asked if anyone would be willing to participate in my study. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if they would be willing to provide me with an email address of someone else who may be interested in partaking in my study. I then reached out to that individual via email, without giving information of the participant who provided me with their email address. All participants' identities were kept confidential in order to promote disclosure and comfortability.

Interview Procedures

In order to ethically conduct interviews, I prepared an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol. I was not allowed to advance in my investigation until granted approval. In following the rules of IRB, I created a consent form that I sent to each participant before the interviews. The consent form detailed important aspects of my study, as well as highlighting the individuals' anonymity. Each participant received the form through DocuSign, and both myself and they signed electronically to confirm consent. Once consent was obtained, I scheduled interviews with each participant during a time that worked best for both of us. In order to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols and convenience, all interviews were conducted over Zoom. I received

permission from all the participants to record the interviews via Zoom. Instead of writing down every answer to each question, I recorded the interviews on Zoom to ensure my attentiveness throughout the interviews. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix A) in order to prepare questions prior to holding the actual interviews. The guide remained the same for each interview, except for the one with the nutritionist. I included 4 questions that pertained to nutritionists only. Although all of my questions were prepared ahead of time, they did not necessarily follow in the same order depending how the conversation proceeded.

The interview protocol consisted of an introduction, opening questions, key questions, closing questions, and a conclusion. The introduction restated the purpose of my study and reiterated the participants' confidentiality and their right to refuse any questions and stop the interview. I then asked basic introduction and demographic questions in order to build "rapport with the interviewee so that they feel comfortable enough to start telling their story" (Hennick, et al., p. 119). Once the introduction part of the interview was completed, I dove into more specific questions related to my research questions.

The first set of key questions were about food related practices. For example, I asked questions about where and why the participants shopped for groceries, how they define "healthy" or "unhealthy" foods, and if they are ever conflicted as to what makes a food "healthy" or "unhealthy. The next set of questions were related to food and identity. I asked each participant about their relationship with food, diets they might have tried, and if they ever research a food before buying it. The third set of questions were related to food decisions and social media. The questions asked in this section pertained to if the interviewee followed any social media influencers who talk about food or diet choices and if they purchase products advertised by these

influencers. Through this, I was able to discover the different influencers that people follow. I then asked questions pertaining to food decisions and traditional advertisements. I asked questions that included, but are not limited to, where people learn about new foods or food trends and the compelling nature of advertisements for trying or avoiding specific foods. Within my interviews, I asked participants to identify any social media accounts or influencers that promote food products, as well as any advertisements about Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods that they were aware of. I selected Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods as specific examples of processed 'health' foods because they are relatively new on the market and I was curious to uncover the participants' different opinions about them. Depending on the participants' answers, I asked or skipped additional follow-up questions. My goal for each interview was for them to feel more like a conversation rather than a test. The complete interview protocol is attached as Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Once I concluded the interview process, I transcribed each Zoom recording with Transcribe in Word in Microsoft 365. I was able to save time by using this program instead of transcribing by hand. When Transcribe would not catch certain words or sentences from the interviews, I double checked the recording to ensure accuracy. I then printed off each interview and color coded them for common themes. Initially, I coded the interviews based on the different types of questions asked (i.e., food related practices questions, food and identity questions, food decisions and social media, etc.). I coded them for consistencies and discrepancies throughout each set of data. When a consistency emerged, I knew that I had found a common theme. However, when discrepancies appeared, I realized that some answers were not supported enough and therefore were unrelated to my own research questions. The amount of text I coded

depended on certain factors, as coded segments can range from a single line of text to several paragraphs (Hennick, et al., 2020, p. 227). During my coding process, I specifically noted some quotations from participants that I found useful or insightful to my study. However, I also paraphrased parts of my participants' answers and incorporated that into my coding. For instance, when participants told me their reasoning as to why they liked or disliked Beyond Meat and/or Impossible Foods, rather than writing down their entire statement for my coding, I used terms such as, "better for environment," "red meat is unhealthy," "vegetarian friendly," and "tastes like meat." This is an acceptable practice in interpretive qualitative approaches because I was able to make sense of the participants' phenomena. Since all of the participants' identities were kept confidential, each person was assigned an alias name for this write-up.

The primary codes that I identified are: education about food, defining healthy vs. unhealthy food, advertisements and social media influencers as education or misinformation, food decisions and thinking, and opinions about Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods. This last category was significant enough that it led to additional textual analysis of advertising and food labels for the two companies, further explained in chapter 5. These codes resulted in four primary themes from participant interviews, detailed in the next chapter. They are:

1. Education from food

2. Difficulties defining (un)healthy food

3. Food decision-making

4. Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods

After the interviews were concluded, I researched the identified social media influencers and accounts in order to grasp a better understanding as to why participants follow them. Likewise, I researched advertisements about Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods that were

named. From there, I chose advertisements to be used in my textual analysis, which also became data for this project. The question, "Why do people perceive plant-based food as healthy?" became the driving question I used when conducting my textual analysis.

Researcher Reflexivity

My positionality as a researcher can affect several aspects of my methods and interview protocol, as well as my interpretation of the data. Although I tried to avoid all pre-established biases of my own when interviewing and analyzing the data, my positionality still effects these aspects. Specifically, I am a senior at CU Boulder studying communication, which affected my choice of participants and site. Due to convenience and accessibility, I reached out to friends, family, and women in my sorority to be interviewed. In addition, my passion for health and activity on social media influenced my topic and research questions, which are informed by my curiosity to see how my experiences aligned with my participants' experiences. Given my positionality, both my interview questions and themes that emerged from coding my data reflect my identity and relationship with health and food as a vegetarian college-aged woman from a health-conscious family.

Chapter 4: Interview Findings and Analysis

This chapter explains my findings based on interviews with participants, exploring the research questions:

R1: What are factors affecting people's perspectives and decisions about food choices?

R2: How do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?

I found four common themes from my interviews: 1) education about food, 2) difficulties defining (un)healthy food, 3) food decisions, and 4) food practices. The themes named have some sub-categories, explained below. Through this analysis, I was able to answer my first question, and amended my second one to look at food-related persuasion strategies *other than* social media influencers, for reasons I explain below.

Theme 1: Education about Food

From the interviews, I was able to better understand how people define what constitutes food to be healthy or unhealthy. The ways in which people educate themselves about food contributed to how they make sense of these definitions. The main sources of education for individuals were social media influencers, celebrity endorsement, and mass media such as documentaries, books, and podcasts. Individuals also seemed to learn about food from those around them, however, they were more inclined to make their food decisions based on their relationships.

Social Media Influencers

The participants had no prior knowledge as to what types of questions I would be asking them. With that being said, I was surprised that all 16 of them have social media accounts. The

main accounts that they use are Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat.

Technology usage continues to grow at a rapid pace, so I was not surprised that every participant

who had a social media account (which was all of them) learns about new foods or food trends

through it. Even the oldest participant, Linda, is 39 and admitted that social media is her news

outlet when seeing advertisements about foods. Participants reported seeing HelloFresh

advertisements on TikTok, Dave's Killer Bread on Instagram, Athletic Greens on Instagram, and

Dr. Kellyann's Bone Broth on Instagram. Others identified different recipes that they have seen

on TikTok from influencers. For example, a participant noted that she was never a fan of

overnight oats until she saw Sami Clarke making them on TikTok.

Social media influencers have the power to convey new recipes and information about

food. Influencers like Emily Mariko and Sami Clarke display an attractive aesthetic on their

feeds, by posting recipes that are healthy and easy to follow along with. In addition, 5 of the

participants disclosed that these influencers promote a healthy lifestyle that they personally

would like to attain. Through this, trust and disclosure were identified as reasons why people

follow influencers and buy or try products that they promote. For example, Lucy explained:

"One influencer I follow on Tik Tok is a reliable source for me when buying certain

products. She will do Trader Joe's hauls and rate the items that she buys. This compels

me to buy or not buy the same products as her because I trust her ratings."

Similarly, Betsy follows influencers like Dr. Mark Hyman and Ben Greenfield because "they are

incredible sources and are just helping people to try and live the longest, healthiest life that they

can. I trust them because they do their own research." Betsy admitted that she has been

compelled to buy products that these influencers have advertised. She said, "I started purchasing

protein powder from Dr. Hyman because it has no sugar, and the ingredients are good." If

influencers can establish trust within their following, they can compel their following to buy products in which they promote.

However, only 6 participants trusted the influencers they followed, as opposed to the 12 who were far more hesitant about influencers' credibility as experts. Social media can be a great tool for spreading information, however it can also be abused and lead to the circulation of fake news and misinformation (Chiou & Tucker, 2018, p. 3). Jane stated, "Influencers hold a lot of responsibility in society today. A lot of power to help, but also create misinformation and create stigmas or stereotypes, and fuel bad habits or ideologies for their following." Some of the participants expressed similar statements as Jane's and argued that social media can be a crucial source to rely on when wanting to learn more about new foods. For example, Shea stated, "social media can be very unrealistic and fake. I try to only follow influencers who promote food for fun and will give their honest opinion about a product." Similarly, Hank professed, "influencers do not always convince me to buy a product that they are promoting because I know that they could just be getting paid to endorse something. I will always do my own research first because I know that they might not actually believe what they are saying or that they might have never really tried that food product." Overall, participants felt that while it can be easy to believe anything that influencers say on social media, users must recognize that just because a person has a large platform, they are not always practicing what they are preaching.

Celebrity Endorsement

A common strategy that is used throughout social media and also in more traditional advertisements is the incorporation of celebrities or popular brands as a means of product promotion. Celebrity endorsement is commonly used because it can help a brand build credibility and result in greater exposure to new markets (Knoll, 2017, par. 2). Charlie identified Dominoes

and Subway as places where he has seen celebrities endorsing a brand. He explained, "I have seen Subway commercials with Tom Brady and Dominos ones with Shaq. These catch my attention because both are well known athletes, but they do not necessarily compel me to eat here because they aren't healthy options." Restaurants like Starbucks, Burger King, and Chick Fil A were also commonly identified as promoting compelling messages. For example, Sophie stated, "Chick Fil A advertisements sometimes compel me to not eat as much red meat." Overall, advertisements by popular brands and ones with celebrities can influence some people's decision making about their food choices.

Media

While advertisements can be used as a means of education for food choices, it is important to look at the other tools that people use when wanting to educate themselves on food decisions. In addition to education from social media and influencers, I noticed that many of the participants form their decision making about food or food trends through documentaries, books, podcasts, and Google or internet searches. Demonstrating this, Betsy explained how she went vegan for a year: "I watched a documentary called *The Game Changers* which talked about the optimal diet for athletes. I am no longer vegan because I started to develop a lot of nutrient deficiencies and I lost a lot of muscle." Another participant, Whitney, disclosed, "The documentary *Super Size Me* about McDonald's made me want to avoid eating at McDonald's and fast food chain restaurants in general because I saw how detrimental these places are for my body."

Education from books, podcasts, and movies are motivating in learning about food, but are not the only way in which people gain knowledge. Some participants noted that they like to do their own research beyond those media sources. For example, Betsy explained,

"I read a lot of articles about certain weird ingredients. There are a lot of different words for sugar or chemicals linked to cancer that I won't buy. Yesterday, I went to the grocery store and was going to buy nutritional yeast, but I saw that it has maldexrose in it, which is another word for sugar, so I didn't buy it."

The participants who research a type of food before buying it do so because they are specifically wanting to know about the types of ingredients in processed foods. Based on all this self-education, what are people learning about healthy and unhealthy food choices?

Theme 2: Difficulties Defining (un)healthy Foods

This theme focuses on how people define healthy and unhealthy food. Likewise, individuals disclosed their difficulties in coming to a conclusion as to what they think is healthy or unhealthy.

Defining Healthy

All of the participants believe that foods such as fruits and vegetables are healthy. More specifically, 14 of the participants defined healthy foods as those that have low ingredient lists, non-GMO, unprocessed, fresh, green, gluten-free, plant-based, and organic. While the majority of participants described healthy foods as what was previously mentioned, 5 believed that food is healthy if it leaves that person feeling energized and good. Laura disclosed "I think healthy food is organic, nutrient dense, gluten and dairy free, plant-based, unprocessed, and non-GMO. It is food that does not cause inflammation and is good for a person's overall longevity." Ten of the participants considered a food to be healthy if it benefited their own personal health. In addition, 14 of the participants believed that low ingredient lists are responsible for defining a food as

healthy. Hayley said, "I think healthy foods have low ingredient lists with words that I can pronounce and recognize." This will be further addressed in the following chapter.

Defining Unhealthy

In contrast, individuals were asked how they define *unhealthy* food. 13 of the participants claimed that unhealthy foods are ones that are fried, frozen, processed, and high in sugars, saturated fats, oils, syrups, dyes, and calories. Unhealthy foods connote indigestion and feelings of laziness or overfullness. Betsy remarked "[unhealthy foods] are typically foods that have additives or ingredients that are man-made which your body does not recognize. They do not serve you in the long run." Knowing how an individual characterized healthy versus unhealthy informs how people make food decisions. Although every individual was able to define healthy and unhealthy food in their own words, ironically, 14 of them still feel conflicted as to what are "healthy" and "unhealthy" foods.

Difficulties Defining Foods

Mixed messages about foods and what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy diet are common. As previously mentioned, 14 of the participants agreed that they are confused as to what is healthy or unhealthy because of all these mixed messages and how food packaging can be persuasive. Jane said,

> "I am definitely confused. There is a lot of stigma, especially with diet culture about what unhealthy and healthy food is. There are a lot of processed foods that market themselves as healthy, but when you look at the ingredients of how it's made and processed, it's not actually healthy."

Successful advertisers use creative and persuasive tactics in order to convince consumers to buy their product. While 12 of the participants described healthy food as gluten free, they also explained how the words gluten free can be deceiving. For example, Laura asserted, "Sometimes it can be really confusing. I'll see something in the grocery store that says gluten free and think that it must be a really healthy option, but then realize that there is way more sugar in that product." Ten of the participants expressed that information overload makes it difficult for people to draw boundaries between healthy and unhealthy foods. As Michael explained,

"There is definitely a lot of confusion about what is healthy or unhealthy because there is a lot of information constantly being thrown around in health terms. Companies use certain words to try and make their food appear healthy when it may be the opposite."

Even the nutritionist, Linda, admitted that although she is never personally confused because of her nutritional training, but "I know it's easy for people to be because of the messages that are out there." Another participant noted that the reason she is so confused is because of all the fad diets that promote weight loss or health improvement, but are oftentimes not fact checked or proven to be healthy. Knowing how companies advertise their products and label their foods are the driving factors that contribute to a person's confusion surrounding food choices.

Theme 3: Food Decision-Making

Individuals make different efforts to navigate themselves through the difficulties of food education. However, there is much more at play that contributes to individual buying decisions and thinking about food products. This section looks at the personal strategies and communication tactics that individuals use for decision making.

Taste

  While there are many factors that drive an individual's buying decisions, the main ones that I uncovered in my interviews were taste, relationships, and personal health. Just because a food tastes good does not mean that it is necessarily healthy (Dubé, et al., 2016, p. 2). However, people want to buy food that meets their own needs. For example, 7 of the participants had never tried a pescatarian, vegetarian, or vegan diet because they liked the taste of meat too much. Jack, a college athlete, shared,

> "I did veganuary [eating vegan for the month of January]. I love the idea, but I could not
>
> stick to a vegan diet because I love the taste of meat. However, I try to do meatless
>
> Mondays now because a plant-based diet is healthier and better for the environment."

Participants were hesitant to try a plant-based diet simply because they did not want to sacrifice giving up the taste of meat. Likewise, Shea is gluten and dairy free. She said, "it can be really hard to be dairy and gluten free. I like Kite Hill's cheese because it tastes the most like real cheese, same with Udis' gluten free bread because it tastes exactly like real [gluten] bread." Shea also revealed that it was difficult when she first adopted a gluten and dairy free diet because she not only missed the taste of real gluten and dairy, but also struggled to eat out because of her dietary limitations. Now that she recognizes the brands that taste the most similar to gluten and animal dairy, she said, "good alternatives make it easier for me to stick with eating this way." While taste plays an impact on how the participants make their food decisions, so do relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners.

Relationships

  Half of the participants had tried a plant-based diet due to pressure and conformity within their relationships with friends, family, roommates, and significant others. Self-education can have an impact on decision making, but participants shared that relationships with others can be

just as impactful on their food choices. Olivia, a junior in college, revealed "I was pescatarian for a few years because a close friend of mine gave me a speech on why it was better for my health and the environment." Another participant, Laura, disclosed "I am mostly vegetarian now because my parents and roommate are. I feel uncomfortable cooking meat in my house since no one else eats it." Laura explained how she felt guilty about eating meat around her roommate and parents so out of respect for them, she hardly eats animal meat at all anymore. In addition, Charlie admitted "my girlfriend is vegan, so I eat a vegan diet about 90% of the time now." By looking at how the participants make food decisions, 8 demonstrated that they do so because of their relationships with people who they are close to.

Even past familial relationships have an effect on people's food choices. Six of the participants disclosed that they eat a similar diet now as to how it was growing up. For example, Sophie confessed that she has not tried a plant-based diet because "I grew up in a house that was really big into eating meat, especially red meat. The way I was raised encouraged eating meat and there were never a ton of alternatives in my house." Similarly, Charlie revealed that his mom is "a big influence on [him]" because she cooked and bought the food for his family growing up. He said that growing up, the food in his house was filled with unhealthy snacks, but that his mom would cook lots of protein, such as chicken, steak, and salmon. Although he doesn't buy or eat the unhealthy snack foods that he had in house growing up anymore, he confessed that he indulges in these foods every so often. For example, Charlie said, "my mom would always make Toll House cookies every Sunday night. I know they aren't the healthiest, but sometimes when I want something sweet, I'll make them because they remind me of when I was little." These participants explain the influence that social relationships can have on eating behavior and buying decisions.

The social influence of interpersonal communication theory shows how an individual's attitudes and beliefs are shaped by others (Smith & Carpenter, 2018, par. 1). Within this theory, norms are established, ultimately shaping an individual's behavior. The social influence of interpersonal communication is a driving factor for persuasion. This theory states, "people tend to spend time with and maintain social relationships with others. Once people develop relationships, they may encourage their close contacts to act as they do in order to maintain homophily" (Smith & Carpenter, 2018, par. 12). In other words, this theory demonstrates how people persuade one another, resulting in the spread of behaviors. As mentioned by Smith and Carpenter (2018), similarity is a factor of interpersonal communication because people build relationships and socialize with people similar to themselves (par. 12). Their study demonstrated that "seeding campaigns cannot be understood or predicted without taking into account features of the social context and personal characteristics" (Smith & Carpenter, 2018, par. 65).

Personal Preferences

When making decisions about food choices, 15 of the participants acknowledged that they would eat whatever they feel is the best for their individual health. For instance, Shea admitted "I like meat for the protein because I think it makes me feel good and energized throughout the day." She has never tried a vegetarian or vegan diet because of this reason. Elena communicated her reasoning for trying a vegan and gluten-free diet for four months:

> "I was having stomach issues and had gained a lot of weight. I went and had a food allergy test done and found out that I was very sensitive and intolerant to most dairy, meat, and gluten products. I cut it all out and detoxed my body, but found that it was very hard to keep up with."

While taste and personal relationships are contributing factors for an individual's food choices, so is personal health. Whether that means eating meat-rich, plant-based, gluten-free, or dairy-free diets, people want to eat foods that provide them with the most benefits. Even though not everyone interviewed follows a plant-based diet, all 16 participants expressed that a plant-based diet is healthier for the environment. Despite their disclosure about plant-based diets bettering the environment, not everyone follows this type of diet because they feel that eating meat and other animal products benefits their health more. Hank acknowledged, "I think that plant-based diets are great for the environment, but with how active I am, I could never be vegetarian because it would be impossible for me to get enough protein and feel energized." Vegetarian and vegan diets are growing in popularity (Joshi, 2020, par. 1), but 7 of the participants expressed that they could never make the switch to a plant-based diet because it would not personally benefit them.

Theme 4: Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods

Once I was better able to understand how people educate themselves about food, define healthy food choices, and make decisions about their diets, I wanted to investigate the different perspectives and opinions about processed "health" foods, like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods. This section will explore the participants' opinions about these lab engineered foods. Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are relatively new foods on the market, (introduced in 2009 and 2011, respectively) however all 16 of the participants were familiar with them and 8 of them have tried these PBMA.

Taste

Through my interviews, I identified common reasons for why people like or dislike Beyond Meat or Impossible Burger, and what their stance is on them. Both lab-engineered foods

are designed to mimic the taste of real meat, so it was no surprise that 8 of the participants who had tried these foods, all thought they tasted just like animal meat. When asked what she thought of these products, Hayley disclosed "I thought they were good and I really liked them because they still gave the same taste as meat." Julia commented, "they taste really good," and went on to express how these foods have expanded options for vegetarian diets. She noted that they each have, "grown rapidly since hitting the market. I felt like those two (Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods) were the first of meat replacements. There used to not be a lot of options for vegetarians and now there are so many." While the taste of these products is important to participants, so is the fact that they give better tasting options to vegetarians and people wanting to switch to a plant-based diet. Shea revealed "they are good alternatives for people who follow a vegetarian diet." In addition to Shea, 9 other participants expressed that they like these PBMA because not only do they think that they give more options to plant-based eaters, but also that they are better for the environment than real meat.

Environmental Concerns

Environmental concerns are an important factor that drives individual food choices, and all of the participants noted in interviews that they felt plant-based diets are better for the environment than omnivorous or meat-based diets. As stated before, 9 of the participants were in favor of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods because they believed that they are better for the environment because they are plant-based. Sophie said,

> "I think from a health and environmental standpoint that red meat is not great for people, but I still eat it sometimes. I like the new creative vegetarian options that companies like these are coming up with because they are better for the environment."

Laura also agreed that these products are better for the environment, but did not believe that they are the healthiest food option. Laura declared,

> "I think that they are a good incentive in moving people towards becoming vegetarian who would miss the taste of meat. Becoming vegetarian is really good for climate change, but these foods are not the healthiest option because of the ingredients in them."

Although all 16 participants believed that a plant-based diet is better for the environment than an omnivore diet, not everyone agreed that Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods were the correct solution for incentivizing the switch to eating lab-created meat instead of traditional animal meat.

Ingredients

A common theme that I found in regard to 6 of the participants' hesitancy towards lab engineered foods like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods were the ingredients. Although these foods are designed to help people cut back on their consumption of animal meat, the ingredients used are a barrier for some of the participants. In particular, 5 of the participants disclosed that the reason they have not tried these foods is because they contain soy. Although Beyond Meat is soy-free, Impossible Foods uses soy-derived ingredients. Elena admitted that she has tried and liked both of the companies' meatless meat products, but does not incorporate them into her daily diet because of their usage of soy. She affirmed, "I think the concept is great. However, personally, I don't like the concept of soy, so I prefer ones that are vegetable based and have proteins that are not from soy." Another participant, Olivia, who was a pescatarian for a few years, has also tried the products and loved the taste of them. However, "I am allergic to soy so I do not eat them anymore. I think they are a cool alternative because the products offer options for people to go vegan or vegetarian." Only Impossible Foods uses soy in their ingredients, so it is unclear if Olivia thinks that Beyond Meat products also incorporate soy. Linda, the

nutritionist, confessed that she has never tried the products because "at first I didn't know if they were soy based because I personally cannot eat soy based foods. I should probably try them because now I know that they are not all soy based." Although soy was a contributing factor for why the participants do or do not eat Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods products, it was not the only element.

As previously mentioned, 13 of the participants concluded that unhealthy foods are ones that have been processed or altered from their original state. In thinking about these products, some participants were obviously working through the debate, "can fake meat products be healthy alternatives to animal meat if they are so ultra-processed?" In the interviews, 6 of the participants believed that Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are not healthy options because of the long ingredient lists and the process that the products undergo to look and taste almost identical to meat. Jack, a recent college graduate and student athlete, had spoken with a nutritionist before because he played hockey at the D1 level in college. He has gained knowledge over the years and feels as if he has a pretty grounded understanding of what is or is not healthy. He voiced,

> "I have tried both [Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat] and I liked them, but I'm not
> sure if they are the healthiest for you, as I have heard that there are some chemical
> ingredients that might not be great for you. I like that they are providing alternatives to
> meat and giving more options to vegans and vegetarians. But, I would like to know more
> about what is in them and how they are made to know the impact that they have on the
> environment and my body."

Likewise, Betsy, a current student athlete in college, is confident in her abilities to recognize what is healthy or unhealthy. She also believes that these products are damaging to one's self and

the environment. She expressed, "I have not tried them because they are filled with bad chemicals. I think that they do as much damage to the planet, if not more, than just eating meat." Linda, the nutritionist, disclosed

> "I think that the idea behind it was to try to limit the amount of red meat that people consume. But for me, in order for them to look like beef or real meat, there are a lot of ingredients in there that aren't the best. I feel like the ingredient lists are too long for these products. There's a lot of fillers to make them have a pinkish tint like meat, I would rather just eat a hamburger because they are so processed."

Overall, 16 participants found that these "meat-free meat products" open new doors for people curious about wanting to switch to a plant-based diet who don't want to sacrifice their love for the taste of meat, but 6 of the participants argued that these are not yet the solution due to their processing and ingredients.

Answering Research Questions

Through conducting and analyzing my interviews, I was able to answer both of my research questions:

R1: What are factors affecting people's perspectives and decisions about food choices?

R2: How do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?

In regard to my first research question, I found that education about food through social media influencers, celebrity endorsements, and media, how one defines healthy and unhealthy food and the difficulties in identifying the difference, taste, relationships, personal preferences, environmental concerns, and ingredients are the main factors affecting people's perspectives and

decisions about food choices. The social influence theory of interpersonal communication can be commonly demonstrated in my interview findings when examining how participants make food choices. Likewise, norms also affect how people are making their perspectives and decisions about food. Participants echoed the role that identity has in making these decisions as well. In the interviews, participants expressed their confusion around what is healthy or unhealthy food. Food labeling, advertising, and societal norms persuaded and influenced consumers, ultimately leading to this confusion.

What's important to note about social media is that although everyone had accounts on various platforms and many looked up food related items, social media and influencers did not play nearly as pronounced of a role in people's decision making as I had assumed when first planning this research study. In the interviews, I uncovered that there was not enough evidence that social media influencers influenced how people make their decisions about food. Although 13 of the participants said that they follow certain social media influencers because it is where they learn about new recipes, new foods to buy at the grocery store, or diet trends, only one said that they learned about PBMA from social media influencers. This participant could not recall which influencer she heard about PBMA from. However, the people who did discover PBMA through social media said that they only saw advertisements for these foods on the platforms. Instead of seeing social media influencers promote these products, they only saw advertisements of them when scrolling through. As mentioned in the next chapter, 5, instead of focusing on these PBMA social media advertisements, I instead shifted back to the mainstream media and traditional advertisement track for analyzing these advertisements.

Since only one person learned about PBMA through a social media influencer, I altered my research approach and focused on the other channels where people learned about PBMA.

When asked about where people learned about these foods, 10 said they saw them in the grocery store, 13 discovered them from fast food restaurant chains, 8 found them in non-fast food restaurants, 13 saw advertisements for them on TV and the internet, and 9 said they heard about them through word of mouth. Based on where participants were seeing these PBMA foods, there was little to no support on the impact that social media influencers have on people in regard to learning and buying these PBMA.

In turn, this changed my second research question, how do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers affecting people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices? In my interviews, I was unable to find a significant amount of evidence that supported social media influencers influencing people's perspective taking and decision making about processed "health" food. Instead, I turned my focus towards traditional media channels for advertisements. I used an interpretive approach in doing so because although I thought my research was going to lead me one way, I was flexible and open-minded to listening to the participants identify what types of advertisements influence them the most in regard to their food choices. The interpretive paradigm's goal is to understand social reality through interpretation and observation (Hennick, et al., 2020, p. 328). In this case, I applied this paradigm and shifted my approach because social media influencers did not influence the experiences of the participants as much as I thought they would have. I focused my attention on PBMA and how the participants were making sense of these. Due to the contradictions I found in my interviews about processed plant-based foods, I conducted a textual analysis in order to better understand the persuasion tactics being used to try and convince consumers that these highly processed lab-created foods are "healthy."

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis: Persuasive Strategies of Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger Ads

In order to better understand how the participants think and make decisions about processed "health" food, I completed a qualitative textual analysis of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods burger advertisements. Doing so answers my amended RQ2: "how do advertisements about processed 'health' foods, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?" As a reminder, I updated my RQ2 because I was unable to find a sufficient amount of evidence about the role that social media influencers had on the participants' perspectives and decisions about food choices. Because of this, I shifted my focus to mainstream media advertisements as a means of persuasion. In this chapter, I analyze the food packaging of a Beyond Meat Burger and Impossible Burger, as well as a Starbucks advertisement for Beyond Meat and a Burger King advertisement for Impossible Foods. Before analyzing these, I will first address the types of methods I used in doing so.

What are Plant-Based Meat Alternatives?

Throughout the past few years, plant-based diets have been growing in popularity due to environmental and individual health concerns. For decades, there have been plant-based protein options such as tofu, tempeh, and other processed vegetarian meat options (Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 1). Although these products have been around for years, new PBMA have hit the market. These newly ultra-processed meat options are different than previous vegetarian meat options. Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are companies that produce lab-engineered vegetarian meat. As mentioned in the literature review chapter, these new PBMA "have entered the market with meat-like texture, appearance, nutritional facts, aroma, and especially taste" (Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 1). Likewise, as previously mentioned, these companies are targeting a broader consumer-

base beyond vegetarians or vegans. They want to attract meat-lovers by offering them the same nutritional facts and taste of real meat, but without damaging the environment or one's health (Szejda, et al., 2020, as cited in Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 2).

During interviews, I asked participants if they had seen advertisements for Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods. Thirteen of the participants shared that they had seen Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods advertisements in Burger King or Starbucks restaurants. Based on the information that participants provided me with, I researched different advertisements for Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods at these restaurants. The participants could not remember exactly what the advertisements looked like, but based on how they described them, I picked out ones similar to their answers.

Textual Analysis Methods

As a researcher, I put myself in the shoes of the consumer, or in this case, the participants when selecting the advertisements and packages of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods for analysis. During my interviews, many participants disclosed that they had seen or heard about Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods when they themselves are at grocery stores such as Whole Foods, Safeway, and King Soopers. Whenever I am shopping at Whole Foods, I almost always walk by the aisle containing Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods products. The packages that I chose for analysis are pictures I found online, but are the same ones that are in this aisle. From my own interpretation and stance as a researcher, these are the standard packages of PBMA that anyone would see if they too were in the aisle at their own grocery store. I used the naturalistic approach to qualitative research in doing this, meaning that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Hennick, et al., 2020, p. 10). In this case, I noted the packaging

in the natural setting of a grocery store, found images of the same packages to study at home, tried to make sense of the labeling, and interpreted what I was seeing based on my interview findings.

Textual Analysis of Food Packaging

Before analyzing the actual advertisements of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods in Starbucks and Burger King restaurants, I chose to first look at the actual packaging for these foods in order to better understand the visual element of the food labels. Previous research demonstrates how individuals rely on food labels and packaging as a way for decision making. Before launching a food campaign, advertisers must target their market and discover the behavior that they are wanting to change. Food labeling is important because it is the communication means that advertisers utilize in order to get their message across to their target audience in hopes of behavior change (Snyder, 2007, p. 36). The food packaging is what drives the different advertisement campaigns. As stated in the literature review, "product packaging may be used to attract consumers at point of scale" (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 10). In addition, consumers use health claims on food packages as a means for decision making (Aday & Yener, 2014, p. 390.

Beyond Meat Packaging

Below, Figure 1, is an illustration of the food labeling used for Beyond Meat Burgers. The packaging reads, "New meatier taste. Plant-based patties. 20g of plant protein per serving. No soy. No gluten." Beyond Meat is not trying to appeal to vegetarians or vegans, but rather the company is attempting to attract "mainstream consumers interested in healthier forms of meat" (Schroder, 2021, par. 31). Their target audience can be seen in their food packaging through the statement, "35% less sat. fat than a 4ox patty of 80/20 ground beef." Vegetarians and vegans

wouldn't care if their meatless meat patty had less saturated fat than ground beef, but meat eaters

might be more compelled to try this product if it tastes, looks, and even "bleeds" like real meat,

but is "healthier" than actual meat (Szejda, et al., 2020, as cited in Zhao, et al., 2022, par. 2).

Figure 1: Image of Beyond Meat Burger Packaging (Beyond Meat, n.d.)

Another goal of the company is to reduce the environmental impact that animal meat has

(Zhao, 2022, par. 8). Previous literature demonstrated how vegetarian diets are growing because

of environmental concerns. Likewise, my interview findings indicated that all of the participants

believe a plant-based diet is better for the environment. With that being said, it can be assumed

that consumers would believe that this Beyond Burger is better for the environment because it is

plant-based. In addition, this packaging wants people to substitute their meat for meatless

products without giving up the desired taste, texture, and nutrition.

During my coding process, I noticed that all of participants identified "healthy" food as

foods that are plant-based. In my interviews, 14 of participants defined "healthy food" as having

components such as "Non-GMO, gluten-free, and plant-based." This code in particular was important to my steps as a researcher when searching for Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods advertisements. In order to understand why a person may perceive plant-based as healthy, I needed to find advertisements that would convey the plant-based message. As previously mentioned in the literature review, "while food labels are required to include nutrition information, some consumers ignore this information and rely primarily on advertising claims and on personal experience in forming judgements about food products" (Mazis & Raymond, 1997, p. 15). In addition to this, previous literature has demonstrated how norms, which are pre-established by individuals, can influence the judgements they make about food products. Authors Smith and Carpenter (2018) expressed that with norms,

> "phenomena and individuals, acting on either self-interest or altruistic motives, continuously alter the normative contours. Communication is central in this process because it is through communication that members of a social group understand, negotiate, and accept (or reject) these prescriptions, proscriptions, and social sanctions" (par. 8).

In other words, norms can be individually established, but through the usage of communication, people have the power to make their own translation of that norm as a means for decision making.

Based on previous literature and my interview findings, it can be demonstrated that consumers may be persuaded that Beyond Meat is "healthy" food due to the food labeling. This is because food packaging serves as an important informational and communication tool when first exposing a consumer to the product (Aday & Yener, 2014, 385). In examining figure 1, it

can be inferred that participants would think the product is healthy based on how they defined healthy food in my interviews.

In particular, a key "health" benefit identified by all of the participants was plant-based. Although all of the participants identified plant-based as being more "healthful," 7 of them were hesitant towards adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet because they did not want to give up the taste or benefits of meat. However, with the help of Beyond Meat, meat lovers would not have to sacrifice their values. Instead, they can continue to consume "animal" meat while eating a non-GMO, plant-based, and overall "healthier" replacement product. Additionally, in my interviews, I learned that 9 of the participants favored Beyond Meat because they believed that cutting out the consumption of animal meat is better for the environment. Those who are familiar with Beyond Meat and its environmental inclinations may be more inclined to try their products for this reason.

Impossible Foods Packaging

Figure 2 is an image of an Impossible Foods burger patties packaging. The packaging is similar to that of Beyond Meat's. Figure 2 portrays the meatless meat patties and reads, "Burger patties made from plants. 19g of protein per serving. No animal hormones or antibiotics. 0mg cholesterol. Gluten-free." In fine print, under the cholesterol serving, it reads "14g total fat per serving." I imagine that they have the fat content in a smaller print, to make it less likely to stand out. I think that this is because, based on my interview findings, 13 people perceive foods in high fat to be unhealthy, so the company wants to minimize the appearance of this information.

Figure 2: Image of Impossible Foods Burger Patties Packaging (Impossible, n.d.)

Although the packaging does not compare the meatless meat patties to animal meat (as Beyond Meat did), Impossible Foods' target market is also meat eaters. According to the Senior Vice President of Marketing, Jessie Becker, "We built this campaign to introduce Impossible products to consumers nationwide as delicious meat – no qualifications or compromises needed" (Kelly, 2021, par. 2). Likewise, to Beyond Meat, Impossible Foods wants to attract meat eaters by offering them plant-based products that will not compromise the nutrition or taste of animal meat. The company prides itself on reducing the environmental effects of livestock, although this packaging does not convey that message. Instead, they are promoting a plant-based, meat like substitute for traditional meat lovers.

In my interviews, 7 participants noted that they are unwilling to give up meat due to their liking of animal meat's protein and taste. I think that this food packaging could persuade meat lovers to try the Impossible burger patties because the label highlights the nutritional benefits, and the look of these red, raw, and juicy patties radiate the characteristics of animal meat. Based

on how the participants defined "healthy" food, it can be inferred that 14 of them would classify the Impossible burger patties as "healthy" because they "gluten-free," and 16 of them would because they are "plant-based." Although the packaging neglects to mention Impossible's mission of creating more environmentally friendly and sustainable "meat," the participants who are already familiar with Impossible Foods and their motivation, may be persuaded to buy this product. Some of the participants revealed that they are in favor of Impossible Foods because the company strives to make the world more sustainable.

Textual Analysis of Advertisements: Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods

As described above, I selected print advertisements about Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger based on what participants described in interviews. In this section, I explain the history of and what these advertisements look like and how they might persuade a consumer to try these PBMA based on my interview findings.

Participant-Identified "Health" Food Ad of Beyond Meat at Starbucks

Starbucks' first plant-based meat sandwich launched on March 3, 2020 in over 1,400 locations in Canada. Their Beyond Meat sandwich is only available in Canadian locations, however Starbucks' Impossible sandwich, which will be addressed later, is available in the United States. The advertisement in Figure 3 reads, "Introducing Beyond Meat, cheddar & egg breakfast sandwich. Made with Beyond Meat." The following illustration depicts a picture of a Starbucks Beyond Meat breakfast sandwich with the classic toppings of cheddar cheese and egg. It looks identical to any other picture of a Starbucks breakfast sandwich with real animal meat. This ad does not highlight the features of Beyond Meat, such as plant-based or vegan. Starbucks

customers who are not familiar with Beyond Meat may be confused or curious as to what this new "meat" patty is in their sandwiches.

Figure 3: Starbucks Beyond Meat Sandwich Advertisement (Facebook, 2020)

Since this Starbucks ad does not incorporate Beyond Meat's plant-based features into this design, I assume that the only people who would be inclined to try this sandwich are those who possess knowledge of what Beyond Meat is. There is not enough evidence provided in this ad to demonstrate that it would target customers who are unfamiliar with Beyond Meat products. With that being said, this ad is striving to attract consumers who are aware of Beyond Meat and their values. The ad wants to persuade the typical Starbucks sandwich meat eater who is familiar with Beyond Meat to try the same meat sandwich, but in a "healthier" way.

The green colors in the advertisement are potentially planned as a way to point out how Beyond Meat is a "greener" option, and therefore is better for the environment. Customers might internalize the color green and recognize that they might be limiting their resources when eating

green, or in this case, Beyond Meat. However, as previously mentioned, it can be inferred that only customers with prior awareness of Beyond Meat can make this conclusion.

Impossible Foods at Burger King

In August of 2019, Burger King launched their Impossible Whopper at more than 7,000 locations nationwide. Burger King's Impossible Whopper campaign was so successful that it drove 5% of the company's comparable sales (Bugga, 2019, par. 1). Additionally, Burger King's CEO, Jose Cil, noted that the sales were "the strongest level since 2015" (Lamb, 2019, par. 2). Burger King launched the Impossible Whopper because they wanted to attract a new customer market. With the Impossible Whopper, meat eaters who are wanting to cut back on their consumption of animal meat, but not wanting to sacrifice the taste and nutrition of meat might be more inclined to dine at a Burger King restaurant.

The ad featured in Figure 4 reads, "100% Whopper, 0% Beef." The copy also reads "Patty made from plants." The accompanying illustration shows a picture of a Burger King Impossible Whopper with traditional toppings including lettuce, onions, tomatoes, mayonnaise, and pickles. One would not be able to tell that the "meat" patty is vegetarian if the ad did not distinctly state that it is.

Figure 4: Burger King Impossible Burger Advertisement (Carman, 2019)

I think this advertisement is targeted at new and returning customers of Burger King. Based on previous literature and my interview findings, it can be concluded that fast food is not necessarily healthy, but people may perceive plant-based options as more healthful. Impossible Foods are designed to taste, smell, and even "bleed" like real meat. The Burger King ad is trying to convey the Impossible burger's similarity to a real, animal meat burger through this image design. The ad is trying to convey that a customer can consume a copy of a "real" Whopper without feeling the guilt of eating animal meat. Burger King's Impossible Foods campaign was so successful because it opened a new door to a different market segment: meat eaters who are wanting to eat less red meat. Instead of depicting Burger King as a traditional, unhealthy fast-food chain, this ad persuaded consumers that they can still practice healthy eating at their restaurants because Burger King now sell a plant-based meat option.

Participant-identified "Health food" Ad of Impossible Foods at Starbucks

On June 23, 2020, Starbucks introduced the Impossible Breakfast Sandwich in the United States. The advertisement below (Figure 5) can be seen in a Starbucks store on their menu. This

particular image is a photo of the screen for the company's online menu, retrieved on February 24, 2022. The ad details the company's new announcement of incorporating a plant-based meat option into their menus. Similar to the previous advertisements discussed, this illustration portrays a classic image of what appears to be the company's existing meat-based breakfast sandwich, with traditional toppings, including an egg, cheese, and bread. Under the image, the ad reads:

> "NEW Impossible Breakfast Sandwich. We're Introducing a new way to enjoy breakfast at Starbucks! The Impossible Breakfast Sandwich is made with premium ingredients, including an Impossible plant-based sausage patty, aged cheddar cheese, cage-free fried egg and artisanal ciabatta bread. Customers and partners will have another vegetarian (not vegan) option on the menu!"
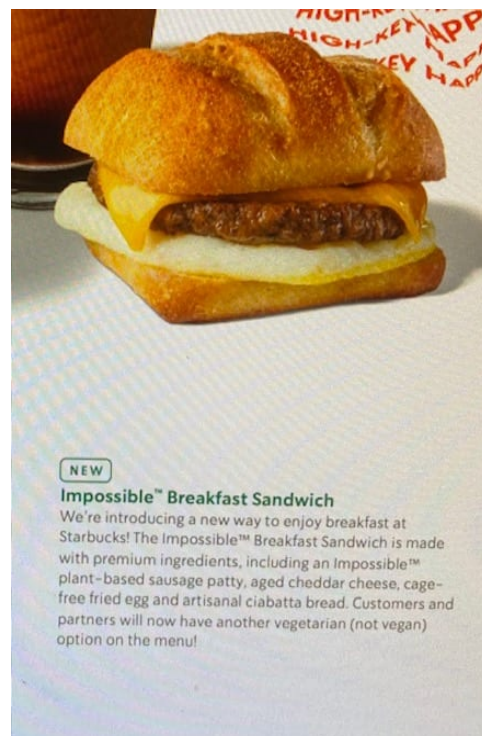

Figure 5: Starbucks Impossible Breakfast Sandwich Advertisement (Walker, 2020)

This plant-based friendly sandwich was launched at Starbucks with Dr. Patrick O.

Brown, CEO and founder of Impossible Foods' goal in mind. He commented, "Impossible Foods

is making plant-based foods that deliver unrivaled taste, nutrition and convenience. We're

excited to work with Starbucks, which shares our mission to make the global food system

sustainable" (Woelfel, 2020, par. 9). Starbucks is wanting to give meat eaters a plant-based

option at their restaurants. As previously mentioned, the advertisement is not necessarily

attracting vegetarians or vegans, but rather consumers who would like to adopt that diet without

forgoing their love for animal meat. Starbucks is striving to provide its customers who are

familiar with Impossible Foods with a more sustainable and environmentally friendly option

through this advertisement. Based on all 16 of the participants believing that plant-based diets

are better for the environment, it can be inferred that these pre-established norms might persuade

one to try this sandwich.

Answering Research Questions

Through studying PBMA advertisements and packaging, I was able to develop a better

understanding of what persuasion tactics advertisers use in order to promote a brand's credibility.

I used an interpretive qualitative approach when picking out which advertisements to incorporate

into this chapter. Through my interviews, I was better able to understand where the participants

see advertisements for Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods. Based on my interview findings

about how the participants defined healthy and unhealthy food, I was able to see how their

understandings align with that of the advertisements and food packaging.

I focused on the characteristics that the participants identified in foods that are healthy and unhealthy. Exploring their opinions of "health" food being plant-based, and "unhealthy" food as being processed, lead me to look into PBMA because of this contradiction. This will help answer my research question about people's perspectives on processed "health" food because they embody the contradiction of being plant-based, which many people understand as "healthy," while also being highly processed, which many people understand as being "unhealthy." In this chapter, I was interested in seeing how these food packages and advertisements can be used as mechanisms for persuasion based on my participants' opinions.

With that being said, the food packages and advertisements that display characteristics of being environmentally friendly, plant-based, gluten-free, Non-GMO, and soy-free might contain a "healthful" connotation to my participants. Additionally, some of my participants refuse to switch to a plant-based diet for fear of giving up the taste of animal meat. However, the packaging and advertisements that display the traditional animal meat benefits may persuade a participant to try them.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this project was to look closely at how people are making their opinions and decisions about processed "health" foods in order to understand how advertisements may influence the food decision making process. By looking at processed "health" foods, specifically Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, I was able to apply what I gained through interviews to inform not only the confusion surrounding food choices, but also how communication effects these decisions. In my interviews, I discovered four themes: education about food, difficulties defining (un)healthy food, food decision-making, and PBMA inclusive of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods.

The first theme, education about food, demonstrated how participants educate themselves about new foods and diet trends through social media influencers, celebrity endorsements, and the media. Originally, I was thinking that social media influencers would play a major part in my research. However, in my interviews, I discovered that participants primarily follow influencers for new recipes and do not learn about processed "health" foods from them. The following theme, difficulties defining (un)healthy foods, explored how participants interpret healthy from unhealthy foods and why it can be difficult in doing so. The next theme, food decision-making, manifested how participants use taste, relationships, and personal preferences as motives for making food choices. Lastly, the third theme, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, explored the participants' opinions about these PBMA. Taste, environmental concerns, and ingredients were demonstrated as to why a person may like or dislike these lab engineered meat products.

The four overarching themes that emerged from my interviews demonstrate how communication, persuasion, and advertisements influence people's perspectives and decisions

about their food choices. The relationships with family, friends, and significant others have the power to influence people's food decisions, whether they realize it or not. Based on previous literature and my findings, it can be demonstrated that individuals will make their food decisions due to social factors. For instance, a total of 7 participants had made a food or diet choice because of their relationships with their family, friend, roommate, or girlfriend. More specifically, some people changed their entire lifestyle by adapting a vegetarian diet simply because their friend told them that plant-based diets are healthier for them and better for the environment. These behavioral decisions, shaped by relationships, further Smith and Carpenter's (2018) understanding of the social influence of interpersonal communication theory. This theory demonstrates how an individual's attitudes and behaviors are shaped by others.

Additionally, through communication and these relationships, norms are established. Norms influence "members of a social group [to] understand, negotiate, and accept (or reject) these prescriptions, proscriptions, and social sanctions" (Smith & Carpenter, 2018, par. 8). Norms are essential to my study in understanding how people make food decisions. For example, Olivia adapted a vegetarian diet because her friend told her that it was better for her health and the environment. In relation to Smith and Carpenter's (2018) explanation of norms, it can be inferred that Olivia accepted the norm that vegetarian diets are better for a person's health and the environment. Relationships and social factors have the power to not only influence a person's behavior, but also shape one's personal identity.

Likewise, personal factors help a person determine and define healthy and unhealthy foods. Because every person is different, so are their opinions, which ultimately affect their decisions. Based on theme 3, food decision-making, individuals rely on their personal experiences and preferences in order to form their opinions and decisions about food choices.

Some people avoid certain foods because they deem them as unhealthy or having negative effects on their personal health. People use their own personal understandings of what healthy and unhealthy foods are in order to benefit themselves the most. Although all of the participants did not hesitate when asked how they define healthy or unhealthy food, most felt conflicted in deciphering what diets and food products are healthy or unhealthy due to the information overload of mixed messages.

Food labeling is one of the most important factors when helping a participant make food choices. Previous research, as well as my findings, demonstrate how consumers rely on food packaging as a means to not only educate themselves about food, but also to make informed decisions about a product. Furthermore, based on this information, food labeling is a tool of advertising because it helps convey information in order to influence decision making. My findings imply that consumers will look for words such as "gluten-free," "non-GMO," or "plant-based" on products when wanting to interpret the health benefits. However, just because a food label may promote personalized health benefits, that does not always mean that it is necessarily healthy.

New PBMA, such as Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, are contradictory of people's opinions about healthy and unhealthy food. Based on the participants' beliefs that a plant-based diet is healthy, whereas a diet consisted of processed foods is unhealthy, these PBMA aid in the confusion about what healthy and unhealthy foods truly are. Likewise, to Verrill (2020), consumers are often persuaded by advertisements that use strategic product naming. In accordance with the PBMA, advertisers are promoting vegetarianism because based on my findings, it can be inferred that individuals associate a plant-based diet as being more healthful and better for the environment. Advertisements, specifically the PBMA ones from chapter 5, are

intended to persuade consumers to the health benefits of the product, but in reality, my findings can infer that they are actually not as healthy as they seem.

After studying how consumers form their identities based off of personal and social factors, I was able to develop a better understanding of the role that communication plays in food decision-making. Additionally, having learned how persuasive advertising, including food labeling, can enhance a consumer's confusion in differentiating healthy from unhealthy food, I can recognize how important caution is in regarding food decisions. In the next section, I explain what scholarly contributions my own research has to those found in the literature review of chapter 2. This past research examines food and identity, food and health, plant-based eating, and advertising and persuasion. My contributions will further explain people's understanding of processed "health" foods, specifically PBMA.

Scholarly Contributions

My study furthers previous research done by Zhao et al. (2022) on PBMA. As a result of Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods being created in 2009 and 2011, little research has been done on these lab-engineered foods yet. In their article, the authors evaluate the demand for PBMA in relation to meats and the growth of PBMA as a whole. Although I was interested in the role that social media influencers played in promoting these PBMA products, I was not able to find much because these foods are relatively new to the market. However, by analyzing advertisements, including food labeling, I was able to grasp a better understanding of a consumer's perceptions about these foods. Zhao et al., (2022) study does not demonstrate the role that advertisements and food labeling of these PBMA can have on a consumer's behavior. With this knowledge, I have also taken into consideration how these PBMA can confuse a consumer's perception of healthy and unhealthy foods.

Social Applications

      In today's world, it can be very confusing to know what types of food are actually healthy or unhealthy. Through my research, it seems that people have a great understanding in defining healthy and unhealthy food, but their confusion arises in response to processed "health" foods. Lab-engineered meats like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods aid in this confusion because their products convey very healthy claims, but, in reality, these foods undergo ultra-processing technologies in order for them to look, taste, and even bleed like real meat.

      Processed and ultra-processed foods can negatively affect a person's physical and mental health, yet the consumption of them are growing rapidly in the United States. Likewise, the food additives in processed foods make it more difficult for a consumer to feel full, resulting in them to eat more of the product. In today's world with COVID-19, I think that it is more important now than ever for individuals to be in good physical health in order to reduce being at risk of severe health consequences. Processed foods are popular because they are typically cheap, easy, and convenient. However, the effects of these foods are detrimental to a person's health.

      Few people are knowledgeable about the ingredients that are in the foods they are consuming. With this in mind, I think that it is important that all schools, especially K-12, emphasize the importance of food education. It can be scary when looking at an ingredient list of a food product and not know how to pronounce the names. With that being said, I also think that stricter food regulations are needed in the United States to ensure that individuals are eating healthy, whole foods, instead of harmful chemicals. Likewise, I think that processed foods should be priced higher and that healthy, whole, unpackaged foods should be cheaper.

      As demonstrated in my study, food labeling and advertisements can oftentimes be confusing and misleading. Similarly, I think that there should be stronger rules in place for how companies are allowed to label and advertise their packaged food products. Although I did not

focus much on social media influencers in regard to PBMA, I still discovered that people are hesitant toward trusting influencers because they are able to post health claims, even if what they are saying is not necessarily true. With that being said, I also think that there needs to be stricter regulations on the internet in regard to what people post on social media, especially those who have large platforms.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few limitations of my study. These limitations include sample size and diversity of participants in terms of attending different universities and gender. Although I was able to interview 16 people, I feel that more interviews would be needed in order to increase the sample size and the quality and amount of data collected. All but 3 participants attended the University of Colorado Boulder. Additionally, 12 out of the 16 people interviewed identified as women. When analyzing previous research, I learned how demographic identities, such as racial and socio-economic status, can impact food choices. However, I did not focus on this aspect in my study. Future research would need to be conducted in regard to this aspect and how these identities could fall into relation with PBMA like Beyond Meat and/or Impossible Foods. Interviewing more participants of different genders and colleges could have added to the richness of my data by allowing me to compare and contrast emerging themes across these factors.

Future research should also entail a stronger focus on social media influencers as an influence for a person's perspective taking and decision-making surround food choices. Due to my sample size and the questions specifically asked about Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, I was unable to find enough supporting evidence on the role that social media influencers have in regard to promoting processed "health" foods.

Conclusion

Throughout life, there are many aspects that shape one's perspective and decision making about food choices. Perspectives are shaped and decisions are made through the environments and cultures that people grow up in, the relationships formed, exposures to advertisements, and the personal preferences and concerns discovered through life. Communication is the foundation of all of these. The social influence of interpersonal communication theory demonstrates how an individual's behavior is shaped by others. Through this, people establish norms which further help construct one's social and personal identity.

Educating oneself on how to identify healthy from unhealthy has countless benefits. However, mixed messages about health claims from social networks, food packaging, and advertisements can make it difficult to draw the line between healthy and unhealthy. Food labeling is the driving force for influencing a person's perceptions and decisions about a product. Consumers will often default to the packaging and labeling itself in order to better educate themselves about food. However, food packaging is at scrutiny because of new PBMA on the market that claim one thing, but the product itself demonstrates something entirely different.

Technological advances are not only impacting how we communicate with one another on a day-to-day basis, but they are also impacting the new types of foods on the market. New PBMA, including Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, are designed to mimic the features of animal meat. It can be difficult when trying to decipher if they are healthy or unhealthy due to the contradicting health claims. However, there is a silver lining, which is being able to recognize when health claims are merely persuasion tactics. As consumers, we must be aware of who we surround ourselves with and the information we allow ourselves to consume as this can help us make informed decisions about food choices, especially processed "health" foods.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Hi, my name is EJ Bill and I am conducting research for my honors thesis. The following questions that I will be asking are a part of my honors project. All of the participants' information will remain confidential and will not be used outside of this research. I will also provide you with my faculty advisor's email in case you have any questions or concerns throughout the interview process. Her name is Dr. Christy Maurer and her email is Christy.Maurer@colorado.edu. You are allowed to decline answering questions and my recording of the interview. If you are uncomfortable with my audio recording, I will hand write your responses to my questions.

Introduction Questions:
1. How are you today?
2. What are your preferred pronouns?
3. What name would you like to go by (alias)?
4. Do you have any questions about my study before we start the interview?

Demographic Questions:
1. Where are you from? Where do you live now?
2. Where do you go to college? (If graduated) Where did you go to college?
3. How old are you?
4. Do you have any social media accounts?

Food Related Practices Questions:
1. Which grocery store(s) do you normally shop at?
2. Why do you choose to shop at this grocery store(s)?
3. How often do you buy groceries?
4. What are things that are commonly on your shopping list?
5. How would you describe the types of foods you buy at the grocery store?
    1. For example, do you think the foods that you buy are healthy, unhealthy, vegan, gluten free, keto, organic, etc.?
6. Growing up, what are the types of foods that were in your home?
7. Would you describe your food choices similar or different from how they were growing up? How so?
8. Today, how do you define "healthy" food?
9. How do you define "unhealthy" food?
10. Are there particular brands or foods that you identify as "healthy" or "unhealthy?"
11. Are you ever conflicted as to what foods are "healthy" and what are "unhealthy" foods? How so?

Food and Identity Questions:
1. How would you describe your relationship with food?
    1. How has this relationship changed over time?
2. Are you, or have you ever identified as a vegetarian, pescatarian, or vegan?

1. If so, how long have you been for?
2. If so, what compelled you to follow this particular lifestyle/diet?
3. If not, why not?
3. Is there any particular diet or food trend that you have tried or are currently trying?
   1. Why or why not?
4. Do you research a type of food before buying it?
   1. What does this research look like?
   2. Can you tell me about a specific example where your research affected a food choice?
5. Have you ever spoken with a nutritionist about food choices?
   1. If so, tell me about your experience.
   2. If not, why not?

Food Decisions and Social Media:
1. Do you follow any social media influencers who talk about food or diet choices?
   1. Do you follow them because they talk about food? If not, why do you follow them?
   2. If so, who do you follow? (get the account name and want to ask this for each)
      1. What about this person's account makes you want to follow them?
      2. What is your opinion of that influencer as a person?
2. Do you purchase products or go to a place that influencers advertise?
   1. If so, why? If not, why not?
   2. If so, tell me about a time when you made a specific decision about food based on an influencer's recommendation.

Food Decisions and Traditional Advertisements Questions:
1. Other than influencers, where do you learn about new foods or food trends?
   1. What are some examples of advertisements about food that have caught your attention?
2. Have advertisements about food ever compelled you to try or avoid specific foods?
   1. Which foods, and which advertisements influenced your thinking about those foods?
3. Where do you see advertisements?
   1. For example, internet, TV, other social media sites, billboards, etc.
   2. Of those examples, which catch your attention the most?

Specific Foods Questions:
1. Are you familiar with foods such as Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods?
   1. If so, have you tried these foods? Why and what did you think?
   2. If not, why not?
2. These are relatively new foods on the market, whether you have tried them or not, what do you think about their existence?
3. Where did you hear about these foods?
   1. Have you seen advertisements for these foods?
      1. Where were those advertisements?
      2. Who was advertising them?

4. When thinking about foods that are healthy or unhealthy, how would you define these foods?
    1. Why?

(Additional Section for Nutritionists Only Questions):
1. How long have you been working as a nutritionist?
2. What is your opinion on lab engineered foods, such as Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods?
3. When talking with clients, how do you define healthy as compared to unhealthy food choices?
4. What advice do you give clients about making healthy food decisions?

Wrap Up Questions:
1. Is there anything else you could tell me about how you make your decisions about food choices?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for your time and participation in my research project. Your information will not be used outside of this research project for any reason. I am utilizing your answers in order to answer my own research questions: What are factors affecting people's perspectives and decisions about food choices? How do advertisements about processed "health" food, including social media influencers, influence people's perspective taking and decision making about their food choices?