

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Going Beyond the *Beyond Meat* Burger: A Political Economic and Comparative Semiotic  
Analysis of Online Advertisements

By

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BA HONOURS IN COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND FILM

APRIL 2020

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### **Abstract**

This undergraduate Honours thesis utilizes political economy and semiotics to explore the political and economic structures, cultural signifiers, as well as the myths that are created within *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burger advertisements. The economic and cultural weight that *Beyond Meat* products currently have in the fast-food market is established through a political economy analysis, demonstrating that their burger is a significant artifact to study. A semiotic analysis is conducted to reveal the myths that are produced in each type of burger advertisement. This thesis explores the power of the cultural and economic signifiers that are associated with both plant-based and beef burgers.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge several individuals for helping me throughout this process of completing my undergraduate thesis. Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Dr. Gregory Taylor for his constant support, honesty and time that allowed for me to complete a thesis that I am proud of. Second, I want to extend my appreciation to Dr. Samantha Thrift for her guidance and encouragement with this year's Honours cohort. I would like to thank Dr. Jessalyn Keller and Dr. Lisa Stowe for being a part of the final stages of my project. Lastly, I would like to thank my partner Brayden Wheeler and my father, Don Grant, for their never-ending encouragement.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The company that has begun to monopolize the plant-based food market is called *Beyond Meat*, and has stated that it is their mission to create “the future of protein” (Beyond Meat, Our Mission, 2020). *Beyond Meat*’s CEO and founder, Ethan Brown, has helped create various plant-based, protein alternative products such as; beef sausage, crumbles, and most well-known, the *Beyond Meat* burger. The *Beyond Meat* burger is the “world’s first plant-based burger that cooks, looks, and satisfies like beef...” (Beyond Meat, Products, 2020). What do consumers think about this product? What does a *Beyond Meat* burger associate itself with, or symbolize, that it has gained marketable traction with major fast-food restaurants such as McDonald’s and A&W?

This Honour’s thesis considers the following two research questions:

- 1.) When analyzing how *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted, in comparison to traditional meat burgers, are different myths produced?
- 2.) When comparing *Beyond Meat*, to traditional meat burgers what is the variation, if any, in their cultural and economic signifiers?

To answer these questions, I apply a political economic and semiotic analysis to four online fast-food advertisements. These advertisements consist of two *Beyond Meat* burgers, and two traditional meat burgers from recent McDonald’s and A&W marketing campaigns. I have chosen to analyze online advertisements, both video and still-image, due to their high circulation in society and engagement levels with consumers. I argue that *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burger advertisements produce different myths, and contain distinct economic and cultural signifiers.

The *Beyond Meat* burger entered the fast-food market in July of 2018 at A&W, and has continued to grow, as these products are now available “in over 58 000 grocery stores, restaurants,

hotels, universities, and beyond” in North America (Beyond Meat 2020). This product’s ability to be a part of initiating a plant-based food movement is significant and worthy of study. The next chapter consists of a literature review, covering a vast amount of research on this topic. All of the work that is referenced in this chapter studies, or examines various elements of plant-based products, or diets. Chapter three discusses my chosen theory and methodology. I explain political economy and semiotics in detail, and demonstrate how both tools work well together for the purpose of this research.

Chapter four is my analysis of the four chosen fast-food burger advertisements. This chapter begins with a political economic analysis of *Beyond Meat* as a company, as well as their burger specifically. Beginning the analysis chapter with a political economy analysis allows for *Beyond Meat’s* political and economic power to be established before analyzing the advertisement semiotically. Finally, I summarize my research, reflect on the research process and offer suggestions for future research on this topic in my fifth chapter.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Political economy and semiotics are methods that are applied in various academic fields, and have been chosen for this thesis to help answer the posed research questions. Scholars in numerous disciplines have used political economy and semiotics to analyze the advertising and products of *Beyond Meat*, and traditional meat companies (Gvion-Rosenburg 1990; Koc et al 2017; Weis 2017; Friedman 2017, and Atkins & Bowler 2001). Researching the work that scholars have produced surrounding my chosen topic provides insight into how they chose, and applied their methods, theories and data. It is important to conduct a literature review to situate this thesis within the current communication and media, and other fields of research. The areas of research that scholarly work is drawn from in this chapter includes: feminist, food, nutrition, environmental, communication and media studies, as well as data from economic and business journals.

By conducting a literature review I am able to discover common themes, methodologies, and gaps in literature that examine plant-based products. It also allows for a greater understanding of the realm of plant-based foods and advertising. How these products are advertised, and recognizing the perception that consumers have regarding plant-based products is key to examining the data for this thesis. This literature review highlights what has been discussed and discovered by scholars within various disciplines, relating to plant-based products, markets and promotions.

A discussion of studies that have been conducted with the focus on consumers' willingness to switch from a meat-based, to a plant-based diet is initially reviewed. This is followed by a section on theories within the realm of food studies. Next, how advertising and marketing has been implemented for plant-based products is discussed, followed by how plant-based products or diets are promoted or are explained in various disciplines. The final section of this chapter focusses on



non-academic sources that possess significant mainstream journalistic perspectives from accredited online journals such as *Forbes*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

### **Section 1: Studies on Consumers' Willingness to Switch to Plant-Based Diets or Foods**

The following articles consist of studies that examine consumers' level of willingness to switch from meat centered, to plant-based diets. Many plant-based diets often include meat substitutes or alternatives. The various results from these articles highlight what consumers value when purchasing "meat" protein items, and the barriers that they face if they are not valuing meat alternative products. By learning what is important to consumers and what they perceive about traditional meat products can suggest what factors about meat alternatives, such as *Beyond Meat* burgers, that consumers are wary of. In this section of literature there are common threads that allow for a general consensus of how realistic it is to expect people to adopt more of a plant-based diet, which is where a *Beyond Meat* burger fits in.

#### *Sec. 1(b): Data Collection*

Each of the studies that I reviewed collect qualitative data that determines their results. These studies are concerned with what barriers consumers have when deciding to adopt a plant-based diet. Both studies conducted by Lea et al (2005 and 2006) use questionnaires to gather specific information on participants' perception of plant-based diets. Graca et al (2015) administrate a questionnaire and online survey to collect data regarding "representations of meat, perceived impact, behavioral intentions [and] willingness to change..." (p. 82). Clark and Bogdan (2019) conduct an online survey with twenty-four questions regarding motivations, frequency of consumption and information regarding consumers relationship to a plant-based diet. Learning that a qualitative analysis is consistently utilized by these studies, demonstrates that a qualitative analysis is an appropriate method choice for my research.

*Sec. 1(c): Barriers to a Plant-Based Diet*

Despite various studies finding that there are barriers that consumers face in their willingness to adopt a plant-based diet, there are discrepancies in what is deemed as the strongest barrier. Lea et al (2006), as well as Clark and Bogdan (2019) consider the strongest barrier for consumers switching to a plant-based diet to be the lack of information surrounding the diet. Hoek et al (2012) however, disagree with the studies that credit the lack of dietary information as the strongest barrier (p. 81). Instead, Hoek et al (2012) believe that the main barrier to eating meat alternatives is based on the level of acceptance and familiarity of the product. For example, consumers tend to perceive meat alternatives as having a low sensory appeal compared to meat (Hoek et al, 2012, p. 254), causing them to be hesitant of the product due to its unfamiliarity.

I will note however that, though Lea et al (2006) state the lack of information surrounding plant-based diets as the main perceived barrier, the types of barriers vary in their study based on the demographic of participants. Lea et al (2006) highlight how, when discussing the barriers that people face when switching to a plant-based diet, each demographic has a different barrier. This demonstrates how there is not one way to persuade a general population to eat plant-based food. For example, the strongest barrier for the youngest age group to consume a plant-based diet is “lack of information...” (Lea et al, 2006, p. 831), whereas for their oldest group of participants the strongest barrier is “being unwilling to alter eating habits” (Lea et al, 2006, p. 831). In Clark and Bogdan’s (2019) study, they notice that there is a difference in one’s willingness to try plant-based foods depending if they had someone that they trusted informing them on the taste or other aspect of eating a meat alternative, or not. Again, this demonstrates the number of factors that need to be considered when analyzing what seems to be the most productive way that promote meat alternatives.

*Sec. 1(d): Consumer Variety*

One study in particular emphasizes that there is not a singular “type” of consumer (Graca et al, 2015). Instead, there is a spectrum that creates an understanding of where consumers can be regarding their willingness or readiness to convert to a plant-based lifestyle, including their reduction in animal product consumption. Understanding this is crucial to this thesis, as it is aiming to develop a way that will help promote meat alternatives, such as *Beyond Meat* burgers, to the largest number of people. Graca et al (2015) in their conclusion explains how it is important for companies to be “designing tailored initiatives when encouraging a shift towards a more plant-based diet” (p. 87). This idea is relevant as it speaks to how promotional materials have the potential to tap into this spectrum of consumers.

*Sec. 1(e): Meats Centrality*

Each article that I analyzed for this literature review acknowledges and demonstrates that if meat is a central part to one’s diet, an association between “health” and “meat” is created, and is difficult to break (Lea et al. 2006; Grace et al. 2015; Hoek et al. 2012 and Clark & Bogdan 2019). Lea et al (2006) and Graca et al (2015) explain that consumers’ association with meat as having a “central role and special status...” (p. 81), attributes meat as a dominant food. Understanding the importance of meat to consumers’ diets can allow for a core value to be noted- that consumers enjoy the sensory experience that is identified with meat. Hoek et al (2012), explain that in comparison to traditional meat, meat substitutes have an overall lower sensory appeal (p. 254), coinciding with Clark and Bogdan’s (2019) study in which 41% of their participants explained that they “will not like the taste” of plant-based protein alternatives (sec. 3.2). From this information it can be assumed that meat, as a central part to one’s diet, is central due to its sensory appeal, but

most importantly its taste. Therefore, traditional meats' sensory appeal can be deemed as a crucial factor for consumers.

## **Section 2: Theories within Food Studies**

The second edition of the textbook *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* explains the theories that are applied throughout this thesis. The authors offer great insight into the political economy aspect of food studies, contributing to the theoretical frameworks that are applied in this thesis. Adopting ideas from communication and media textbooks allow for a consistent perspective when describing and understanding political economy and semiotics in regard to plant-based products.

### *Sec. 2(b): Political Economy*

When reading work on political economy, scholars often refer to similar key words and concepts that help describe political economy as a theory. For instance, Koc et al (2017) as well as Flew and Smith (2014) describe political economy as a theory that draws attention to inequalities of power, economic relations, and modes of production. Koc et al (2017) explain that the political economy approach is a “major influence in food studies...as it examines[s] the role of economic institutions and inequalities of power and property...” (p. xiv), in various food systems. This is useful, as I analyze the data within the plant-based food system.

### *Sec. 2(c): Semiotics*

In addition to a political economic analysis as one of the main theories of this thesis, a semiotic analysis is also conducted. O'Brien and Szeman (2018) explain that semiotics is a part of structuralism (p. 70). Therefore, the focus is on understanding the representation of words, or signs, and how they are generated “according to the structure and rules of the system from which they are generated” (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 70). Gvion-Rosenberg (1990) similarly comments on

the formation of signs, but specifically with food. She notes that the association of particular foods with certain cuisines are due to the symbols that are noted within culinary traditions, for example how vegetarian “main dishes are sometimes dressed and textured to be as similar as possible to familiar meat dishes [such as] ...the meatless hamburger...” (Gvion-Rosenberg, 1990, p. 69-72). Applying a semiotic approach helps to determine, through the signs present in traditional versus *Beyond Meat* burger campaigns, what it is that consumers are valuing that persuade them to purchase one “burger” over the other.

#### *Sec. 2(d): Vegetarianism*

The concept of vegetarianism is discussed within the realm of food studies as a healthy lifestyle that is often debated. Vegetarianism is a lifestyle that is chosen by consumers who want to eat healthier (Friedmann, 2017, p. 21), improve animal welfare, and decrease the environmental impact that is driven by people’s food choices (Kornelsen, 2017, p. 164). Despite consumers intent, vegetarianism is often scrutinized for the potential “nutritional deficiencies and inadequate calorie intake” (Beagan & Chapman, 2017, p. 70) that can be a result of not consuming animal products. This critique of vegetarianism is noteworthy as it demonstrates that meat eaters’ value caloric intake, in addition to other traits that are discussed later in this chapter. This is considered when analyzing the *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat advertisements. Analyzing these discussions on vegetarianism are equated to the plant-based products that are the focus of this thesis.

### **Section 3: Advertising and Marketing Plant-Based Products/Food**

These articles comment on, and study, the business, marketing or the advertising of food studies and plant-based products. Information gathered from these sources help me properly analyze the chosen advertisements for this thesis. Understanding the content of these articles assists in the analysis of the companies’ financial aspects, and how money is allocated within

companies regarding advertising campaigns. The three common themes that occur in this literature are the importance of branding, the use of social media and the economics behind meat alternatives.

*Sec. 3(b): Branding*

Branding is noted as having a significant role in influencing consumers decisions (Klaus 2005). The significance that brands have in consumers lives creates a focal point for this thesis. It is important to realize when analyzing *Beyond Meat* burger campaigns, that *Beyond Meat* products are a part of a brand that founder and CEO Ethan Brown has created. Klaus (2005) discusses how brands have “powerful cues” that consumers associate with the level of quality for that product, thus influencing their choice to purchase (p. 377). Jessica Wohl (2019), who delves into the marketing of plant-based products more specifically, explains that when branding is done correctly, companies can cultivate loyal customers. However, Wohl (2019) also notes that there is room for improvement in order for brands to successfully attract vegetarians, that being, “transparent about ingredients...” (n.p.). This suggestion follows suit with Klaus (2005) and his idea behind increasing positive product perception. Klaus (2005) states that “products with differentiated qualities need to communicate these qualities to consumers...otherwise, consumers will...not buy the quality differentiated product...” (p.378). Thus, emphasizing the importance of transparent marketing strategies when analyzing *Beyond Meat* versus traditional meat campaigns in this thesis’ analysis.

Holmberg et al (2016) conduct an explorative study on how young people represent their food on social media. They find that in as “many as 37.2% of the images a brand name [is] prominently displayed as it would be in an advertisement” (Holmberg et al. 2016, p. 125). Wasserman (2010) also highlights that there is a “...great appeal for any brand that’s authentic”

(p. 8). *Beyond Meat* products are considered differentiated products, that are authentic. Which, according to this literature, means that *Beyond Meat*'s branding can tap into consumers quality perception, and emphasize its transparent and authentic nature (Wasserman, 2010; Holmberg et al;2016 and Wohl, 2019). In this thesis, it is useful to consider how the *Beyond Meat* company is utilizing their brand to influence consumers in the most significant way.

Adam Shprintzen (2012), Harvey Levenstein (2013) and Judy Doyle (2016) engage with the concept of branding within the marketing realm of food (vegetarian specifically for Doyle and Shprintzen) and its significance in creating loyal consumers. Shprintzen (2012) examines J.H. Kelloggs' journey of developing the first, in the late 1890's, "vegetable- friendly meat substitutes with flesh-like qualities" (p.116), Nuttose and Protose. He explains how Kellogg noticed the work that national brands were doing to build loyalty and trust with their consumers, which he aimed to reflect in the marketing of his own meat substitutes (Shprintzen, 2012, p. 117). Harvey Levenstein's article does not focus on plant-based food, but offers insights on early food communication practices. Levenstein (2013) demonstrates the importance of proper branding in the nineteenth century. In order for food producers to sell their products they had to prove that they were "associating their brand names with sanitation and purity..." (Levenstein, 2013, p. 303) in order for their products to be sold. For example, through packaging, biscuits were advertised as being "touched only once by human hands-when the pretty girls pack them" and cardboard boxes were called "sanitary boxes" (Levenstein, 2019, p. 303), which highlights this branding trend.

Julie Doyle (2016) examines the significance of branding veganism via celebrity discourse, with a focus on Ellen DeGeneres and Alicia Silverstone (p. 779). Doyle (2016) explains how celebrities are their own brands and that they must maintain discourses that are suitable to preserve their brand that they have created (p. 781) to maintain their fan base. The concept of branding is

important to understand to support this thesis. In order to interpret what people value when purchasing protein products, it is useful to note how consumers perceive the brand of *Beyond Meat* as a company.

### *Sec. 3(c): Beyond Meat and Social Media*

Plant-based products are mainly promoted through social media, which seems fitting due to the relatively new and changing movement surrounding plant-based foods, that includes meat alternatives. Beaudoin (2014) explains how adolescents are impacted heavily by the media (p. 548), and that advertising “depicts food consumption norms” (p. 551). Therefore, the ways in which traditional media, and specifically social media is utilized for advertising, is considered. As mentioned above, in Holmberg et al’s (2016) study, Instagram is an image sharing application that is widely used to present food items (p.122). Holmberg et al (2016) associate one’s identity with the food items that they post online and its symbolic meaning (p. 127). This demonstrates the importance of creating a food item that people want to share on their social media accounts. Wohl (2019) claims that “...plant-based foods so far are relatively small and driven mainly by P.R...” (n.p.), which relates to Mouat and Prince (2018), who explain that the “animal free movement is internet and social media savvy...” (p. 318). It is important to recognize the value that social media, and online marketing has when promoting plant-based products, as it can be noted when examining how *Beyond Meat* products are currently being advertised.

### *Sec. 3(d): Plant-Based Finances*

In this section, the literature involving the concept of plant-based products expenditures is reviewed. Mouat and Prince (2018) draw on the relationship between “venture capital and animal-free food” (p. 324). This relationship refers to how plant-based products are an “investment culture of ‘disruptive innovation’” (Mouat & Prince, 2018, p. 325). They explain how traditional meat



suppliers such as *Tyson* and celebrity investors are starting to participate in this disruption by investing into companies such as *Beyond Meat* (Mouat & Prince, 2018, p. 325). Scholars consistently express the reliance that plant-based companies have on larger, established companies, as well as celebrity investors, in order to compete and participate in the food industry (Wohl, 2019). For example, the *Beyond Meat* burger and the *Impossible burger* (both plant-based meat alternatives companies) generated more exposure and sales after being associated with fast-food companies like A&W and Carl's Jr. (Wohl, 2019, n.p.). For the sake of this thesis, the stakes that other companies and investors hold in the smaller plant-based companies is considered. This area of literature helps to inform the political economic aspect of this thesis when analyzing the difference between *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat advertisements. By learning how these industries are financed, or if either industry has grown, captures both their political and economic significance.

#### **Section 4: The Promotion of Plant-Based Products and Diets in Various Disciplines**

The following articles discuss either *Beyond Meat* products specifically, or, the promotional aspect of meat alternatives or plant-based diets. As these articles are from various disciplines, there are many perspectives about *Beyond Meat*, or meat alternatives that are considered. These articles are not focused solely on consumers, but instead discusses the research that has been conducted, in other fields, that surround promotional and plant-based work. In this section, there are two main themes. First, that plant-based products, or diets, depend on the media for promotion. Secondly, that there is a consistent understanding among scholars that that replication of traditional meat products, by plant-based products allows for an important sense of familiarity for consumers.

*Sec. 4(b): Dependence on Media Promotion*

The following articles focus on how certain types of food, mainly plant-based, are advertised or discussed in the media. Lisa Keefe (2018), Adam Shprintzen (2012), Harvey Levenstein (2013) and Francesco Buscemi (2015) analyze how companies utilize media to convince consumers that their plant-based food products or diet is a better alternative to traditional meat products. Keefe (2018) discusses the circulation of the phrase “clean meat” in mainstream media outlets (p. 32). The circulation of this phrase to the public implies that anything that is not considered “clean meat”; a product that “does not depend on the slaughter of an animal” (p. 32) is potentially unsafe, and that “clean meat” is a better alternative to traditional meat.

Shprintzen (2012) exemplifies how media exposure informs consumers of meat alternatives in a persuasive nature. He explains how when “the press, too, caught onto the rising popularity of meat substitutes and extolled their virtues as cheap, nutritious alternatives...to the ‘meat problem’...” (Shprintzen, 2012, p. 122). Another way that the media is utilized to promote plant-based products is through celebrity narratives of veganism. Julie Doyle (2016), as well as Ella Fegitz and Daniela Pirani (2018) focus on the discourse that surrounds celebrity women such as Beyoncé, Alicia Silverstone and Ellen DeGeneres and their choice of adopting a vegan lifestyle. Due to these women’s celebrity status, they are “media creations and branded commodities...” (Doyle, 2016, p. 781). Therefore, they create promotional work for veganism that is captured by the media (Doyle, 2016, p. 781). Liora Gvion-Rosenberg (1990), however, does not consider the media promotion of meat alternatives in her article. Instead, her article examines vegetarianism as a cuisine and analyzes menus. She considers the semiotics of dishes within a cuisine and what the relationships, and social values are between food items and what they represent (Gvion-Rosenberg, 1990, p. 63).

*Sec. 4(c): Mocking Traditional Meat*

The following articles examine why plant-based products replicate traditional meat products; for example, non-meat burgers that evoke a sense of “meaty” familiarity to the consumer. Francesco Buscemi (2016) when looking at “new meat” explains how designers need to agree on a way to promote it (p. 428). He explains how the shaping of food is an “aesthetic issue ...and affects the way in which it is perceived and consumed” (Buscemi, 2016, p. 428). Society is able to understand how to consume something when it is a recognizable shape, such as a hamburger. Lisa Keefe (2018) looks at *Beyond Meat* burgers specifically and notes that part of the companies “marketing pitch is that the patties “bleed” like a beef burger, thanks to the use of beet juice extract” (p. 31). The focus *Beyond Meat* burgers have on the look and interaction with their burger is unique, and is recognized.

Adam Shprintzen (2012) suggests a different explanation for the replication of traditional meats by plant-based alternatives. He examines vegetarians as a community, and what their opinions are about “mock meats”. Shprintzen (2012) claims that a newer generation of vegetarians understand that vegetarian products are supposedly higher in nutritional value than traditional meat but still have a “similar taste and consistency as flesh foods” (p. 114). With this, “mock meats are marketed as having all of the taste advantages of meat with added nutritional value” (Shprintzen, 2012, p. 114). Julie Doyle (2016) highlights this with her statement that in order to normalize plant-based protein alternatives they need to “referen[ce] their meat equivalents” (p. 785). Gvion-Rosenberg (1990) explains that consumers require a sense of familiarity in their meal “to make up for the absence of an ingredient that is otherwise perceived as central” (p. 63) like meat. Gvion-Rosenberg (1990) argues that both a meat-less and meat burger have physical similarities that “equates the meatless hamburger with the icon...as long as it resembles the ‘real’ hamburger it is

treated equally” (p. 63-4). The common notion of creating plant-based products that mimic traditional meat products creates a starting point to understand consumers values when deciding what type of “meat” protein they will purchase. This is noted as a starting point for the discussion on the semiotics of a burger, which is relevant for the semiotic analysis of this thesis.

I find these articles to be strong in their analysis, as each author has a main artifact that is focused on, whether it be a celebrity, a historical figure or a specific meat alternative product. One aspect that I find to be relatively weak among these articles is the link to environmentalism. Though it is briefly touched on in the majority of the articles, I feel that plant-based products have a greater environmental significance than what is discussed in the reviewed articles.

## **Section 5: Non-academic sources**

In addition to academic work, I have explored articles within mainstream journalism. I argue that reading various online media articles allow for non-academic opinions to be heard, and I recognize their significance when examining the promotional work of *Beyond Meat* products. Mainstream journalism is important to consider as it offers different perspectives on discussions surrounding this topic, and provides links to other articles that can lead to more information. Due to the range in publication dates, these non-academic articles also demonstrate the development of the *Beyond Meat* company. While reading these articles four common themes emerged: the emphasis of Bill Gates’ involvement in the company, *Beyond Meat*’s positive relationship to the environment, the products replication to animal meat and the company’s finances.

### *Sec. 5(b): Bill Gates as an Investor*

When *Beyond Meat* is mentioned in any piece of mainstream journalism Bill Gates as an investor is overtly highlighted. Jason McBride’s (2019) article in *Maclean’s*, uses Gates as a recognizing agent for *Beyond Meat*, as he states, “maybe you’ve heard of it [*Beyond Meat*]?...Its

investors include Bill Gates, Leonardo DiCaprio and conventional meat giant Tyson Foods” (para. 2). An article written by Marc Gunther (2013) in *Fortune* magazine writes Bill Gates in the title: “The Bill Gates-backed company that’s reinventing meat”. By constantly proclaiming that Gates is involved with this company is noteworthy. The emphasis on Gates’ relationship to the company implies that Gates being an investor is a key reason for *Beyond Meat’s* success. Bill Gates represents philanthropy, entrepreneurship and innovation due to his widely known achievements, and resonates with *Beyond Meat’s* outlined company goals. Bill Gates’ involvement is noteworthy when analyzing the promotional tools and ideas that are necessary for consumers when deciding to purchase *Beyond Meat* products.

*Sec.5(c): Environmental Ties, Mocking Meat and Finances*

I noticed that non-academic articles tend to emphasize *Beyond Meat’s* relationship to improving the environment, its finances, and the importance of the products replication of traditional meat as its key selling feature (The New York Times, 2017 & Forbes, 201). An article in the *New York Times* explains how, “to help reduce our growing environmental footprint, some entrepreneurs are experimenting with new plant-based alternatives that look and taste like meat” (New age of meat: No animal required, 2017), this quote illustrates two of the three trends noted above. A *Forbes* article focuses on the financial aspect of the *Beyond Meat* company and debates if investors are overpaying into it, and that the “stock is currently over valued” (Forbes, 2019). These themes, are not surprising to identify while examining non-academic articles, as they offer similar insight as some of the scholarly work that is discussed above. Considering both academic and non-academic sources for this thesis allows for informed and appropriate decisions to be made for this research.

## Conclusion

While conducting this literature review, I was determined to consider many perspectives and opinions. Regardless of scholars' academic discipline, bias or methods of study, there are two main themes that commonly surfaced when researching plant-based foods. First, the importance of proper branding is noted in each article. The importance of having appropriate labels on meat-alternative packaging (Lea et al. 2005) and understanding that companies need to have a high engagement level on social media (Wohl, 2019 and Holmberg et al, 2016) are two apparent points for strong branding. Utilizing celebrity endorsers and investors (Doyle, 2016; Fegitz & Pirani 2018 and Moucat 2018) is also mentioned. These three points determines that branding is a crucial aspect of promoting meat-alternatives products (Shprintzen, 2012; Grunert, 2005; Brester & Schroder, 1995; Beaudoin, 2014 and Wasserman, 2010). Second, a prevalent factor in the reviewed literature, is the discussion about the finances that are intertwined with meat-alternative companies such as *Beyond Meat*. Regardless of the scholar's perspective on the promotion of meat-alternatives, the roles of investors, and the company's financial value, are both considered determining factors in the amount of success a product has.

As there are commonalities that are woven throughout the literature that I reviewed, I believe that there are significant gaps that can be considered. While exploring the various literature, I have yet to find a study that directly compares a traditional meat advertisement to a meat-alternative advertisement. The concept of signs and imagery is not discussed as frequently, or as in as much detail as I argue it should be when examining the promotion of meat-alternative products. I argue that this lack of exploration, relating to the use of signs in advertising when considering the promotion of meat-alternative products, is where my thesis proves its significance. Holmberg et al (2016) note that, as a society, we are becoming more image focused due to our

increasing use of social media. Therefore, the use of signs in advertising traditional meat versus meat-alternative products are examined. An explanation of signs, and how they are used within semiotics, as well as political economy, is discussed in the following chapter.

### Chapter Three: Theories and Methodology

This thesis conducts a semiotic analysis on four fast-food advertisements, two promoting *Beyond Meat* burgers and two promoting traditional meat burgers. By analyzing the data, the understanding of how *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted compared to traditional meat burgers, and the myths that are created via fast-food advertising are understood. Political economy, as a theoretical framework, guides the analysis of the findings and representations that are present in the burger advertisements, as food is both culturally and economically significant in western society.

The posed research questions are answered appropriately, due to the application of a semiotic and political economic analysis to the chosen fast-food burger advertisements. It is necessary to utilize both methods in order to capture the complexity and significance of food. Koc et al (2017) describes the act of eating, and food in the following way:

“What we eat, if we eat, how we eat, when we eat, and with whom we eat reflect the complexity of our social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental relations with food. Eating is one of the most common human activities we engage in on a regular basis” (p.xiii).

When analyzing the burger advertisements, political economic as well as social and cultural perspectives are being considered, as studies that analyze food require an interdisciplinary approach (Koc et al, 2017). This chapter demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the theory and method that is used, and additionally justifies why they are feasible tools to help answer the posed research questions. A rationale for the chosen data is given in addition to an explanation on how the data is analyzed, and the possible limitations to the chosen forms of analysis.



## Section 1: Theories

The following scholars are mentioned in the literature review, and have all conducted successful qualitative research when analyzing the barriers, and levels of willingness that people have, of adopting a plant-based diet: Lea et al (2005 and 2006), Graca et al (2015) as well as Clark and Bogdan (2019). The work produced by these scholars is significant to this field of research, confirming my methodological choices. Lea et al (2005 and 2006), randomly select 415 Australian participants for their study. With this, a general understanding of the public's views and levels of readiness to switch to a plant-based diet is assessed, determining that barriers are fairly low, and that there are various levels of readiness among the participants, that are considered (Lea et al, 2006 and 2006). Clark and Bogan (2019) conduct an in-depth online survey on how Canadians engage with plant-based foods (PBF) and create qualitative categories from the responses to understand the major barriers to PBF, willingness to switch to plant-based diets, and offer suggestions to those in the PBF market.

Similarly, Graca et al (2015) examine consumers' willingness to switch to a plant-based diet and emphasize the importance of "designing tailored initiatives when encouraging a shift towards a plant-based diet" (p. 86). Graca et al (2015) utilize an internet platform in order to reach a wider audience with 1180 people clicking the "link to the survey and 410 participants completed all the measures from the questionnaire" (p.83). Reading these papers and understanding how scholars administered their research confirms the decision to conduct this research with the following qualitative practices: a semiotic and political economic analysis.

### *Sec. 1(a): Political Economy*

The theoretical framework of political economy is chosen to help analyze the data in this thesis due to its focus on inequalities of power, relations of productions and ownership (Koc et al,

2017). *Beyond Meats*' third quarter 2019 financial report, states that "net revenues increased 250% to \$92.0 million in the third quarter of 2019 compared to \$26.3 million in the third quarter of 2018" (Beyond Meat, News Release Details, 2019). This revenue increase is correlated with the high volume of product consumption, that production has to keep up with. This increase also demonstrates the financial and market-holding power that *Beyond Meat* has in the current plant-based foods market.

There is continuous media attention that applauds *Beyond Meat* products, including their burgers. For example, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 2020) begins its article with "it was a remarkable week for Beyond Meat Inc" and comments on *Beyond Meat*'s recent share increase. This article also speaks to another aspect of *Beyond Meat* burgers, that encompasses the principles of political economy, of how major fast-food corporations are putting *Beyond Meat* products on their menus. These corporations include McDonald's, A&W, Subway, Tim Horton's and others. The *Wall Street Journal* (2020) article continues to report how the recent increase in the *Beyond Meat* share is correlated with McDonald's launching their "P.L.T" burger, which contains a *Beyond Meat* burger patty. The article also notes *Beyond Meat*'s main competitor, *Impossible Foods* (another plant-based food company), that is also in business with fast-food chains such as Burger King, but states that "McDonald's is bigger..." (The Wall Street Journal, Jan 2020), confirming the power that *Beyond Meat* currently has in the fast-food and plant-based market. The various types of power that are embedded within *Beyond Meat*, when its financial aspects, ownership, power inequalities and relations of production are considered, is evident. When examining *Beyond Meat*'s burgers specifically, its advertisements allow for researchers to uncover what myths their advertising is producing that engages consumers.

Political economy, like most theoretical frameworks, encompasses various concepts and critical ways of thinking that need to be considered, when being applied. For example, often political economy is associated with Marxism (Flew & Smith, 2014; Koc et al, 2017), which understands capital as labour done by the proletariat to the financial benefit of the bourgeois. However, political economy can also be understood as a “...material force information (who owns it, who buys it, who controls the sale) ...” (Flew & Smith, 2014, p. 69 paraphrasing Tiziana Terranova 2004), thus highlighting the emphasis that political economy has on ownership. *Beyond Meat*, as a rapidly growing company has all of these aspects of political economy working together for it to be successful.

When analyzing the chosen fast-food burger advertisements, *Beyond Meat* needs to be seen on these advertisements, as its own entity that is powerful, by having its own logo present. This can be a challenge when a *Beyond Meat* product is being advertised in a McDonald’s promotion, next to a large McDonald’s logo. Thus, an unequal amount of advertising space is being shared. Anthony Winson (2017) explains how “mass advertising and corporate concentration go hand in hand...they are mutually reinforcing processes” (p.189). This speaks to the ownership piece of political economy and why it is an appropriate framework for this thesis. Winson (2017) writes that it is companies, such as McDonald’s and A&W, and their “ability to create and strengthen a brand [that] has made these same corporations even more powerful over time...gain[ing] market advantage” (p. 189). Even though the data in this research is analyzed with a semiotic method, the results would be shortsighted if the ownership, and finances were not considered when analyzing the promotional work of fast-food restaurants. The advertisements that are analyzed in this thesis exist because of the companies that are financially backing them, allowing them to be online, in magazines and on television. Images of *Beyond Meat* burgers circulate as the result the CEO and

founder of *Beyond Meat*, Ethan Brown, getting noticed by, and in contact with some of the biggest food companies in the world that helps make his product culturally and economically significant.

In conjunction with a semiotic analysis, applying a political economic lens allows for both economic and cultural views of advertisements to be studied. To examine the finances behind the burger advertisements, as well as how words and signs are represented and what they mean to consumers, more effective research can be done. Koc et al (2017) explains how the “political economy approach has mostly focused on production...” (p. xiv) but expresses that there are political economic scholars who focus on the “role of consumption” (p. xiv). This description of political economy, and its function as a theoretical framework incorporates the different problems that the research questions in this thesis consider.

- 1.) When analyzing how *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted, in comparison to traditional meat burgers, are different myths produced?
- 2.) When comparing *Beyond Meat*, to traditional meat burgers what is the variation, if any, in their cultural and economic signifiers?

Implementing a political economic framework assists in analyzing the chosen data as it allows for the signs in the advertisements to be identified, and situated in its social context, going beyond the analysis that semiotics provides. Ronald Bettig and Jeanne Hall (2012) explain advertising as an ideology, in which advertising “is not only an economic institution...but an ideological institution that supports and negates certain ways of thinking” (p. 145). The variation in forms of analysis, aids in understanding how the chosen advertisements operate. By considering ways in which consumers interact with the chosen burger advertisements, in addition to the signs that they interpret provides well rounded findings.

*Sec. 1(b): Semiotics*

A comparative semiotic analysis of the advertisements that have been chosen for this thesis entails identifying and analyzing the signifiers that are present in these texts. Semiotic principles place semiotics within the realm of structuralism (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018). This is due to how semiotics function, as semiotics work to suggest that cultural practices and interpretations are due to underlying rules that are a part of "preconscious systems of interpretation...in which individuals orient themselves and act in specific contexts" (Jenson, 2015, p. 594). With this, when looking at advertisements, consumers engage with and interpret the visuals in a way that conforms to the cultural practices in which they are surrounded. Utilizing semiotics as a framework to analyze the data for this research, makes it necessary to select visual aids. When doing a semiotic reading, there is a "focus on the way in which meaning is generated through the relationships between signs in a text" (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 74). A sign "can be...anything that conveys meaning and is recognized as doing so by users of the sign system...[signs] are culturally specific" (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 70). There are several key concepts that are mentioned when examining the data through a semiotic lens. These key concepts include the denotative and connotative meanings of signs, the signifier and the signified parts that make up a sign, and the myth that is constructed surrounding a sign. The images and words on the chosen advertisements are signs that produce and represent meaning for consumers.

Ferdinand de Saussure is a structural theorist who is credited with creating and expressing the science behind language, images, gestures and so on, which describes semiotics. Saussure defines semiotics in his early texts as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (Saussure, 2011, p.16). Saussure, within his studies creates the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, as well as denotative and connotative meanings of signs (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018).

Denotative and connotative meanings are different ways that a sign can be interpreted and understood. O'Brien and Szeman (2018), explain Saussure's denotative meaning as "literal meanings" (p. 72) and a connotative meaning as taking on "additional associations...charged with a culture's dominant, often unspoken beliefs of values" (p. 72). For example, the denotative meaning of a burger is a piece of beef sandwiched between two pieces of bread with a slice of cheese, lettuce, and tomato.

Going beyond the denotive meaning, the connotative meaning of a burger can be interpreted as a tasty, unhealthy fast-food product that is a North American food staple. As it is noted later in this thesis, traditional meat burgers are tied to the myth of Americanization due to its involvement in the diner era, post-World War 2, that transformed the "American consumer institutions" (Hurley, 1997, p. 1283). For this thesis it is important to convey both levels of meaning that are associated with the signs present in the advertisements. A clear distinction is created between the words and images that are on the advertisements, in comparison to how they can be interpreted by consumers, beyond their literal meanings. This is due to the differentiation of both the denotative and connotative meanings that are present in the data

In addition to conveying the various meanings that are present in the data, it is also necessary to understand that a sign consists of two parts. Saussure expands on his work of signs having a denotative and connotative meaning, by articulating that a sign is made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified, which produces the signs' meaning (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018). The signifier, is the word itself: b-u-r-g-e-r and the signified, is "the concept it refers to is not natural but arbitrary, determined by convention" (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 71). The word "burger" means nothing until it is connected with the concept of what is associated with that word, a juicy meat product that is eaten. Saussure demonstrates this through his emphasis on what the word is

not (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018). A "burger" is a meat product that is eaten, it is not a French fry or a chicken wing, demonstrating the word "burger" as it is "differen[t] from a series of related words..." (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 71). The arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified produces the sign, relating to semiotics structuralist nature.

Finally, when discussing semiology, often Roland Barthes' concept of mythology is considered. O'Brien and Szeman (2018) explain Barthes' idea of mythology as an elaboration on Saussure's work of signs, in particular their connotative meaning (p. 27). Barthes, according to O'Brien and Szeman (2018), uses the word mythology as a way to go beyond the simple denotative meaning of signs. Mythology, "bring[s] into play a whole chain of associated concepts...that help to shape their collective identity" (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 72). Essentially, a sign's mythological significance incorporates symbolism and "dominant values of a culture in a particular historical moment" (O'Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 72). When analyzing the traditional burger advertisements, the connotation, or myth that is commonly associated with hamburgers is rooted from the 1950s, as "the hamburger was the most popular food in America" (Tarshis, 2015, p. 11), and has since then with "fast-food restaurants like White Castle and McDonald's [has] earned billions of dollars satisfying the American hunger for burgers" (Tarshis, 2015). This quote highlights the dominant cultural ideologies and values that are associated with hamburgers, and therefore is its produced myth.

The analysis chapter discusses the cultural significance that a hamburger has in western society, as James Helmer (1992) describes McDonalds' burger empire as "a tribal act of imbued with inevitability and necessity" (p. 93). People need and desire hamburgers, they see it is as food that is a required part of their American diet. Uncovering and analyzing the myth associated with

the various burger advertisements communicates the different dominant ideologies that are present and interpreted by consumers.

The myth that is associated with the signs present in the burger advertisements connects with political economy, as O'Brien and Szeman (2018) explain how “myths are not natural but historical, the product of particular relations of power” (p. 73). Each advertisement that is analyzed is selling a product that is embedded with various relations of power, whether it be economic or cultural, and is historically situated. By utilizing both semiotics and political economy to guide this analysis, the various power relations are considered to best understand the dominant values that are explicit in the advertisements. Developing an idea as to why certain societal factors are being presented helps answer the questions of what myths are being created between the different types of “burgers”, and do they differ in their cultural and economic signifiers?

## **Section 2: Methods**

### *Sec. 2(a): Data Collection*

For this thesis, I analyze four fast-food burger advertisements to assist in answering the posed research questions. Two advertisements are video commercials, and two advertisements are still images that aid in examining the promotional difference between *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burgers. Figures one and two are (see appendix) advertisements from the Canadian fast-food chain A&W. Figures one and two are video commercials, figure one promotes A&W's *Beyond Meat* burger, and figure two promotes their “56 Buddy Burger” which contains a traditional meat patty. Figures three and four are still image advertisements from McDonald's. Figure three promotes McDonalds' *Beyond Meat* burger, the “P.L.T” and figure four promotes their Angus Burger, a traditional meat burger.



There are thousands of advertisements from various fast-food restaurants that promote a range of traditional meat and plant-based burgers. The advertisements that I chose for this research are due to four sets of criteria that I created that helped narrow the scope while I searched for data: choosing the type of advertising medium, finding both types of burger advertisements from the same fast-food company, the quality of the source to help determine the credibility of where the advertisement was located, and the advertisements sense of neutrality to limit my own bias.

When looking for fast-food burger advertisements, I had to decide on which type of advertisement would best suit this thesis. Due to the allowed length of this research, and conducting a comparative semiotic analysis, I initially thought that still advertisement images seemed more appropriate than video advertisement. However, I decided to search for video commercials as well to analyze a greater variety of *Beyond Meat* versus traditional meat burger advertisements. Finding both mediums of advertisements, with the following sets of criteria in place, narrowed the scope of types of advertisements that could be considered, and were suitable for this thesis. Another aspect that I considered when choosing applicable data was finding consistency among the advertisements that allowed for a more transparent comparison, when applying the comparative semiotic analysis.

For this thesis, consistency was a necessary component when deciding which fast-food companies' advertisement to choose. Finding both a *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burger advertisement from the same fast-food company also reduced the scope, as not all fast-food chains sell *Beyond Meat* burgers. Another advantage to choosing advertisements from the same company is that it allowed for direct comparisons, beyond the visual aid of the advertisement, to be made, namely financial. This research also applies a political economic lens to the data, therefore having two different "burgers" from the same company, allows for a more accessible and impactful

financial, ownership and power relation comparison of the two different “burgers” from the same company.

Another factor that I considered when choosing the data was, where the advertisement was sourced from, inferring to the credibility of the advertisements’ source. Each of the chosen fast-food burger advertisements are from credible websites. Having real advertisements from credible sources aids in understanding the reality of the circulation of these advertisements and how consumers perceive them. Figures one and two can be found on A&W Canada’s YouTube channel, figure one from July 2018, and figure two from July 2019. Figure three is from a 2019 *Vox* article, and figure four is from the 2019 McDonalds’ website. Due to the credibility of these sites, and accounts or channels, it is understood that the chosen data are real advertisements that the companies created to promote their products. They are not fake advertisements; therefore, it is appropriate to analyze these advertisements for their promotional effect on the everyday consumer.

Finally, when accumulating the chosen data something that was necessary to be aware of was the advertisements sense of neutrality, which is important for this thesis. A plethora of examples surface when the phrase “burger advertisements” is searched on google, with various originating dates. To remain unbiased, it was imperative to collect data that was not going to automatically skew the results. For example, the American fast-food chain, Carl’s Jr, released a hyper-sexualized video advertisement for their “All-Natural Burger” that aired during the 2015 Superbowl. This advertisement consists of Charlotte McKinney, a tall, blonde, voluptuous model whose body was objectified leading up to her grabbing the burger and taking a big bite (YouTube, 2015). If I had chosen this advertisement to be a part of the data for this research, to semiotically analyze for the traditional meat burgers, it would be comparably negative to an “earthy-green” *Beyond Meat* burger and its association with a plant. The neutrality among burger advertisements

is significant, and is important to recognize as this factor eliminated some potential data options for this thesis. To remain unbiased during my research the criteria that I created was clear and necessary.

When deciding on which advertisements would be selected, I determined that the images and words present could only be used for promotional purposes, and be about the product. These criteria allow for an unbiased comparative semiotic analysis. By only focusing on the images and texts relating to the “burger” products, a unique analysis is created. I note that this decision can be a limitation as it does not necessarily consider the “controversial” advertisements. Advertisements that can be considered controversial hold their own cultural significance and meaning, and I understand that it is difficult to be completely unbiased when examining advertisements.

#### *Sec. 2(b): Data Analysis*

I analyze the chosen advertisements initially with a semiotic lens in order to understand what signs are present in the company’s effort to persuade consumers into purchasing one “burger” over another. Each advertisement I analyze individually on a denotative and connotative level, which is followed by determining the myths and ideologies that each advertisement is associated with, and produces.

Similarly, to the criteria that I created to aid in finding the proper data for this research, I identify here what I specifically look for in the data for my semiotic analysis in the following chapter. Due to the two posed research questions I examine the chosen advertisements to see if I notice any trends between the two companies and how they advertise *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burgers. I also look for any signs in the *Beyond Meat* advertisements, both for A&W and McDonald’s, that explicitly indicates that *Beyond Meat* burgers are different from traditional meat

burgers. I focus on the colours that are utilized in the still images as “food choices have been discovered to be highly dependent on the appearance of the food, the appearance-induced expectations, and the visual quality of the food...including colour-related aesthetic” (Paakki et al, 2019, p. 2). I also note language, both spoken and written, that is used as well as I aim to understand the overall appeal, and type of attraction that both types of burger advertisements create. For example, did the *Beyond Meat* burgers have an environmentally friendly appeal? Or did the traditional meat burgers have a hyper-masculine appeal? Before I semiotically analyze the chosen advertisements, I apply a political economic lens to establish the political and economic significance of *Beyond Meat* burgers to set the stage for the semiotic perspective. This ensures that all aspects of the “burgers” are considered, as food is both culturally and economically significant.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discusses, and presents an overall understanding about the method and theory that I utilize for this research. Political economy and semiotics are applied in this thesis, and when both tools are explained, a link is formed between the two methods, highlighting how well they work together, especially when analyzing food and in this thesis’ case, hamburgers. My analysis of the four advertisements that I have chosen, from A&W and McDonald’s, with both a political economic and semiotic lens demonstrates the multifaceted nature of food advertising.

Semiotics allows for *Beyond Meat* burgers’ cultural significance to be considered. This is important when comparing it to traditional meat which is typically associated with sexuality, as “masculinity is strongly linked to red meat, understood also as a symbol of virility and sexual prowess” (Fegitz & Pirani, 2017, p. 296). The signs and myths that are produced in the advertisements for *Beyond Meat* burgers allow its cultural significance to be seen. I combine the cultural findings with the economics that are behind each type of burger. This allows for a complete

and, overall understanding of both *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burgers. An analysis of four fast-food burger advertisements, with a political economic and semiotic lens, supports this research of understanding the various myths, as well as the cultural and economic signifiers that are associated with *Beyond Meat* versus traditional meat burgers.

## Chapter Four: Analysis

The goal for this analysis is to understand the economic and cultural signifiers, signs, or myths that consumers associate with one type of burger over another to highlight their promotional differences. This is done with a semiotic analysis. First, I conduct a political economic analysis to establish the political and economic power within each of the chosen advertisements. Political economy is a tool that provides, through analysis, an economic perspective that creates a more holistic view of the objects of analysis.

Using both a semiotic and a political economic framework allows for the two posed research questions to be examined and acknowledges the complexity of how food functions in current society. Adrienne Lehrer (1990) notes that “food and drink can have political and social effects because of their symbolic associations” (p. 392). I argue that the promotion of *Beyond Meat* burgers have political and social effects on society due to the myths that the advertisements produce. Part of the semiotic analysis examines the advertisements for obvious signs that distinguish *Beyond Meat* burgers advertising from traditional meat burgers. Colours, language used, noticeable trends between promotional work, and the overall theme, or aura of each advertisement is also investigated. These factors are all deliberated with the two research questions in mind, which again are:

- 1.) When analyzing how *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted, in comparison to traditional meat burgers, are different myths produced?
- 2.) When comparing *Beyond Meat* burgers to traditional meat burgers, what is the variation, if any, in their cultural and economic signifiers?

## Section 1: Political Economy

The company, *Beyond Meat*, that produces *Beyond Meat* burgers are a part of the plant-based phenomenon that is dominating the current food market (Plant Based Food Association, 2020). Shanker et al (2019) describe *Beyond Meat* as “the shorthand for the whole industry...the star of a movement...to take vegan products mainstream” (p. 52). This is highlighted through its direct competition with another meatless company, that also creates a meatless burger, the *Impossible Burger*. *Beyond Meat* burgers are readily available in over 3000 Canadian grocery stores, as well as on a growing number of fast-food chains’ menus (Global News, 2019). The *Impossible Burger* however, only recently got approval to be sold in Canada, by Health Canada in January 2020 (The Toronto Star, 2020). In October of 2019 the *Beyond Meat* company generated its first net income in its ten years of operating, as it “reported a third- quarter profit of \$4.1 million...on sales of \$92 million, higher than the \$82.2 million Wall Street expected” (MarketWatch, Oct, 2019).

Applying a political economic lens allows for the “role of capitalism” (Atkins & Bowler, 2016, p.ix) to be considered in its function, which is necessary to consider due to the current system that these companies are operating in. Political economy is also historically rooted. Conducting a political economic analysis gives priority to historical transformation and pays attention to “the relationship of history to its positioning social structures and social reproduction” (Mosco, 1996, p. 29). The myths that are produced from the advertisements are related to the history of plant-based, or traditional meat burger industries. Therefore, the findings are contextually considered as “no social fact can be really understood apart from its history” (Mosco, 1996, p. 27). The myth associated with the traditional meat burger advertisements utilizes this aspect of political economy.

The Plant Based Foods Association (PBFA) notes, that since 2018 the plant-based market has grown 11% and was valued at \$4.5 billion dollars (Retail Sales data, 2020). The PBFA lists

the following products as those that make up the plant-based market, plant-based: cheeses, meats, yogurts, and milks, as well as creamer, butter, tofu, Ready-to-Drink beverages, condiments, dressings and mayo, spread, dips, sour cream, sauces and eggs (Retail Sales Data, 2020). Plant-based meats alone, including *Beyond Meat* burgers and products, since 2018 have grown 10% and are “now worth more than \$800 million” (Retail Sales Data, 2020). The 10% sale increase of plant-based burgers in 2019 is comparable to the merely 2% sale increase of the “conventional meat category...during the same period” (Retail Sales Data, 2020). However, due to the beef industry being valued at \$9.4 billion dollars (Canadian Cattleman’s association, Industry Stats, 2020), a 2% increase in the meat industry is still significant. Though large amounts of money are being spent, and generated on the plant-based market, the meat industry, including beef, doubles the plant-based markets overall economic value. Therefore, the economic and political power that is embedded in the signifiers and myths of the advertisements for each type of burger is be acknowledged.

*Beyond Meat* products have paved the way for meatless protein alternatives. Due to the companies various financial and market place victories, its economic and cultural significance has been noticed on a large scale. For example, *Beyond Meat* burgers are the first meatless protein product that has made their way into the traditional, animal meat cases at grocery stores. CEO Ethan Brown explains that when he began promoting *Beyond Meat* burgers to retailers, he did not market them towards vegans and vegetarians, but instead “requested that the product be sold in the meat case at grocery retailers where meat-loving consumers are accustomed to shopping for center-of-plate proteins” (Beyond Meat Archives, 2019, Unique approach to market). Brown’s decision to market his product in this distinct way led to a massive success, as now *Beyond Meat* burgers are available in “15 000 out of the 17 000 grocery stores across the United States” (Beyond Meat



Archives, 2019, Unique approach to market). This statistic speaks to the volume of promotional and financial work that is behind *Beyond Meat*'s products and advertising.

The production that occurs behind the scenes of *Beyond Meat* burgers to create effective and successful advertisements and branding is crucial. The *Beyond Meat* company expresses that they establish their brand "as one with "halo" benefits to [their] partners..." (Beyond Meat Archives, 2019, Unique approach to market). The "Halo Effect" has recently been extended to "health related halo effect[s]" (Sundar & Kardes, 2015, p. 513). This extension analyzes products that are labeled or branded as a healthy food alternative, that consumers generalize as being nutritionally better for them due to their health halo, via branding and labeling (Sunday & Kardes, 2015). The *Beyond Meat* company, is associated with positive characteristics and therefore, when a company promotes, or sells *Beyond Meat* products, such as McDonald's, they positively benefit due to their association with the *Beyond Meat* brand.

External businesses are also putting their own resources into *Beyond Meat* products. A&W is "currently investing significant amounts of money across television, digital media, and press to promote...it on their menu" (Beyond Meat Archives, 2019, Unique approach to market). *Beyond Meat* displays, and expresses its brand through various mediums, including TV advertising, billboards, and on the radio. The most prominent, and growing form of branding and advertising exposure however, is through online media impressions (Wohl, 2019). Wohl (2019) states that "Beyond Meat cited 7.5 billion earned media impressions in the first nine months of 2018, up from 4 billion in all of 2017" (n.p.) The following quote speaks again to the cultural significance of *Beyond Meat* as a company, that highlights their reliance and success that, in part, is due to their engagement with the media:

“brand awareness is driven by strong social marketing, with over 1.2 million combined social media and newsletter followers as of March 2019...[*Beyond Meat's*] audience continues to grow from the attention generated by our large following of celebrities, influencers, and brand ambassadors who identify with [*Beyond Meat's*] mission” (Beyond Meat Archives, 2019, Brand Mission aligned with consumer trends).

There are various levels of power that are utilized for the production and creation of *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements. Each factor including, CEO Ethan Brown, the businesses, the media, and endorsers, who allow for the modes of production that circulate the significance and power that *Beyond Meat* encompasses. It is crucial to keep these points in mind when semiotically analyzing the chosen burger advertisements. For, considering the political economic tendencies that shape how texts are spread to consumers their levels of political and economic significance can inform semiotic readings.

## **Section 2: Semiotic Analysis**

When examining both videos and still images semiotically, my goal is to determine the literal, denotative, and culturally created, connotative meaning of signs that are present in the texts. As semiotic readings “focus on the ways in which meaning is generated through the relationships between signs is a text” (O’Brien & Szeman, 2018, p. 74). The myths that are embedded within the advertisements are identified through a comparison of the language that is used and images that are present. It is worthwhile to analyze advertisements such as the chosen ones below, as “advertisements provide a good way of investigating the symbolic nature of food...by appealing to the desires and needs of the public” (Lehrer, 1990, p. 396). In this section I apply a semiotic analysis to the data.

*Sec. 2(b): “A&W: The Beyond Meat Burger” Video Advertisement*

This video advertisement is from the Canadian fast-food company A&W. It was uploaded on the video streaming platform, YouTube, on July 16th 2018 from A&W Canada’s account. To date (March 2020), this video advertisement on YouTube has over 14.2 million views and is fifteen seconds long. I note the phrases that are said in the video, as well as important visual aspects on a relatively literal, or denotative level. Following this, I explore past the denotative meanings to discuss the connotative meanings or myths that are present and what that suggests about consumers in our society.

The advertisement begins with A&W’s spokesperson and employee, Allen Lulu. Lulu is “featured in the fast-food chain’s [A&W] national TV commercials”, and has a large fan base (EBoss Canada, 2017, para.1). With this, Lulu is a credible and well-known persona that consumers trust. Lulu states “that patty is 100% plant-based protein” (A&W, 2016, 0.01) to a middle aged, assumingly, heterosexual white couple. This first statement is followed by the following expressions:

“No way!”, “Like no meat?”, “That’s plant?”, “What plant?”, “Tastes exactly like meat”, and finishes with, “That’s insane!”.

The advertisement finishes with a direct shot of the *Beyond Meat* burger with the A&W logo, and the phrase “The new, Plant-based Beyond Meat burger” (0.15). The entire commercial is shot at an outdoor venue, with tents and food trucks that are blurry in the background. There is greenery in the background of each frame and there are outdoor hanging lights that can be seen. The dialogue has a faint musical background accompaniment somewhat depicting a county fair.

Allen Lulu first speaks about the *Beyond Meat* burger to a man and woman, followed by two other couples (a man and a woman), then a young man alone, a young woman, two young women, and ends with Lulu telling a man, “that’s *Beyond Meat*”. When Lulu switches to talking to different people, the camera notifies the viewer that they are changing frames, with an obvious new take. All of these observations are surface level, a literal explanation of the video advertisement. Determining the denotative level of meaning of signs allows for my analysis to consider the greater meaning and significance that exists due to the language that is being used (O’Brien & Szeman, 2017, p. 71). This next section considers the advertisements greater cultural significance that is being promoted to consumers.

Each of these observations, the words spoken, and the images and people that are present, create meaning or significance, because they collectively exist together. When portions of texts or videos are combined and viewed as a unified front, consumers are producing meaning “...by the selection and combination of signs” (O’Brien & Szeman, 2017, p. 73). A trendy, modern appearance, and brand, surrounds *Beyond Meat* burgers. This branding aims to promote the product, and be attractive, to consumers. The atmosphere that is created in this advertisement is due to the outdoor location, greenery, hanging lights in the daylight, and the inclusion of all Caucasian men and women. The artistic and design selection of the advertisement creates a sense of cleanliness, modernity and nature and, therefore associates a *Beyond Meat* burger with those characteristics. I correlate these traits to the advertisement due to its neutral white colour palette, cleared smooth pavement, and lack of background clutter, other than the plant greenery.

The setting of this *Beyond Meat* burger advertisement, a seemingly outdoor food festival with food trucks, capitalizes on the growing popularity and trend that circulates food trucks. Food trucks symbolize unique urban entrepreneurship and mobility due to their easy access, price,

cuisine variety and quickness for consumers (Restaurant Engine, 2019). This parallel is due to the “connection between the item[s] and what [they] represent...and is learned through socialization” (Gvion-Rosenburg, 1990, p.63). I argue that in comparison to traditional meat burgers, *Beyond Meat* burger campaigns have a goal of being branded as and selling a trendy, modern burger that is good for the planet.

The people that are shown in the video commercial poses a potential issue due to its lack of racial diversity, or, is a strategic move that caters to *Beyond Meat's* main consumer demographic. In researching the race or ethnicity of *Beyond Meat's* consumer demographic, no information was found. Business Insider (2019) notes, that millennials, those who are in their mid-twenties to their mid-forties, are noted as the largest consumer demographic for plant-based alternatives, such as the *Beyond Meat* burger. According to PBFA (2020), as of 2018, 79% of millennials already eat a plant-based diet, and 30% of this demographic are working on developing a more plant-based diet. Therefore, the assumed age of the people in this advertisement is anticipated as they represent *Beyond Meat's* largest group of buyers, and invites others like them to follow suit.

In addition to addressing the age of the people in the advertisement, the way that the *Beyond Meat* burger is described is also noteworthy. The participants in the video are all sampling the *Beyond Meat* burger from A&W. Each of the participants comment on the burger after their initial taste. Three out of the five expressions are in disbelief that the burger contains no animal products, and are marveled that it is only made out of plant-based products. In the advertisement, the first thing that is said is “that patty is 100% plant-based protein” (A&W Canada, 2016, 0.01). The word “plant” is consistently mentioned in the customers reviews of the taste of the burger.

The consistent use of the word “plant” highlights the nutritional and environmental importance of the “plant” aspect of the *Beyond Meat* burger, and can be deemed as the main selling feature for this type of burger. Wohl (2019) explains that “the word “plant” is very much in vogue” (p. 19), confirming *Beyond Meat*’s promotional tactic of being trendy by emphasizing its “plant”, versus “veggie”, make up in comparison to its beef alternative. According to *Global News* (2019) several states across America have taken part in a “truth in labelling law... that prohibits food-makers from labelling plant-based products such as meat, milk...any term in reference to a specific agricultural product” (para. 2). The article claims that this is to avoid confusing consumers on what they are buying, however highlights that the author of the bill does not comment on why veggie burger would be confusing, but never the less is a banned phrase (Global News, 2019). The creation of laws that are specifically targeting plant-based products and how they are labelled demonstrates the pressure that competing industries are facing. This implementation also highlights the state of nuance and trendiness that is associated with “plant” items, as this law came into effect within the past year.

The word plant, p-l-a-n-t as the signifier is arbitrary until it is compared with other words that determines its difference from those words, that it gets its meaning (O’Brien & Szeman, 2018). The understanding of what plant means is the signified, which creates the sign of a plant, which is typically a leafy green object that grows from the ground and is a part of nature. The word plant however, now holds cultural significance due to the mythologies that have been produced from social relationships (O’Brien & Szeman, 2018). Therefore, when *Beyond Meat* burgers utilize the word plant and all that it is associated with in its advertising, certain values are portrayed. O’Brien & Szeman (2018) explain Roland Barthes concept of mythology as signs being able to go beyond their denotative level of understanding, that “signs also assume connotative, or mythological,

significance...often charged with a culture's dominant, often unspoken beliefs or values" (p. 72). Plant, as a sign, is doing just that in the promotional work of *Beyond Meat* burgers.

When I think of the word "plant", I picture the colour green, and the concept of environmentalism. At the end of this video advertisement, the phrase "try the new plant-based Beyond Meat burger at A&W" (A&W Canada, 2016, 0.15) is noted, and is transcribed on the screen, with "Beyond Meat" written in the colour green. Keith Allan (2009) discusses how the colour green "is linked to living vegetation" (p. 626) and is often associated with "political movements which focus on the preservation of the natural environment..." (p. 633), for example in Canada the Green Party. With this, the cultural significance that the word "plant" and the colour green provoke cannot be ignored, as promotional tools are always intentional. Next, the *Beyond Meat* burger will be examined on different medium, which holds similar characteristics as this video.

*Sec. 1(c): "P.L.T" Still Image from McDonald's*

This advertisement is a still image from McDonald's 2019 campaign promoting their "P.L.T" burger that uses *Beyond Meat* burger patties. The "P.L.T." stands for plant, lettuce and tomato, a play on words of the popular "B.L.T" (bacon, lettuce and tomato). On a denotative level, this advertisement shows a wooden sign that says "new P.L.T. Plant.Lettuce.Tomato" written in yellow with "Made with a plant-based patty" written in white underneath. The *Beyond Meat* logo, also written in white follows. This section of text takes up a majority of the advertisement, and to the right of the body of text, three quarters of a "P.L.T." burger is shown. The burger that is shown consists of a bun, ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, onions, lettuce, tomato and cheese all on top of a burger patty, that we only know is a *Beyond Meat* patty due to content and labelling of this advertisement. The burger is on-top of a wrapper, with a piece of lettuce falling off, and the

background is a blurry abstraction of the colours, grey, white, green and yellow. In the bottom left hand corner, the details of the promotion are written in white text, “For a limited time only. In select McDonald’s restaurants in Southwestern Ontario, Canada”. This description of the “P.L.T” burger from McDonald’s expresses the literal meaning of what consumers see when they engage with this advertisement.

I now consider the connotative level, and myths that are produced from the “P.L.T” text, to see how it compares to the A&W *Beyond Meat* video advertisement. The sign that “new P.L.T. Plant. Lettuce. Tomato” is written on creates a modern rustic aesthetic, as it is a wooden sign being held up by barbed wire. This is similar to the aesthetic that is noted in the above *Beyond Meat* advertisement, as the sign has a wooden, modern and trendy appeal to it. A majority of the text on this image is written in the colour white, which creates a certain bright tone about the promoted product. The colour white is often “associated with purity and light...” (Allan, 2009, p. 628). This common association with this colour creates a connection between *Beyond Meat* burgers and a sense of newness, and goodness in comparison to traditional meat burgers.

How the space is being used within the image is another aspect that I consider. The image of the “P.L.T.” burger is not in the center of the advertisement, but instead is off on the right side, not completely in view. The use of space in the advertisement does not create a dominant sense for the burger. With the image of the burger on the side, the body of text becomes the most significant aspect of the still image advertisement. Perhaps this is for the consumer, so they feel as though they are getting the proper information about the product before they purchase it. In comparison to the traditional meat burger still image advertisement that I examine later in this chapter, having the text as the main focal point, not the burger itself demonstrates a significant difference in the way the types of burgers are marketed. This “P.L.T.” advertisement gives focus



and attention to the text, that suggests a lack of confidence in the product, as it needs to be explained to consumers. In traditional meat burger advertisements, the burger is the focal point, and confident, needing no explanation.

Finally, the acknowledgement of the limited time that the “P.L.T.” burger is available signifies the products time sensitivity and exclusiveness. This is not a new promotional tactic for McDonald’s, as they often have seasonal food promotions, for example currently they have their “Cadbury Crème Egg McFlurry” promotion, in which it says “Get it before it hops away!” written underneath (McDonald’s, 2020, Promotions). Both of these promotions relay a sense of potential urgency, when consumers are deciding to buy their products or not, is given through this text, as it notifies consumers that this product can only be purchased at selective stores for a limited time. The “P.L. T’s” time limit increases its cultural significance with a sense of nuance and trend. Food advertisements “depict food consumption norms...” (Beaudoin, 2014, p. 551), and therefore when *Beyond Meat* advertisements create a selective and limiting appeal to their product, the product becomes special, and make consumers believe that they must purchase it sooner rather than later so that they do not miss out on the trendy food, that will ideally become a part of consumption norms.

#### *Sec.2 (d): The Beyond Meat Burger Advertisements*

Analyzing the two *Beyond Meat* burgers advertisements from A&W and McDonald’s allows for the similarities in the way the product is marketed to be seen. I do note, that *Beyond Meat* has many more advertising campaigns than what are being analyzed in this body of research. I do not generalize my findings to all *Beyond Meat* promotional work. By semiotically analyzing the two *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements I argue that *Beyond Meat* burgers are creating a brand that signifies them as products that appeal to a certain aesthetic. Due to the colours that are used

in each advertisement, greens, whites and yellows, a bright, light and clean aura is created. The use of the outdoor, rustic signs, and hanging outdoor lights are specific to a modern rustic, industrial appeal that is currently a design trend. According to *Architect Magazine*, the journal of the American institute of architects, “a modern aesthetic with clean and simple industrial materials will be the interior design trend of 2019...” (Shanesy, 2019, para. 2). This aesthetic that is created by *Beyond Meat* lines up directly with this trend. *Beyond Meat* is creating a brand that consumers are intrigued by, which leads to more people wanting to test this new product.

Producing promotional work for food that captures current design trends is a way that *Beyond Meat* burgers are being marketed in a different way than traditional meat burgers. The variation in cultural significance is the acknowledgement of current trends in society, as associating food with other parts of culture allows consumers to identify with their food more than just on a nutritional level. The promotion of *Beyond Meat* burgers, within this study, utilizes a design trend that people want to associate themselves with.

*Sec. 2 (e): “A&W: ’56 Buddy Burger” Video Advertisement*

This video advertisement for A&W was uploaded onto YouTube from the A&W Canada account on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2019. To date, March 2020, it has 2881 views, and is a fifteen-second-long video advertisement that promotes A&W’s ’56 Buddy Burger, which contains a traditional beef patty. In a similar format of the *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements analysis, the denotative levels of meaning are noted first in this video advertisement. The connotative meanings, and myths that are produced from this advertisement will follow.

In the opening frame of the video advertisement, promoting the ’56 Buddy Burger, again, is the well-known A&W spokesperson, Allen Lulu. Lulu is talking to a bobble-head that looks like him saying, “What do you think? Look good?” (A&W Canada, 2019, 0.01) while sitting in a

vehicle holding the '56 Buddy Burger. The camera shifts to view the bobble-headed version of Lulu nodding to his question. Lulu continues with, “It’s a '56 Buddy Burger, look at all that stuff in there, ya like grilled onions?” while gazing longingly at the burger. Again, the bobble-head nods, followed by Lulu stating, “Me too, should I take a bite?”, with another shift to the bobble-head nodding. The video advertisement ends with Lulu saying “ya? Mmmm juicy!” while the bobble-head continuously nods. The video then cuts to a shot of the '56 Buddy Burger with its price written beside it, and a narrating voice saying “try the '56 Buddy Burger for just \$2.99”. The final frames of the commercial show an image the '56 Buddy Burger between two white bread buns complete with sauce, lettuce, tomato, cheese and bacon. The phrase “'56 Buddy Burger” is written in the colour orange, with the “\$2.99” being in brown and in a bigger font than the other words. A small A&W logo appears in the last second of the video underneath the price.

When examining what is present in the video advertisement on a denotative level, the video clip promoting another one of A&W’s beef burgers can be understood as a standard burger advertisement. A standard burger advertisement is what consumers resonate with, due to a hamburger being “a universally known food...where everywhere you go a hamburger means a ground beef patty served on an enriched white bun” (Ozersky, 2008, p. 5). Historically, advertisements for beef burgers do not create a direct connection to the animals that they come from, as consumers disassociate animal products from animals (Lewis, 2018). In her doctorate dissertation, Karyn Lewis (2018) explains that “many people find pleasure in meat consumption but don’t like thinking of animals being raised for meat” (p. 3). This aspect of typical beef promotion is present in the A&W '56 Buddy Burger advertisement. Throughout the video Allen Lulu is talking to himself, via bobble-head, while expressing how juicy the burger that he is eating

is. Audiences watching this advertisement would not necessarily correlate this burger with a cow, as the myth surrounding burgers have become much more than being from an animal.

The traditional beef hamburger, is a Westernized food that has shaped the way people think about, and consume food. Burgers, are a part of the fast-food, food regime and therefore play a significant role in representing major developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as, “population mobility, advances in food technology, the rise of chain stores and the proliferation of the automobile” (Helmer, 1992, p.87). Eating a burger is classic, and A&W plays into the burger’s American roots with their video advertising. Having Allen Lulu as the main face of A&W speaks to the company’s familial essence that they portray, and the burger fits right into that production of an Americanization myth. Having the video advertisement shot in a vehicle, that looks like a truck, speaks to A&W’s origin as a drive-thru restaurant. According to D’Antonio et al (2017) “cars are deeply embedded in American culture...and have a set of values tied to tradition, brand loyalty, patriotism and nostalgia...” that alludes to the idea surrounding the American Dream (p. 29-30). An article from *Foodology*, claims that the ’56 Buddy Burger is “...inspired by their [A&W] start in 1956. A throwback to the ol’ drive in days...” (Chan, Jan. 2018, para. 1). The way that Lulu speaks about the burger, in a taunting way, by stating “crispy onion”, and saying “mmm Juicy!” establishes, and highlights aspects of the burger that A&W wants to provoke its consumers with.

Finally, an aspect of the advertisement that perpetuates the Americanized myth that aligns with beef burgers, is its price. At the end of the advertisement the narrator emphasizes that the ’56 Buddy Burger is “only \$2.99” while having it also written in a large font in the middle of the screen. Shanker (2019) reminds readers that “consumers food choices [are] understood to be driven by taste, price and convenience” (n.p.). The way A&W highlights the price of their beef burger

creates an understanding that burgers are desired to be inexpensive, but are still capable of being of high-quality food source. Obtaining a quality product for a low price, is a common desire that circulates throughout society.

The association between a hamburger and a low purchase price is not a new aspect for hamburger marketing, which allows the Americanized myth that is produced from this advertisement to persist. The origin of the hamburger is rooted in Billy Ingram's, the noted inventor of the hamburger, ideological switch about how society should think about hamburgers in 1926 (Ozersky, 2008). Ingram reclaimed the meaning of hamburger, from "dirty and greasy" to its new association with the White Castle System (Ozersky, 2008). The White Castle System, is considered the first hamburger serving food chain that operated successfully due to their guarantee of "serving the finest product, for the least cost..." (Reference for Business, 2020, para. 1). With the familiar and familial ambience that is portrayed with Lulu appearing in every A&W commercial, and the setting of the video advertisement in a truck, which I relate to A&W's drive-thru origin, the myth of Americanization surfaces. These aspects, in addition to the emphasis on the low price of the beef burger at the end of the advertisement, I argue that the '56 Buddy Burger video reveals and produces a mythology of associating a beef burger with Americanization. This advertisement produces, both, different levels of cultural and economic significance than *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements, that is discussed at the end of this chapter.

*Sec. 2 (f): McDonalds' "Mighty Angus" Burger Still Image*

This McDonald's advertisement promotes one of their beef burgers from their "Mighty Angus Range", and was located on McDonald's main website in 2019 during their promotion. On a denotative level, this still image advertisement features front and center an image of a beef burger surrounded by a black and grey background. I am unsure of what the burger is placed on top of,

but it looks industrial, perhaps a concrete or metal slab. The burger consists of sauce, bacon, lettuce, tomato, cheese, fried onions and a beef burger patty squished between a brown brioche bun, sprinkled with sesame seeds. Each burger topping has a vibrant colour that nicely contrasts with the dark background. On the top left-hand corner, the promotion is written in white and red, with half of a maple leaf of the top and “range” in red, and “Mighty Angus” written in all capital letters in white. The top right-hand corner shows a beef certification, “CRSB Certified” and “Beef Sustainability” encircling an outlined shape of a cow’s face, all in white.

The first thing that I notice when looking at this advertisement is the focus, and centrality of the image of the burger. In this image, the burger is the most important aspect that McDonald’s is aiming for consumers to resonate with. Having the burger filled with vibrant colours is appealing to the eye and it demands attention from the viewer. The range name itself, that the burger is a part of, “Mighty Angus” has a strong connotation with manliness, and power. The CRSB certification in the top left corner notifies the consumer that this beef patty comes from a sustainable source. The CRSB is the Canadian Roundtable for Canadian Beef and is the “go-to forum for sustainable beef in Canada” (CRSB, 2020). Consumers rely on these types of stamps of approval to help them feel confident about their purchases.

The majority of the advertisement is dark, with the burger being in a halo-like focus in the center. Utilizing the dark colours of black and grey is a conscious choice made by the marketers. The colour black, in Western communities, is often associated with “...matters pertaining to death” (Allan, 2009, p. 627), and grey is often used to represent dullness (Allan, 2009). These common association with these two colours speak to the type of message McDonald’s is portraying with this still image advertisement. The burger represents much more than a piece of meat sandwiched between two buns; it signifies the progress of America in many ways. Helmer (1992) notes that

“buying a hamburger and fries at McDonald’s becomes here not simply a pleasurable shared activity but a tribal act imbued with inevitability and necessity” (p. 94). The darkness that is present in the background, is countered with the almost angelic-like burger that is the light bursting through the darkness.

The metal, or concrete slab that the burger is placed on-top of creates an industrial feel that people often associate with toughness, when it is surrounded by certain signs, such as dark colours. Being a burger that is a part of the “Mighty Angus Range”, that is the shining through the somber industrial background produces a sense of victory for the burger, as if it has conquered the darkness. The myths that are associated with this, are also linked to Americanization as the burger is a “social nexus” for America (Ozersky, 2008). The hamburger has its own history, and has persisted to exist today in the same form it originated in, proving the determination and dedication that Americans have in preserving their invention (Ozersky, 2008). Though this advertisement produces the myth of Americanization differently than the A&W ’56 Buddy Burger video advertisement, it produces the same myth nonetheless.

#### *Sec.2 (g): The Traditional Meat Burger Advertisements*

Through semiotically analyzing the two traditional beef burger advertisements, the myth of Americanization that they produced is evident. The cultural significance that traditional burgers have is rooted in nationalism, and the history of America, and is therefore important to consumers. Economically, the meat industry is beyond the scope of *Beyond Meat* burgers, or any protein alternative. The purchasing price of a beef burger however, aims to stay as low as possible to continue exemplifying the Americanized myth.

Though the two advertisements do not directly relate to each other, each one places the burger as the main selling point of the advertisement. The A&W video finishes with a clear, bright

image of the '56 Buddy Burger, and the McDonald's advertisement places the burger in the center of the image looking somewhat heroic. Whether it be through, the familiar face of Allan Lulu, that makes consumers feel as though they are a part of a family, while reminiscing on the early days of A&W, or resonating a beef burger with a sense of toughness, that has allowed beef burgers to remain greatly consistent throughout time, a myth of Americanization is portrayed and produced.

## Conclusion

From this analysis, the answers to the two posed research questions have become clear. Establishing the cultural and economic signifiers of *Beyond Meat* burgers at the beginning of this chapter through political economy allows for it to be properly compared to beef burgers that are major products in the fast-food market. Semiotically analyzing both *Beyond Meat*, and traditional meat burgers, with both video advertisements as well as still images from the same two companies allows for a fair comparison. Though both types of burgers are selling the same product on a visual level, and attempting to have similar sensory qualities, they are being promoted quite differently. I argue, that the *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements are producing myths that are associated with societal trends, such as the modern industrial aesthetic, and the word "plant". In combination with the colours, level of brightness, and the scenes that *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted within, a light, trendy, earth conscious aura that consumers can choose to buy into is created.

The traditional meat burger advertisements, in comparison, produces a myth that aligns with Americanization. This myth embraces the hamburgers' history, and sense of nationalism that is signified. The myth of Americanization is portrayed through the advertisement's inferences to the burger's origin, and how it has continued to be a staple in North American's diets, and is thought of as a "basic design that cannot be improved on" (Ozensky, 2008, p. 6). In response to the second posed research question, there is variation in the two burgers' cultural and economic



signifiers. *Beyond Meat* burgers have a nuance sense of cultural significance, as the goal of the burger aligns with environmentalism, health and current aesthetic trends of society. A *Beyond Meat* burger, through its branding, has become a product that grocery stores and fast-food restaurants desire to have in order to serve customers' needs.

Traditional meat burgers, culturally signify through signs that tie into nationalism, and therefore is a Western food necessity. The two burgers are both quite economically significant in their own ways. The *Beyond Meat* burger has had enormous growth in their stocks, and recently in their revenue, but still is nowhere near the billion-dollar traditional meat industry that is present today (Canadian Cattleman's association, Industry Stats, 2020). Ultimately, both types of burgers produce their own myths that consumers buy into and contain powerful economic and cultural signifiers. The final chapter summarizes this research in its entirety and suggests further research that could use some of the data and findings from this thesis.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

By analyzing the four chosen online fast-food advertisements, both traditional meat and *Beyond Meat* burgers, via a political economic, and semiotic approach, this thesis has answered the following two research questions.

- 1.) When analyzing how *Beyond Meat* burgers are promoted, in comparison to traditional meat burgers, are different myths created?
- 2.) When comparing *Beyond Meat*, to traditional meat burgers what are the variations, if any, in their cultural and economic signifiers?

I have found that different myths are created when each burger is promoted to consumers. The *Beyond Meat* burger advertisements produce a myth that is associated with modernity via its industrial, wooden aesthetic appeal, that taps into consumers desire to consume trendy foods. This myth incorporates factors of cleanliness, greenery, and familiarity that is attractive to millennials. In comparison, the myth of Americanization which refers to “the perceived spread and absorption of presumed American values...” (MacDonald, 2011, p. 46) is produced in traditional meat burger advertisements. This is due to the signs having a focus on North American history that creates a sense of Americanization which is rugged and manly. This is due to the cement slab that the burger is placed on top of, confidently bursting through the dark surrounding background colour. There is a sense of patriotism in the corner where the stamp approval is, in a maple leaf. All of these signs, create a myth that is associated with what it means to be an American.

Secondly, this research has aided in discovering that *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burgers function differently in their economic and cultural significances. Though *Beyond Meat*'s burger profits and revenues are increasing, in the past year by 250%, these numbers do not compare to those within the traditional meat industry and its \$9.4 billion dollar value (Forbes, 2019 and

Canadian Cattlemen's Association, 2020). Both *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burgers have cultural signifiers that equate to cultural power. *Beyond Meat* burgers are a product that is made to disrupt the meat industry and to create a new type of protein for consumers (Beyond Meat, 2020). With this, its cultural significance lies in its nuance state that aims to produce trendy, forward, and environmentally conscious plant-based burgers. *Beyond Meat* burgers are a part of a plant-based food revolution that aims to increase animal welfare and decrease the environmental repercussions that are associated with animal farming, while providing a meat alternative product.

Traditional meat burgers, unlike *Beyond Meat* burgers, have a cultural significance that is rooted in historic American movements such as industrialism, transportation, and capitalism. Hamburger consumers resonate with these ideals, that are symbolized by traditional meat burgers, as some argue they have shaped the North American food industry into what it is today. The cultural significance of traditional meat burgers is highlighted through the myth that is produced with these advertisements and its association with Americanization. Understanding how each burger works, and how each is understood by consumers, demonstrates their unique, yet strong function of being culturally significant.

### **Summarization and Reflection of Work**

I began this research due to my own experience as a vegetarian. During the summer of 2019 I started to notice the prominence of the plant-based movement, as *Beyond Meat* burgers began appearing on many menus and billboards throughout my small hometown. As I reflect on the work that I have done I am not surprised at what I have found. However, I find it satisfying to be able to articulate properly, with evidence, the variations that I notice between the advertising of different burgers. As I continue to come across both academic and online articles regarding *Beyond*

*Meat* burgers, in various capacities, I believe that I have made a contribution to the academic literature that involves plant-based products, diets and trends.

The ongoing trends and gaps in literature studying plant-based products and diets became apparent while conducting the literature review for this thesis. A clear variation was noted in ways to analyze and conduct research on a topic, such as plant-based products, or objects of analysis like advertisements. After sorting through each article, the following points were continuously brought forward: the importance of proper branding and the consistent discussion of finances. Discovering these prominent aspects of plant-based products and diets throughout my reading confirmed my choices of using a political economic lens to establish each industries significance before conducting my semiotic analysis.

I felt confident throughout my analysis because of my informative discussion in the third chapter about the methodological choices. Laying out how I was going to analyze the chosen advertisements, how, and why my choices of theory and method worked together was beneficial, and kept my research questions at the forefront of my thesis. As predicted, conducting my analysis was the most time consuming, but it was the most rewarding as it allowed for all of the content that I had been looking at to come together to answer my research questions.

### **Recommendation for Future Work/New Knowledge to the Field**

If I were to continue on with this research, on a larger scale, I would conduct my own online survey asking participants how they interpret and engage with *Beyond Meat* versus traditional meat burger advertisement on a visual level. As per my literature review, there are many studies that conduct online surveys, but I have yet to find one that asks participants to directly compare the two types of burgers visually. Collecting qualitative data would enhance the findings that have come from this research. I would also analyze advertisements from other large fast-food

companies so that the findings could eventually be generalized. Lastly, I would consider the environmental discourse surrounding the *Beyond Meat* movement.

*Beyond Meat*, as a company, takes pride in the fact that its plant-based products are positively impacting climate change (Beyond Meat, Our Mission, 2020). Therefore, their environmental impact is often brought forward when its products are discussed. However, people's opinions are not always in agreement with the company's statements, and sometimes *Beyond Meat* faces critique and hesitation. This aspect of *Beyond Meat* products, the environmental discourse surrounding the company and their products is an aspect that I did not explore, due to the length of this thesis. I believe, however, that is important to research and consider, on top of the company's financial or cultural power, what its environmental power is, and how does that aspect of their products circulate to consumers?

Throughout this research I have yet to find a study that has conducted a semiotic analysis of plant-based burger and traditional meat burger advertisements. Humans interact with hundreds of advertisements each day and consciously or not, we engage with them. Fast-food burger advertising is not a new concept, but advertising and branding for plant-based burgers relatively is. With my research, I have contributed a visual analysis via semiotics, rooted in political economy, that demonstrates the myths that are associated with different types of burgers, to the communication and media studies, as well as food studies literature. I confidently argue that *Beyond Meat* and traditional meat burger advertisements produce different myths, and contain distinct political and cultural signifiers.

**Figure 1**

*A&W's Beyond Meat Burger Video Advertisement*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_HuOl9xsUg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_HuOl9xsUg).

**Figure 2**

*A&W's '56 Buddy Burger Video Advertisement*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxkvaUYyvhs>.

**Figure 3**

*McDonald's P.L.T Burger*



**Figure 4**

*McDonald's Mighty Angus Range Burger*





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