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CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PLANT-BASED MEAT MARKETING (based on Beyond Meat's Instagram marketing)

Andrii Yuriiovych Rybalchenko, andrei.uni@live.com

Assistant Professor

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

This article examines linguistic and semiotic means in BEYOND MEAT's marketing on Instagram with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study focuses on stylistic devices – anthropomorphism, metaphor, hyperbole, othering – and their use in rhetorical strategies to position the brand within modern cultural and ethically engaged narratives which include environmental responsibility and reduction of ecological impact, animal welfare and ethical consumption, promotion of plant-based diet as a healthier alternative to traditional meat. Key findings reveal that BEYOND MEAT employs anthropomorphism to forge emotional ties, attributing human traits to plants to highlight their worth and capabilities of becoming various healthy and eco-friendly products offered by BEYOND MEAT. Anthropomorphism is used to portray animals as figures worthy of respect and admiration to counteract the view of animals as a means to human ends imposed by the traditional animal food industry. Metaphors and hyperboles strategically underscore the ideological basis of the brand's messages, linking plant-based diets to animal welfare and enhanced environmental sustainability. Othering helps to create a distinct brand identity by positioning BEYOND MEAT's products as superior to traditional meat products, highlighting the benefits of the former and emphasizing the negatives of the latter. The research also reveals the use of cultural references to boost consumer engagement and receptivity. The article shows that while BEYOND MEAT's marketing adeptly engages with current social movements and consumer trends, it tends to oversimplify complex issues, potentially engendering skepticism in certain audiences.

Keywords: *Beyond Meat, plant-based meat, Instagram marketing, Critical Discourse Analysis, rhetorical strategy, stylistic device.*

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Критичний дискурс-аналіз маркетингу рослинного м'яса (на матеріалі Інстаграм маркетингу компанії Beyond Meat) (Англійською)

КРИТИЧНИЙ ДИСКУРС-АНАЛІЗ МАРКЕТИНГУ РОСЛИННОГО М'ЯСА (на матеріалі Інстаграм маркетингу компанії Beyond Meat)

Андрій Юрійович Рибальченко, andrei.uni@live.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1595-7429>

Асистент

Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка

У статті за допомогою інструментів критичного дискурс-аналізу досліджуються лінгвістичні та семіотичні засоби, що використовуються у маркетингу компанії BEYOND MEAT в Інстаграмі. Головна увага приділяється стилістичним засобам, а саме антропоморфізму, метафорі, гіперболі, іншуванню та їх використанню у маркетингових стратегіях для позиціонування бренду у сучасних культурних і етично заангажованих наративах, які включають у себе відповідальне ставлення до навколишнього середовища, зменшення негативного впливу на нього, захист прав тварин, етичне харчування, рекламування їжі рослинного походження як здоровішої альтернативи традиційним харчовим продуктам, виробленим з м'яса. Антропоморфізм використовується компанією для формування емоційних зв'язків шляхом атрибуції людських властивостей рослинам, щоб підкреслити вартість і уміння рослин перетворюватися у різні здорові та екологічні продукти харчування, які пропонує компанія BEYOND MEAT. Антропоморфізм також застосовується для зображення тварин як істот вартих поваги та шанси, для протидії традиційному відношенню до них як до об'єктів експлуатації. Метафори і гіперболи висвітлюють ідеологічні основи маркетингових повідомлень компанії, пов'язуючи рослинний раціон харчування з правами тварин та відповідальним ставленням до навколишнього середовища. Іншування допомагає сформувати унікальну ідентичність бренду, зосереджуючись на позитивних аспектах рослинної продукції BEYOND MEAT та негативних аспектах м'ясних продуктів харчування. Компанія інтегрує культурні аспекти у свої маркетингові повідомлення та підкріплює їх фактами, що потенційно підвищують якість їх сприйняття цільовою аудиторією та формує довіру до них. У той же час, спрощення складних проблем у маркетинговій комунікації компанії може викликати недовіру в аудиторії, знайомій з неетичними маркетинговими практиками. У цілому, маркетинг Beyond Meat не тільки сприяє поширенню рослинної дієти, а й позитивно впливає на суспільні норми та поведінку споживачів.

Ключові слова: Beyond Meat, рослинне м'ясо, Instagram, маркетинг, критичний дискурс-аналіз, риторична стратегія, стилістичний засіб.

Introduction

In 1992, Norman Fairclough wrote that he noticed an increase in the codification of language to meet political, economic, and institutional objectives [Fairclough 1992]. In the economic sphere, language design acquired particular importance as the focus shifted from manufacturing to service, culture, and leisure industries where success largely depends on the image they present to the public. In addition, due to growing market competition companies have been more preoccupied with communication strategies and techniques that would enable them to outperform their competitors [Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011, p. 359]. Nowadays, marketing language is highly codified and carefully tested on focus groups to ensure its potential to influence consumers. The linguistic aspects of marketing language have been extensively explored in the seminal studies of Edward F. McQuarrie and David Glen Mick, [McQuarrie and Glen Mick 1996, p. 424-438], Greg Myers [Myers 1994, p. 159-173], Angela Goddard [Goddard 2002], Geoffrey Leech [Leech 1966], and Guy Cook [Cook 2001].

More recently, new software, and digital tools allowed to enhance verbal communication with extra-linguistic means through the codification and creative use of image, color, video, icon, typeface, and other semiotic resources. Their motivated use as well as the social and cultural meanings they are loaded with are studied within the framework of Social Semiotics. Additionally, research and consulting agencies such as *Semiotic Solutions* employ semiotic methodology to identify nuanced aspects of contemporary culture which they apply to help businesses create effective marketing campaigns. In turn, semiotic resources can be categorized as belonging to visual, aural, linguistic, gestural, and spatial modes and studied within the framework of multimodality. Multimodal research helps uncover how different modes are implemented to generate complex meanings. Various modes can reinforce, complement, and extend each other, enhancing the overall communicative impact. Multimodality of marketing communication on online platforms has been explored in the studies of Carmen Daniela Maier [Maier 2011], John A. Bateman, Janina Wildfeuer and Tuomo Hiippala [Bateman *et al.* 2018], and others.

In late capitalism, adding symbolic and material value to products is essential to fend off competition. Thus, marketing communication is loaded with cultural and social meanings that endow it with the power to reinforce and challenge societal norms and structures. Within this critical perspective, communication is much more than just ways of speaking or writing, it constitutes practices that systematically shape the ideas of what is considered true and acceptable in society, thereby

regulating and controlling it [Fairclough 1995]. Therefore, marketing communication can be viewed and analyzed as discourse.

The marketing of plant-based foods, one of the newest and fastest-growing food market sectors, leverages discourses of health, vegetarianism, veganism, environmental protection, sustainability, and animal welfare [Overstreet 2019; Mintel 2023; Hopwood *et al.* 2020]. These issues are increasingly popular in Western countries and are gaining traction globally, contributing to the sale of products, on the one hand, and a positive impact on society, on the other hand. Noteworthy, some businesses exploit these trends by merely portraying their products as healthy, environmentally friendly, and sustainable without a genuine commitment to these values [Andrews 2021; Eriksson and Machin 2020; Chen and Eriksson 2019].

One of the largest companies that represent the sector of plant-based foods is *Beyond Meat*, founded in the USA in 2009 [Jones 2022]. *Beyond Meat* is a popular, innovative company with a mission to positively affect the global problems of natural resource depletion, the greenhouse effect, and animal welfare by providing nutritious and healthy food options. It produces plant-based meat substitutes such as burger patties, sausages, and ground meat. The company's products are available in more than 80 countries across the globe and sold in over 190,000 locations worldwide including grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, and universities [Beyond Meat, Inc. 2023]. The brand actively promotes its products on social media which allows a broad reach and the use of diverse communicative formats (text, images, videos, stories, *etc.*). In particular, Instagram, a visual-centric platform, is suitable for food marketing hence we consider *Beyond Meat's* marketing discourse on Instagram a noteworthy object of analysis.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the linguistic and semiotic means employed in marketing communication of *Beyond Meat* on *Instagram* using the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as described in Machin and Mayr [Machin and Mayr 2012]. The study will contextualize *Beyond Meat's* marketing discourse within health, environmental protection, sustainability, and ethical consumption, and evaluate its potential perception by the audience.

This study analyzes *Beyond Meat's* Instagram posts over the period from the 1st of January 2023 to the 1st of March 2024. A total of 194 posts and the profile bio were examined to identify the discourses of health, environmental protection, sustainability, and ethical consumption, which were then grouped by stylistic device and analyzed employing the analytical tools of CDA described in Machin and Mayr [Machin and Mayr 2012].

In this section, we present the findings from our critical discourse analysis of Beyond Meat's Instagram posts. The analysis reveals several key rhetorical strategies employed by *Beyond Meat* to promote its plant-based products. These strategies include anthropomorphism, metaphor, hyperbole, and othering, each contributing uniquely to shaping consumer perceptions and encouraging ethical consumption.

1. Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a rhetorical strategy that attributes human characteristics to other entities. *Beyond Meat* anthropomorphizes plants to create a perception of plants as valuable and worthy, highlighting their human-like qualities. By presenting them this way, *Beyond Meat* encourages consumers to make choices that are beneficial for their health and environment, as consuming plant-based foods typically has a lower environmental impact and reduces the risk of chronic diseases [Willett, Rockström, Loken, et al. 2019, p. 447-492]. Moreover, opting for plant-based meat helps animals live better lives outside of the confines of industrial farming systems, which aligns with *Beyond Meat's* mission statement.

The key elements of plant anthropomorphizing are represented by the phatic (e.g., *tell your house plant I said hi*) and the conative functions (e.g., *To all the plants out there, we believe in you*), positioning plants as humans [Jakobson 1960, p. 350-377]. Emojis reinforce verbal elements and add a casual and friendly tone to messages. Furthermore, *Beyond Meat* emphasizes the capabilities of plants by personifying them as animate agents rather than as receivers of action, which is underscored by the active voice in their messaging: 1) **looking at a plant* You can be anything you want when you grow up. A burger, a chicken nugget, a steak. I believe in you.* 2) *Pretty cool that plants can combine with other plants to become burgers. who you surround yourself with matters* 3) *Shout out to plants for being able to be meat without all the drama.* 4) *Plants, wow. Amazing range. Should've won a Golden Globe.*

Beyond Meat also expresses a fascination with the capabilities of plants via celebratory and admiring language (*“Shout out to plants,” “Should've won a Golden Globe,” “Pretty cool that plants can”*).



Fig. 1. *Beyond Meat's* logo in the profile bio

When it comes to animals, the company conveys their agency and human-like capabilities semiotically. For example, *Beyond Meat's* logo (Fig. 1) features an icon of a bull, which traditionally symbolizes strength, stability, and power. The addition of a cape enhances these qualities, transforming the bull into a superhero-like figure, since in modern popular culture, capes are associated with superheroes symbolizing exceptional power, protection, and heroism. In combination with the brand's name, these visuals create a narrative where the bull saves the world by taking consumers beyond the outdated and flawed traditional consumption model. Thus, the bull is portrayed as being engaged in morally commendable actions, suggesting that it possesses qualities of moral agency – a human trait not associated with other living beings.



Fig. 2. *Beyond Meat. Instagram, September 30, 2023*

Similarly, the question “*When cows see humans drive by on the highway, do they say, “humans.”*” (Fig.2) suggests that cows can reflect on human behavior and judge it as undeserving of being called human, implying a form of moral agency. Therefore, *Beyond Meat* portrays animals as figures worthy of respect and admiration rather than viewing them as a means to human ends in the animal food industry.

2. Metaphor

A metaphor is a rhetorical trope that compares two objects by stating that they have the same characteristics. Most importantly, comparing one object to another influences not only the way we think about that object but also the way we act. As a

result, the use of metaphor can have ideological significance [Machin and Mayr 2012, p.163].

Beyond Meat utilizes cultural metaphors to deliver a range of messages connected to animal welfare as well as environmental protection. For example, the text in one of the posts “*We make plant-based meat for the same reason you wanna date emotionally available man: good meat without all the suffering*” uses a metaphor to draw a parallel between plant-based meat and the cultural value of emotional availability in men, who have traditionally been stereotyped as less expressive about their feelings. Emotional availability in men is especially valued in Western countries, as a result of the feminist and mental health movements.



Fig. 3. *Beyond Meat*. Instagram, February 14, 2024

In another example (Fig. 3), *Beyond Meat* employs a cultural metaphor to convey a message about environmental stewardship. The metaphor draws a parallel between the qualities of a significant other and the Earth and the feeling of worry about both of them, thus broadening the traditional scope of the holiday from caring about the loved one to caring about the environment. The message is reinforced by semiotic means, namely, the heart icons and earthy color scheme.

3. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of speech that involves an exaggeration of ideas for effect. D. Machin and A. Mayer note that the use of hyperbole can indicate ideological work [Machin and Mayer 2012, p. 170]. *Beyond Meat* employs hyperbole to emphasize the urgency of addressing climate change and to promote the transition to consuming its plant-based products as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

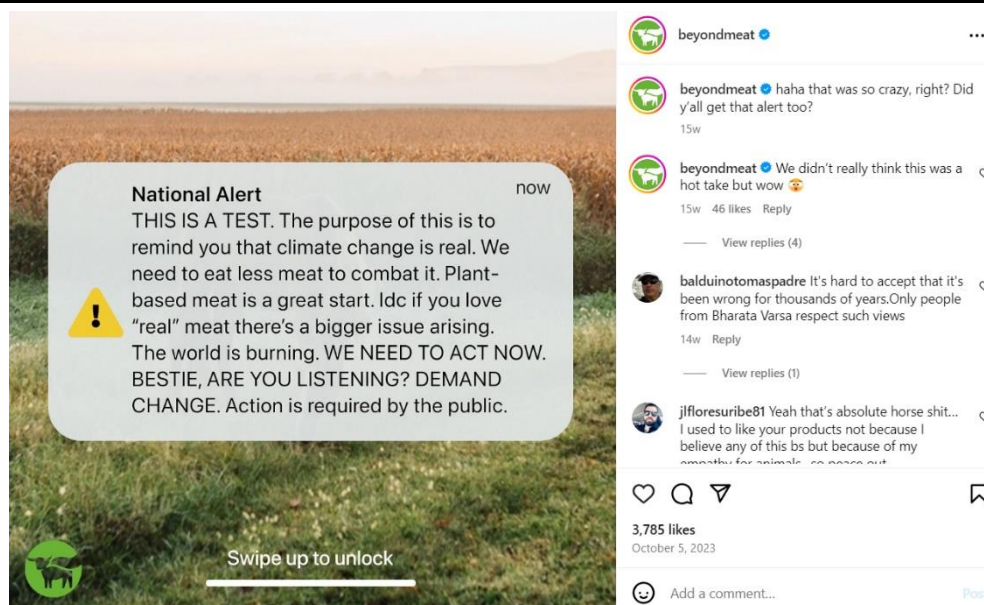


Fig. 4. *Beyond Meat*. Instagram, October 5, 2023

The brand hyperbolizes the consequences of climate change through apocalyptic language, uppercase typeface, and signs indexing a hotter climate. For instance, Fig. 4 presents a textual message that draws attention to climate change (“*The world is burning*”) and calls to mitigate it (“*DEMAND CHANGE*”). The text is set against a backdrop that indexes a hotter climate.

Much like in the case of metaphors, *Beyond Meat*’s hyperbolic messages are full of cultural references. For example, “*105 °F*” in the text “*YOUR PEPPERMINT MOCHA ISN’T GOING TO HIT THE SAME WHEN IT’S 105 °F*” (Fig. 5) signifies scorching temperature using the unit of measurement predominantly used in the United States. Peppermint mocha is traditionally associated with winter holidays in the temperate regions of the USA, which results in an incongruity of enjoying a traditional cold-weather drink in the extreme heat of 105 Fahrenheit [Peiper 2022].

What is worth noting is that the text in the caption of Fig.5 serves as an extension that refers to the publication dedicated to combating climate change. This allows the viewers to familiarize themselves with the precise data on the severity of the issue and a concrete solution that mitigates the distrust triggered by the exaggeration. This aligns with the approach suggested by *Euromonitor International*, a leading provider of strategic market research, advising businesses to support their claims with tangible proof to convince ‘*greenwashed out*’ consumers that their calls for environmental action are not merely attempts to sell products disguised as ‘good for the environment.’ [Euromonitor – Global Consumer Trends 2024]. However, this is not the case with all the *Beyond Meat*’s posts. For instance, the message in Figure 4 is not likely to have a good reception from the audience who do not have a deep

understanding of the climate change issue, as there is no explanation as to why the statement “*The world is burning*” might be realistic shortly. A curious reader might be motivated to search for an explanation; however, if they are familiar with unethical advertising, they may not make the effort to do so.

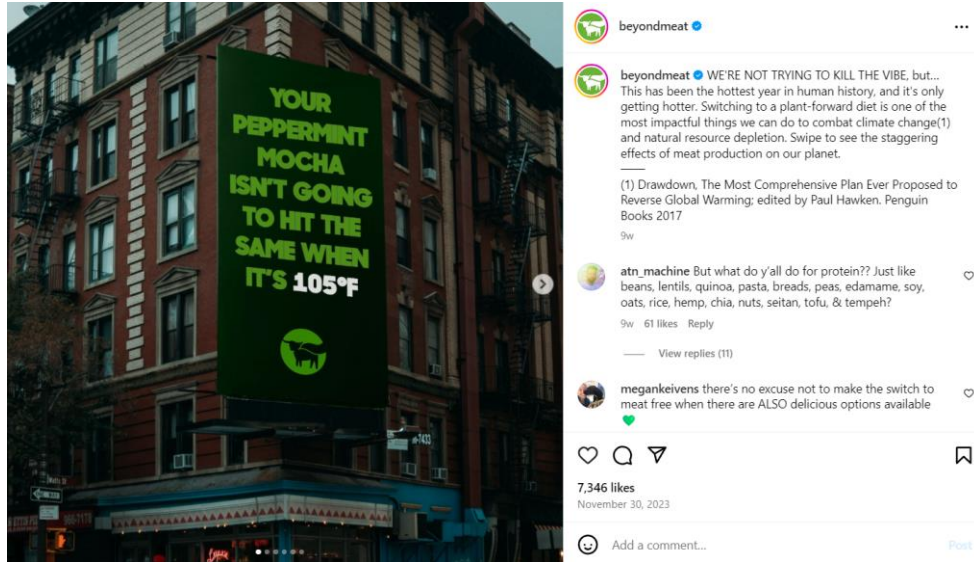


Fig. 5. *Beyond Meat*. Instagram, November 30, 2023.

4. Othering

Othering is a rhetorical strategy that allows to create a distinct brand identity by positioning a product or brand as superior in comparison to competitors [Fernández-Vázquez 2021, p. 3284]. It often involves highlighting the negative traits of a competing product and stating that these undesirable traits are absent in the marketed product. This approach can create a biased perception because it focuses selectively on the negatives of others and the positives of one's own product and does not rule out the presence of negative characteristics in the marketed product itself. *Beyond Meat* uses this strategy to present its products as a healthier, more sustainable option compared to the meat products it aims to substitute.

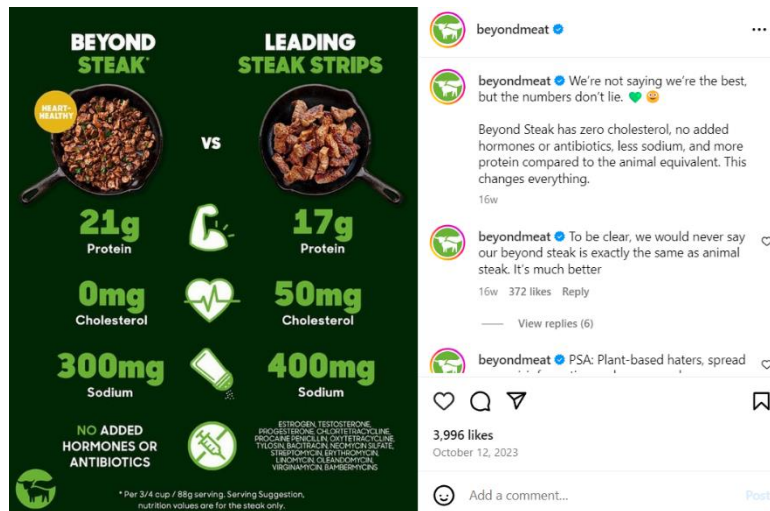


Fig. 6. Beyond Meat. Instagram, October 12, 2023

For instance, Fig. 6 presents a typical post contrasting a plant-based “*Beyond Steak*” with meat-based “*Leading Steak Strips*”. The company uses a comparative table to highlight the nutritional differences, focusing on protein, cholesterol, and sodium content, and the absence of added hormones or antibiotics in their product represented by the No + Noun Phrase structure. The use of the abbreviation *VS* in the image sets up a direct opposition between Beyond Steak and the leading steak strips. This creates an ‘us versus them’ relationship that is the core of othering, positioning the plant-based option as not only different but also superior in terms of health benefits. The captions complement the visual part, creating a narrative of superiority using the superlative “*best*” and the intensified comparative “*much better*” in “*We’re not saying we’re the best, but the numbers don’t lie*” and “*It’s much better.*” These statements suggest a clear valuation over the animal-based product. The provision of factual data contributes to the credibility of the post and is expected to be well-received by the audience according to recent consumer research [Euromonitor – Global Consumer Trends 2024].



Fig. 7. Beyond Meat. Instagram, December 20, 2023

Similarly, the brand presents factual information regarding sustainable production. The two bar graphs in Fig.7 contrast the water amount used for the production of a patty made of beef versus a plant-based patty by *Beyond Meat*. The use of gray for the beef patty's bar in the graph connotes dullness, industrialization, and a lack of life, enhancing the impression that the beef option is the less desirable one. The bold statement above *Beyond Meat's* bar uses emphatic language to draw a stark comparison with the number "34X" acting as a signifier of excess and inefficiency. The caption using the comparative adjective structure reinforces the message as well as extends it, providing a reference to the full report on comparative sustainability which adds credibility to the whole message.

The success of companies such as *Beyond Meat* depends largely on their positioning. To create a favorable image, the company leverages sophisticated stylistic devices and integrates modern cultural and ethically engaged narratives into its marketing. These narratives resonate with contemporary consumer values and help to reinforce positive societal norms. However, despite the efforts of the company to increase the receptivity and credibility of its messages, oversimplification of complex issues may provoke skepticism in audience members who are not familiar with these issues yet.

Despite these insights, several areas warrant further investigation. Future research could expand the dataset to include publications from other internet platforms, providing a more comprehensive understanding of *Beyond Meat's* marketing discourse. Additionally, analyzing how the audience engages with and responds to marketing discourse can help assess its effectiveness. Finally, comparing *Beyond Meat's* marketing discourse with that of other companies operating in different English-speaking countries may provide insights into the way businesses tailor their marketing communication to different national markets.

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