

“EATING FRESH” IN AMERICA: SUBWAY RESTAURANT’S NUTRITIONAL RHETORIC

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Increasingly, many American fast food restaurants are marketing their food as being healthier, often by introducing new menu items that have less fat, fewer calories, and that fit into a broader range of nondiscretionary categories of the food pyramid. However, no fast food restaurant has focused on the “healthiness” of its products to the extent that Subway Restaurant has over the past near decade. In 2000, the restaurant’s famous “Jared” campaign first shared the story of Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds in one year by following a diet that consisted primarily of Subway sandwiches (“The Subway Diet”). This campaign’s influence on consumers was clear, as it was followed by a one-year sales increase of 47.5% for the restaurant (McGrath and MacMillan 159). The campaign advertised seven types of subs that contain six grams of fat or less—although the restaurant’s menu includes not-so-healthy items as well. While Subway’s sales continue to grow rapidly (and with Jared still appearing in many of its commercials), America’s obesity rates also are increasing at a shocking pace. The role that popular restaurants such as Subway play in the American diet is important to consider in contemplating the obesity crisis, as Americans currently consume about one-third of their daily calories while dining out (Jacobson). To understand how restaurants like Subway influence the American diet, it is critical to examine their advertising strategies in order to ascertain specifically how their advertisements work to persuade potential customers. In particular, the increasingly common “healthy” fast food ads must be analyzed in terms of their potential to misguide viewers about the nutritional benefits of consuming fast food.

A recent study performed by Chandon and Wansink indicates that the average Subway diner has been misled by the restaurant’s commercials, even if this is unintentional on Subway’s part. As a result of an effect Chandon and Wansink have designated the “health halo,” customers extend the “healthiness” of a selection of Subway’s sandwiches to apply to all subs that the restaurant serves, even if a sub has additional, less-healthy toppings such as mayonnaise and other sauces that add to the fat and caloric content. The study shows that a person eating a Subway meal will estimate that it has, on average, 151 fewer calories than a McDonald’s meal—when, in actuality, it has approximately the same number. The investigation also finds that people ordering a foot-long Italian BMT sandwich at Subway are much more likely to add higher-calorie drinks and cookies to their meal than people who order a McDonald’s Big Mac, even though the Subway sandwich actually has twice the caloric value of the burger. In other words, the average person who eats at Subway believes that the “healthiness” of the sandwiches there compensates for the relative “unhealthiness” of side dishes such as cookies: by choosing to eat what they perceive to be a healthy meal, Subway diners feel that they have earned the right to consume additional items that they believe to be less healthy.

This type of research has made clear that the advertising methods used by Subway somehow have played an important role in distorting customers’ perceptions of the nutritional content of the restaurant’s products. The connection between exposure to fast food advertising and gaining weight is difficult to conclusively examine, but a 2006 study performed by Chou, Rashad, and Grossman suggests that a relationship does exist between viewing more fast food commercials and being over-

weight. The study examines the body mass index (BMI) values of children living within distinct television marketing areas in the U.S., and the amount of time that the children living in those specific areas spent viewing fast food ads on television.¹ Through this analysis, a strong positive relationship was found between time spent watching fast food ads and the probability that children were overweight. The study considers that children who watch more television (and thus see more fast food advertising) have higher BMI values because they probably engage in less physical activity and therefore burn fewer calories. Beyond this cause, however, the researchers stress that viewing fast food ads is likely to independently contribute to weight gain, because such advertising encourages children to develop an early habit of consuming unhealthy foods.

With the influential nature of fast food advertising and its effects on caloric intake and being overweight already having been explored by studies such as these, it is my intention to provide a close look at the rhetorical nature of fast food advertising through a specific focus on Subway Restaurant's television advertisements. Despite the importance of studying the rhetoric used in advertisements of "healthy" fast food, I have not identified any previously performed studies of the subject. Therefore, in my investigation, I intend to define and to provide examples of some of the primary rhetorical methods that Subway repeatedly uses in its advertisements, and to offer an explanation of how the restaurant's use of rhetoric may cause consumers to misunderstand the nutritional value of Subway's menu items.

For the purposes of my study, I define rhetoric as the persuasive methods applied by Subway Restaurant to entice television viewers to purchase its products. I specifically concentrate on ads that make a deliberate appeal to the nutritional and health concerns of the average television viewer; I designate this rhetorical focus as "nutritional rhetoric." In a cultural environment that is increasingly permeated by news stories about health and especially about the obesity epidemic, it seems reasonable to assume that much of the American television audience has been primed to be acutely receptive to this form of rhetoric. I will analyze eight recent Subway television advertisements that I located online.² After viewing these ads several times, I identified five rhetorical strategies that repeatedly were used in making appeals to consumers. In my analysis, I will examine the advertisements in terms of their use of these strategies. I have classified the following approaches as being critical aspects of Subway's nutritional rhetoric: (1) the making of nutritional claims, (2) a visual rhetoric that makes the restaurant's "healthy" food options appear to be numerous and exciting (in addition to being nutritious), (3) the comparison of the Subway product with the products of other, less "healthy" fast food restaurants, (4) the clear indication that the physical manifestations of eating poorly, and hence being overweight, are unattractive or undesirable, and (5) the association of the Subway product with a person who is physically fit.

Analysis

To provide a background for my analysis of Subway's specific rhetorical practices, I will describe the general premises of eight "healthy" Subway commercials. I chose these commercials because they have all been aired fairly recently and because they all include references to eating well and/or being physically fit. Four of the commercials are part of Subway's Fresh Fit campaign, which began to air in March 2007. These advertisements all present characters who, it is implied, are not maintaining healthy lifestyles. The ads all mention that Subway's Fresh Fit menu "fits into the American Heart Association's approach to a healthy lifestyle." The other four commercials feature a

nationally or internationally successful athlete who indicates that Subway sandwiches are a part of his or her diet.

Nutritional Claims

Subway's Fresh Fit campaign emphasizes that the restaurant currently offers "new, better-for-you sides and drinks." The advertisements show that these new sides and drinks include apple slices, Baked Lays potato chips, raisins, low-fat milk, and bottled water. It is important to note that the restaurant does not refer to these sides and drinks as being "healthy," but simply as "better-for-you." This distinction implies that the restaurant intends to be cautious about how it directly characterizes its products; it does not make explicit verbal claims that might be disputed by people who see a discrepancy between the phrases "healthy" and "better-for-you." For example, it is easy to say that a bag of Baked Lays is "better-for-you" than a greasier variety of chips, but to claim that Baked Lays are therefore "healthy" would be perceived as questionable by many nutrition-conscious viewers.

The restaurant's concern (perhaps from a legal standpoint) about being misread is highlighted further in the fine print that appears at the bottom of the screen in each of the Fresh Fit ads. The fine print in two of the commercials states that the "Subway Fresh Fit Meals are not a diet program," while in the two other commercials it is noted, "Subway Fresh Fit Meals are not a diet program, they are a better way to eat." Both examples of these fine-print statements remain on-screen for approximately four seconds. It seems safe to assume that these clarifications, being on-screen for such a short time and in a very small font, would easily escape the attention of the average television viewer. While most viewers may not notice these details, it still is important to be aware that Subway recognizes, if only in the fine print, that its meals are not in themselves "a diet program." Ironically, however, the statement that "they are a better way to eat" seems to be flawed: Subway cannot safely assume that its meals are naturally "a better way to eat" for every person.

The Fresh Fit campaign also focuses on the concept that the Fresh Fit meal "fits into the American Heart Association's approach to a healthy lifestyle." In this way, the commercials attempt to build up the restaurant's ethos by associating the brand with the American Heart Association (AHA) and the concept of leading a "healthy lifestyle." For American consumers who are concerned with their cardiovascular health—which likely includes a large portion of the population, being that cardiovascular disease is the top killer of Americans—this could serve as a particularly strong appeal.

Visual Rhetoric

Like any company that advertises food items, Subway attempts to make its products visually appealing to consumers. The sandwiches shown in Subway's commercials are extra thick, packed with many toppings, and stand out clearly against plain white backgrounds—which may influence viewers to subconsciously associate Subway with the pure whiteness of medical facilities, lending greater power to the restaurant's healthy image. For its healthier products, Subway uses specific visual strategies. The restaurant seems to want its "better-for-you" products to come off as exciting and numerous. The Fresh Fit commercials include dynamic shots of apple slices flying through the air while water pours over them, as well as images of sliced strawberries falling into a bowl of low-fat yogurt. Each commercial includes images of a sandwich surrounded by a selection of sides and drinks that constantly alternates, as if to emphasize the multitude of "better-for-you" options that exists at Subway. In addition, the camera pans across a large spread of items, including a glass of milk, bowls of raisins and apples, and ripe tomatoes.

Some viewers potentially could be misled by the images of sandwiches that are shown in the commercials. While it may not be noticeable to most viewers, the sandwiches in these advertisements appear to lack cheese. The sandwiches also appear to contain more lean choices of meats, such as turkey and ham (rather than meatballs, roast beef, or bacon), and the majority of their substantial width is comprised of lettuce, tomatoes, and other vegetables. Yet because the sandwiches are extremely thick, some viewers might wrongly assume that they contain cheese, heavy dressings, and other sources of additional calories, grams of fat, and sodium. As a related note, a visit to Subway reveals that its sandwiches often are much thinner than they appear to be in the restaurant's ads (an observation that rival sandwich company Quizno's has taken advantage of in its own commercials). Furthermore, while the sandwiches in these advertisements are thick with vegetables, an image that enhances their apparent health value, a typical sandwich made at the restaurant probably would not contain so many veggies, unless a Subway diner were to specifically order the peppers, cucumbers, onions, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, and olives that often are packed onto the advertised sandwiches. A decrease in vegetable content might significantly reduce the nutritional value of the sandwich. Due to this ambiguous visual presentation of advertised sandwiches, an uninformed consumer might order a sandwich that, while similar to those shown in Subway's ads, actually is not equally healthy.

Rhetoric of Comparison

MacArthur and Cuneo take note of the current trend of "comparative ads," which are used in attempts to demonstrate why one company's product is superior to a related company's product. In one of their examples, the authors describe Papa John's claim that Pizza Hut's dough, unlike its own, is not fresh but instead comes out of the freezer. Subway Restaurant recently has used this approach to compare its sandwiches to the "greasy fast food" offered by other restaurants like McDonald's and Burger King. The Fresh Fit campaign in particular uses comparison to present the argument that Subway's food is healthier than other restaurants' fast food options.

These advertisements portray people who, instead of placing orders for food, literally are ordering fat. One man asks for a "jelly belly" while his female companion orders "cottage cheese thighs." A voiceover then intervenes: "Instead of greasy fast food, try the new Subway Fresh Fit meal." The commercial then provides examples of the "better-for-you" options that Subway offers, as I have described previously. While the Fresh Fit commercials do not directly state which restaurants Subway is being compared to, the super-size options and bright red décor of the spoofed establishments make it fairly clear who the targets are. Other advertisements, however, are absolutely direct in their comparisons. In an advertisement featuring Subway's Jared and the champion figure skater Kimmie Meissner, the announcer states that "the delicious Subway Foot-Long Club" has "less than half the fat of a Big Mac."

These comparisons establish the *logos* of the advertisements. They present the television viewer with negative images or facts related to rival companies, and then contrast this information with the "better-for-you" nature of a specific type of Subway meal. This approach may influence a consumer to feel that he or she has received strong evidence that Subway Restaurant sells healthier food than other fast food restaurants. Equipped with this understanding, a person may feel that he or she is prepared to make informed and health-conscious decisions concerning future fast food meals.

The flaw of this rhetorical approach is clear: comparative advertisements do not show a complete picture of Subway or its competitors. While Subway's Fresh Fit menu contains items that likely are far healthier than many or even the majority of items on other restaurants' menus, Subway's

menu as a whole contains sandwiches that rival the “unhealthiness” of the Big Mac and other fast food products: Subway’s six-inch Chicken and Bacon Ranch sub has 30 grams of fat, and many other of its six-inch sandwiches exceed 20 grams of fat. At the same time, Subway’s commercials ignore that many of its competitors offer healthier options in addition to their not-so-healthy items—just as Subway does. Burger King’s menu includes garden salads with fat-free dressing, apples that are sliced to look like French fries, and the Tendergrill Chicken Sandwich which, with 7 grams of fat and 1,090 mg of sodium, is comparable to many of the “healthy” Subway sandwiches. McDonald’s Grilled Snack Wraps have 10 or fewer grams of fat, fewer than 300 calories, and approximately 800 mg of sodium. McDonald’s hamburgers (250 calories) and two of the grilled chicken sandwiches (420 and 470 calories) on its menu also contain about 10 grams of fat. Clearly, Subway’s “6 grams of fat or less” sandwiches, ranging from 230 to 370 calories and 500 to 1,290 mg of sodium, are not strikingly different from the healthier options at these other fast food establishments.

Subway’s comparative ads carefully choose the nutritional aspects on which they base their comparisons. When the Big Mac claim is made in the Meissner commercial, for example, the fine print on the screen says about the Foot-Long Subway Club: “Contains 2620mg sodium. No claim is made regarding comparative calories.” This makes clear that Subway’s commercials may not be entirely upfront about their sandwiches’ nutritional content: A sodium content of 2,620 mg exceeds the maximum of 2,300 mg/day that the American Heart Association recommends for healthy adults, and the Big Mac actually contains less than half the sodium that the Foot-Long Club contains. Likewise, the lack of a “claim . . . regarding comparative calories” seems to imply that the Subway Club has a higher caloric value than the Big Mac does: nutritional information publicly provided by the two restaurants exposes that the Foot-Long Club (640 calories) indeed does have a greater caloric content than the Big Mac (540 calories). While comparative advertising might, on the surface, appear to allow consumers to make more informed decisions about their fast food choices, in truth this type of ad is more likely to provide people with misleading or incomplete information that might result in deluded decision making.

Implied Undesirability of Weight Gain

The premise of several of the Fresh Fit commercials is that greasy fast food items will result in weight gain, and that this increased amount of body fat is undesirable primarily because of its physical appearance. The rhetorical nature of the perception of body fat in American culture is explored by Sonya Christine Brown, who asserts, “Body shape and size are aspects of physical ethos that Americans focus on” (10). She states: “Fat is . . . perceived as the visible, physical evidence that a body is likely to be unhealthy, unwell, unfit” (39), and adds that “to be fat is to be scorned.” The relationship between fat and ethos clearly is a rhetorical basis of Subway’s advertisements. In one ad, a man pulls up to a drive-through window and asks, “Can I get the love handles, double chin, and some blubber?” The female in his car requests the same, but substitutes for the blubber “thunder thighs and a badonkadonk butt.” Another, similar advertisement is located in an office setting, where one character announces his intention to go to “Burger Town.” He takes the orders of his coworkers, which include “the can-my-butt-look-any-bigger meal,” “the extra-tight-pants combo,” the “feel-so-bloated-I-just-want-to-sleep-for-three-days meal,” and “a-bucket-of-please-keep-your-shirt-on.”

In addition to its appeals to ethos, this aspect of Subway’s advertisements employs pathos to get the consumer’s attention by insinuating that (1) if people consume certain types of fast food, they likely will become overweight or obese and that (2) the consumer himself should fear becoming over-

weight or obese and (3) as a way to protect himself from this fate, he should choose instead to eat the healthier fast food options that are offered at Subway. This approach attempts to plant in the consumer's mind suspicion regarding other fast food establishments, and then asks the consumer to consider that Subway actually can prevent him or her from acquiring "blubber."

One of the Fresh Fit commercials specifically targets the parents of young children. This commercial shows a young boy sitting on a couch with a plate of brownies on his lap while he plays a video game called "Snakka." The game's character chows down on French fries, a hot dog, and a burger, while the boy takes a big bite out of his brownie. The video game character, who initially had been able to run quickly, now slowly proceeds to the center of the screen, where a large ice cream sundae awaits him. When he jumps to reach the sundae, his large belly becomes stuck in a passageway and "GAME OVER" flashes onto the screen. At this point, a voiceover asks, "What kind of eating habits are your kids learning?" The Fresh Fit menu then is introduced. Like the other Fresh Fit ads, this commercial focuses on the point that unwelcome weight gain will result from the making of poor nutritional choices. This advertisement is unique, though, in that it asks parents to question how they are raising their children in terms of the eating habits that they are being taught. The answer to the underlying question—Are you a good parent?—hinges on whether the viewer is enabling his or her children to eat well. After asking this tough question, Subway provides a simple answer: Subway can aid parents in teaching their children to eat right. This rhetorical approach attempts to create a sense of insecurity in parents who want to do what is best for their children, and then it attempts to take advantage of the resulting vulnerability by offering its product as an easy solution.

Athletes and Jared as Subway Diners

Like many American companies, Subway uses athletes or other physically fit individuals to promote its products. McDonald's recent use of the Ronald McDonald character exemplifies this type of approach. In 2005, the restaurant unveiled the clown's new image as an in-shape supporter of children's health; at the annual Ronald McDonald convention, a leader in the corporation's marketing department even "threatened to fire clowns who didn't get fit" (MacArthur). To investigate Subway's own attempts to associate the restaurant with physically fit people, I examined four Subway advertisements that use athletes. Kikkan Randall, an Olympic cross-country skier training for the 2010 Winter Games, is featured in two of them. The other two ads include Subway's spokesman Jared Fogle paired up with U.S. champion figure skater Kimmie Meissner in one ad and NFL player Reggie Bush in the other.

The Reggie Bush ad actually shows the NFL player eating a Subway sandwich. While Kikkan Randall and Kimmie Meissner are not shown eating food at Subway, both athletes imply that Subway is an important part of their diets. Randall says, "Something keeps me going, pushing myself to new heights . . . Is it the fame? The records? The future gold? Right now, it's just dinner tonight!" as she walks toward a Subway. Meissner, in her advertisement, tells Jared that the Subway Club "Fills me up so I can skate for hours." In Meissner's case, Subway is linked directly to her successful athletic performance. For Subway, the upholding of a healthful image is essential, so it seems particularly advantageous for the restaurant to portray winning athletes as consumers of its product. By associating an athlete with Subway food, the restaurant appeals to the television viewer through logos: if a person who is in peak physical health eats Subway, then it *must* be good for me, too.

When Jared is featured in the commercial alongside an athlete, it adds another dimension in support of the restaurant's logos. In the Reggie Bush ad, Jared briskly walks while Reggie sprints across

a football field; Jared lifts his laundry basket while Reggie curls weights; and Jared skims a net over the surface of his above-ground pool while Reggie relaxes next to a large pool with a mansion in the background. The voiceover then says, “No matter how different you are, you’ve gotta love the Subway Foot-Long Club.” The argument is apparent: Subway can be an important and healthful part of the diets of athletes as well as the diets of average people.

Conclusion

Fast food makes up a large portion of many millions of Americans’ diets: every day, one in four Americans visits a fast food restaurant (Schlosser 3). While a diet chiefly consisting of fast food aided Subway’s Jared in his extreme weight loss, it is highly unlikely that a diet based on fast food is the healthiest choice for most people. Nonetheless, consumers will continue to frequent fast food restaurants, and a close examination of the role that fast food plays in America’s upward obesity trend remains necessary. My preceding analysis looked at some of the approaches used by Subway Restaurant that potentially could influence the average consumer to choose a meal that might not be as healthy as he or she perceives it to be. It is clear that there is a great need for further and more technical investigations of how “healthy” fast food advertisements lead customers to consume meals that would not fit a nutritionist’s standards for a healthy dietary choice. In America, merely one-third of the adult population currently maintains body mass indexes that are considered to be medically healthy. America’s increasing rates of obesity and overweight are undeniably significant in that they have the potential to negatively affect both the physical and the psychological well-being of Americans. They also are significant in terms of the massive healthcare costs that are associated with obesity, along with the strain that is being placed on the American healthcare system as a result of increasing incidences of obesity-related illnesses (Manson et al.). I view my study as a contribution to the discourse surrounding fast food advertising and as a stimulus for increased analysis of the ways in which fast food commercials may lead consumers to make misinformed nutritional decisions.

With so much at stake, it is critical that future research be done to determine how consumers might be enabled to make more accurate evaluations of the nutritional content of their fast food options. While it is unlikely that many restaurants voluntarily will alter their advertising strategies to make it absolutely clear to the customer what is “healthy” and what is not, other types of helpful changes to restaurants’ approaches might be introduced. According to a press release from Subway, beginning in March 2007 every Subway in America introduced new menus that include an “apple-shaped icon [to allow] customers to easily identify and order the ‘better-for-you’ options” (“Subway Restaurants”). Although Subway could take another step and provide more specific nutritional information on its menu, it is significant that the restaurant has made an attempt to make its menu more accessible to customers who are interested in making healthier choices. If every fast food restaurant were to provide its customers with direct and easy-to-comprehend nutritional facts on their menus, perhaps misconceptions about restaurants’ products would not be as sizeable as they are today. It is important to investigate how these types of changes might permit the average American to make more informed and healthier decisions while dining at a fast food restaurant.

Notes

¹The amount of time spent viewing fast food advertisements was calculated by the researchers using reported hours of children’s television viewing as obtained by the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1996, 1998, and 2000, and using fast food television advertisement data collected by Competitive Media Reporting from 1996 to 1999.

²I viewed additional advertisements that I excluded from my analysis, because they lacked references to the health

value of Subway's products. Subway's "Fresh Moment" series of ads and the "Subway Dinner Theatre" series (starring Jon Lovitz) both were excluded.

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