



## Healthy nutrition and health-washing corporate discourses across three organizations in the fast food and soft drinks industry

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### Abstract

*The study inquires about the means by which corporate discourse formulates, invokes and challenges scientific research by examining three case studies of organizations in the fast food and soft drinks industry. Critical discourse analysis carried out on corporate sections dedicated to healthy lifestyles reveals all three explored discursive streams acknowledge customers' changing needs and consumption patterns. They introduce healthy lifestyles up on the corporate agenda, as cornerstone for their identity and governance strategy of fast-food and soft drinks producers. As overall discursive pattern, corporate public relations jargon constantly employs disclaimers and generic terms such as "evolution", "development", "strategy", "partnership", "transparency", without providing specific assessment criteria to map down the intended intervention. The article provides rhetoric illustrations enacted through omission, disclaimers, backgrounding and reframing effects. The overriding discursive rationale implies that healthy diets are still low-priority for leading food and drinks producers. The documented companies indicate in their PR communication two strategies of fighting against the scientifically proven negative impact of their traded products: the individual choice paradigm and the social compensation strategy or health-washing. The article highlights some of the inconsistencies of discourses on healthy food that apparently are counter-intuitive enough to undermine corporate interests, while such discourses peddle on the idea of sincerity, transparency and ethical conduct. All three case studied corporations strive to safeguard their threatened reputation across discursive practices by acknowledging their weaknesses as sign of honesty. Further reflection on critical discourse analysts' mandate and implications for practice are explored.*

### Keywords

*Fast food, obesity, health-washing, critical discourse analysis*

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## Introductory outlook

The study inquires about rhetoric means by which the dichotomy healthy-unhealthy nutrition is being reproduced across PR discourses. The study proposes a reflection on the **interplay between science and PR messages** that aim to persuade consumers of the legitimacy of fast food and soda drink consumption. This preliminary contribution is relevant for the journal's scope because it supports the effort of structuring and understanding public relations speech within an **interactional persuasive rhetoric grounded in empirical data**. The multiplicity of discursive practices across the highly controversial realm of fast food and soda drinks is explored using the challenging arguments of scientific input filtered-out by PR output. Hence, theoretically prompted questions find answers by data-driven argumentation.

The current study aims to explore **discursive means by which case studied companies deal with scientific findings** that elucidate the correlation between unhealthy diets, obesity and disease such as cardio-vascular impairments or diabetes. It pursues the corporate construction of health information as right of answer (and rebuttal) of leaders on the fast-food and soft drinks global markets, aimed to counter-act scientific data on the impact of fast food and soda consumption on obesity prevalence. The main thread of discussion relies on the underlying argument that corporations acknowledge scientific data on obesity. They do not refute such findings directly, but compensate for by two types of intervention: **health-washing initiatives or compensatory strategies**, on the one hand, and endorsing the **paradigm of individual responsibility** vested as **empowerment over nutrition decisions**, on the other.

How are healthy nutrition practices problematized and conceptualized by most prominent champions of unhealthy eating and drinking (leading global producers of soda drinks and fast food)? How do they **overcome or bypass scientific arguments** about the negative impact of their products on consumers' health? How is corporate discourse (dis)similar for the global organization and for the Romanian branch? To answer these research questions, the study collects empirical evidence to account for communicative practices that shape knowledge and power attributes with the goal of gaining symbolic leverage on the targeted public. It explores critically the underlying meanings inserted in corporate textual discourses, illustrated through health-related content on the local and global corporate website. It primarily views **discourses as regimes of truth** (Foucault, 1969/1972), **semiotic versions of socially constructed** reality that, once scrutinized, elucidate power relations and hidden agendas.

## Theoretical perspectives

### **Overweight and obesity**

The United Nations General Assembly shares scientists' concerns on obesity issues and acknowledges its urgency, by proclaiming **2016-2025 the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition**. This call for action aims to ensure universal access to healthier, more sustainable and nutritious food, while reducing the burden of diet-related ailment

incumbent on states worldwide (U.N. General Assembly resolution, 2016). The steady growth in the **consumption of unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles** are main factors responsible for the doubling of global obesity incidence from 1980 to 2014 (WHO 2016a; WHO 2016b). Overall, an estimated 13% of the world's adult population (11% of men and 15% of women) were obese in 2014, whereas 39% of adults aged 18 years and over (38% of men and 40% of women) were overweight (WHO 2016b).

A formal acknowledgement of the severity of this public health hazard is marked by a **European Day of fight against obesity** (celebrated on May, 21<sup>st</sup>) and **World Obesity Day** (October, 11<sup>th</sup>), whereas World Health Organization celebrates **Anti-Obesity Day** on November, 26<sup>th</sup>. U.N. urges producers and vendors of this type of processed food and beverages to take action for decreasing the quantity of salt, sugar and fat from their assortment, whilst ensuring nutritious options that are accessible to all audiences, promoting regular physical practice for employees, consumers and other stakeholders. Marketers from controversial industries such as fast food and soft drinks should also **restrain from advertising and marketing to youth products that are proven as unhealthy** (UN, 2016).

In Romania, the most popular places for purchasing a meal or snack out of home are international fast food chains (McDonald's, KFC, Subway and Spring Time), shaorma restaurants and take-aways, followed by pizza and pastry shops (Vrabie, 2015). The National Institute of Public Health reported that in the last 10 years, on account of unbalanced dietary habits and precarious health education in schools, the rate of obesity among pupils had doubled (Institutul Național de Sănătate Publică - INSP, 2014). The same report also indicates that 60% of children and youth lack the adequate intake of fresh fruits and vegetables. In comparative terms, Romania ranks at an intermediate level concerning the ratio of obese children and teenagers in the total children population (with 15%), whereas the US had the highest ratio (almost 30%), and the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and France reported the lowest values - close to 7% (INSP, 2014). In Romania, obesity started being reported in the interval 1995-1999, when it affected between 15 and 20% of the population, and in the next reporting interval the proportion ranged from 20 to 24,5% (INSP, 2014). The upward trend for overweight and obesity remained powerful regardless of public policies aimed at prevention.

### ***Sociology of healthy living***

Healthy living is a broad orientation that underlies normative beliefs and behavioral patterns re-enacted through everyday (inter)actions, concerning the definition and articulation of health-related representations and practices. There is a dualism in the field of healthy living between the **socio-centric perspective** (that employs support networks, communities of practice, social and organizational norms, infrastructure, and facilities factors such as cost and accessibility constraints) as explanatory precursors of healthy lifestyle adoption, and the **individual-centric outlook** that relies on social-economic status, meta-cognition, values and attitudes, rationality and planned behavior (Barton and Tusting, 2005; Venn and Strazdins, 2017; Schneider and Davis, 2010). The shifted

healthy living paradigm moves away from systemic macro-level explanations and displays an individualistic shift towards empowerment, ownership, self-reliance, self-sufficiency in making informed decisions on nutrition, physical exercising, preventive care and regular medical check-ups (Abel and Frohlich, 2012).

Teenagers' propensity to fast food is multifaceted, spatial proximity to fast food establishments and social class are only partially accountable for its causality (McPhail, Chapman & Beagan, 2011). More comprehensive explanations rely on social discourses of healthy eating that use the concept of **moral boundary work to account for the deliberation between degrees of acceptability** (McPhail et al, op.cit.). Teenage participants negotiated with such notions and navigated through eating alternatives in a reflexive attempt to decide what is preferable for their own condition, relying on a self-regulatory outlook.

Discursive foundations over the controversial causes of the obesity crisis surface concerning the issue that cheap, mass-produced and over-processed food that conventional food capitalism provides has low-level nutritional intake hidden under a glossy marketing cover (Guthman, 2005). Critical discourse analysis highlights the relentless push to produce, acquire and consume that constitutes a trademark for the self-absorbing, always voracious capitalism search guided by the incremental principle: more is better (Alexander & Coveney, 2013; O'Hara et al, 2015; Evans-Agnew et al, 2016). Health insight that corporations elicit is worthy of further investigation, as they attempt to incorporate scientific findings, whilst reinventing them across a strategic **self-promotional symbolic investment** vested so as to better suit their PR interests.

### ***Sociology of fast food across discourse***

Several studies have employed critical discourse analysis to elucidate media reflections of fast food impact on health outcomes, accommodated into thick, theoretically dense explanatory frameworks. A content analysis performed on three mainstream and three minority (African American) women's magazines revealed the common, overall attributional trend of **placing responsibility for over-weight and obesity on behavior rather than personality traits or environmental factors** (Campo & Mastin, 2007). Weight loss strategies addressed for the most part behavioral change, however mainstream magazines were twice as likely to advise readers to eat less, give up on fast food, eat more protein and limit their fat and sugar intake, whereas magazines targeting the African American female minority were more likely to propose intermittent fad diets or external locus of control means such as prayers. According to Campo & Mastin (2007), multiplicity and hybridization of polyvocal strategies were rendered more in mainstream than African-American magazines.

Discourse studies themselves make use of **personification** when they claim that corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs is problematic because it remains **self-legitimizing and self-apologetic**. From this viewpoint, they criticize Coca-Cola for marketing its involvement in community in an hypocritical attempt to conceal real sales interests and bottom-line intentions by a more subtle advertising means (Powell & Gard,

2015; Ravi, 2007). Taking the self-regulation framework of corporate thinking a step forward, Coca-Cola operates a global anti-obesity movement that safeguards corporate reputation while launching the political message that children are responsible for their own health (Powell & Gard, 2015). In the self-proclaimed new role of health educator in schools, Coca-Cola uses **expert risk knowledge** e.g. by body mass index (BMI) and calorie-burn calculators that estimate risk of obesity and other health impairment. The anti-corporate PR argument is similar: because all materials distributed to pupils and teachers (e.g. T-shirts, workbooks, classroom posters) have the Coca-Cola logo to stimulate purchase behavior and brand awareness and attractiveness (Powell & Gard, 2015).

In the same vein, **conflation of corporate profit with social performance** is ambiguous, vulnerable to manipulation and ‘erodes democracy and children’s position as citizens’ (Saltman, 2011, p.13). Critical discourse analysis points out the tendency of corporations to colonize health education reshaped as indirect advertising rhetoric (Macdonald, 2011; Saltman, 2011). State government stakeholders (e.g. in health and education) are relieved to externalize these courses without thinking about the impact of such take-over. Form of shifted governmentality in action asking for closer research scrutiny and the synergy of corporate and government contributions redefine public health. Following Foucault’s (2000) definition, the concept of **governmentality** refers to the influence exerted by power authorities to influence and lead through persuasive norms and expectations, as well as directive surveillance without coercion, with the scope to self-perpetuate their legitimacy and supremacy.

Across public relations communication, corporations use discursive practices that carry metaphorical constructions. Conceptual metaphor theory serves to track continuities and changes in advertising discourse (Hidalgo-Downing & Kraljevic Mujic, 2015). Conceptual metaphor theory argues metaphors are central to reflexive language, they structure thinking and are ideological. Ethicalization of discourse constitutes the trend to frame communication predominantly from a moral judgment perspective (Krzyzanowski, 2014). In the fast-food industry, it likely occurs as counter-reaction to a debilitating crisis of legitimacy and makes use of discursive rituals that are inherently path-dependent and self-reproductive.

### ***Impact of fast-food and sweetened drinks on health***

Regarding the anti-obesity movement, most studies focus on public health communication tactics (e.g. O’Hara et al, 2015; Evans-Agnew et al, 2016; Brookes and Harvey, 2015), whereas on-topic corporate discourse is not a consistent stream of research. Campaigns that promote healthy living for children and teenagers are typically **prescriptive, overtly performative and target families and youth** (O’Hara et al, 2015; Evans-Agnew et al, 2016, Alexander and Coveney, 2013). By and large, the anti-obesity discourse of state authorities seems flawed by a paternalistic, coercive or excessively normative overtone on choice that is accused of disregarding personal autonomy and unintentionally nurturing learnt helplessness (O’Hara et al, 2015). By contrast, corporate

discourse would be expected to lean, on the contrary, towards personal empowerment, individual choice, self-regulation and responsibility.

By playing on a semiotics of fear and guilt-driven reproach, as less active or static pastimes are vilified altogether, they can unintentionally become discriminatory as they stigmatize children who are not passionate about engaging in physical activity (Brookes and Harvey, 2015). **Energy balance** is a concept that corporate PR employs strategically to reshape ideas of health, using the **metaphoric image of the couch-potato** child that does not balance energy input with output. The diversity of pedagogical messages that state-funded anti-obesity campaigns launch in the public space can be thus synthesized:

“such is the relentless ubiquity of health promotion texts in everyday life that individuals are regularly and unavoidably exposed to a plethora of health education messages, ranging from exhortations to monitor and enhance their well-being, through to messages that warn the public about specific risks to health” (Brookes & Harvey, 2015, p.59)

Consumers’ litigation against fast food producers and distributors are hindered by the necessity to provide burden of proof as to direct causation of health impairment, attributed to consumption of such products. It also raises the issue of **voluntary assumption of known risk**, proven by scientific studies (Poodiack, 2013). Similar to arguments brought by tobacco manufacturers in litigations with clients over healthcare expenditure compensation, plaintiffs do not receive a favorable sentence if there is evidence to indicate they know about the health risks. Following the **norm of informed citizen** (Krzyzanowski, 2014), knowledge is equated with assuming individual responsibility for the consequences of one’s choice to eat fast-food meals.

In both areas of winning legal disputes and promoting health-washing marketing, providers of controversial foods and beverages profit from two main defensive loopholes: (a) **multi-causality and inter-connection** of health impairments and (b) personal responsibility (hence assumed subsequent risk) over consumption-related decisions (De Vogli et al, 2011; Evans-Agnew et al, 2016; Laufer, 2003). Corporations hence counter-act customers’ claims and complaints by proposing plausible alternative explanations or cumulative effects of unhealthy lifestyle choices that cannot be attributed to any one company or product in particular. For example, obesity or heart disease are caused by eating at multiple fast-food chains and none in particular is to blame. Moreover, hereditary factors are co-responsible for health ailments.

### **Health-washing**

The term is adapted from greenwashing, which means that a company attempts to attenuate its harmful externalities on environment by a sign of compensatory good will, e.g. a development program or conservationist initiative performed in the affected community. However, in greenwashing strategies the good is over-reported, while the damage is underrated and glossed over. The same tactics occur in health-washing, with the sole difference that in this case the aspect that is covered up refers to consumers’

health and not to the environment. Critics regard **health-washing as type of CSR that provides semiotic mystification by inflated credentials and misleading achievements** in terms of social performance (Laufer, 2003).

Companies engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs not merely from an altruistic perspective, but with a less visible branding agenda of self-promotion, notoriety, equity inducer, reputation strengthening and ultimately the bottom line is enhanced profitability (Budinsky and Bryant, 2013). The **rationale for adopting CSR** is multi-fold: **competitiveness** (considering that competitors are exerting pressure for their rivals to keep up with this marketing innovation), **customers becoming more knowledgeable and selective**, following the norm of informed citizen, and **relative transparency** with abundant information available on the market. Nevertheless, the deficit in adequate monitoring and reporting of nutritional information validated by independent audit organisms affects the accuracy of publicly available information, rendering its most desirable features of accessibility and affordability somewhat redundant. Mistrust proliferates when the highest bidder receives the credentials certificate for best workplace, most vivid community supporter or healthiest nutritional option.

Similar to greenwashing, corporate health-washing relies on manipulative discursive tactics such as: confusion, vagueness of promises and ambiguous statements of good intentions, fronting and posturing (Laufer, 2003). One strategy that Big Food and FMCG (fast moving consumers' goods, including soft drinks) representatives resort to is **coopting scientists and medical practitioners to legitimize their use of ingredients** in recipes and testify as to corporate genuine preoccupation for wellbeing and health. As such, McDonald's has a long-standing partnership with the U.S. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Corporate Board members such as McDonald's Director of Nutrition hold regular meetings with key stakeholders of dietetic associations to lobby on healthy initiatives such as McDonald's Next – newly launched **flagship restaurants** that uphold the new philosophy of healthier diets by proposing to customers salad bars featuring wholesome multigrain products and other catch-phrases, e.g. super foods such as quinoa seeds. The same **health awareness** translates in a shifted paradigm, wherein fast food is gradually replaced by **slower food consumption**, encouraged by coffee shop, gadget and free wireless across McDonald's franchises (Bellatti, 2013). Company marketers expect the **blending of actual results with optimistic prospects to generate business development and customer retention** even among those who doubt the gain in nutritional value that such corporate ideology promises.

The **discursive tactic of “deny the denier”** contradicts upheld assumptions on fast food:

The marketers have a term for what a salad or veggie burger does for a fast-food chain: "denying the denier." These healthier menu items hand the child who wants to eat fast food a sharp tool with which to chip away at his parents' objections. 'But Mom, you can get the salad . . .' (Pollan, 2017, 89)

As expected from an inextricable web of actual and fictitious meanings, health-washing discourses are not without counter-advertorial blunder even for market leaders such as McDonald's. **McResource Line, the online counselling center addressed to staff and their families**, advised employees to avoid fast food (Little, 2013). At that time, it warned explicitly against the high content of fat, salt and sugar in fast food, and stated that such dietary option was problematic especially for at-risk categories suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and cardio-vascular disease. Their own website turned against the fast-food chain's best sold and aggressively marketed products, as it advised consumers who wish to maintain their state of health to stay away from the largest portion of the brand's assortment such as: all fried products (to be replaced with boiled, grilled or roasted ones), salad dressing (gravy, mayonnaise, ketchup etc.), bagels, buns, biscuits, white bread and other products high in gluten and starch, as well as proposing an embargo on desserts altogether.

Health-washing echoes in critical sociological concepts of **alienation**. It draws on the **anti-consumerist, downshifting paradigm** that claims consumed products are alienating the self because of being impersonal, unconnected to symbolic values, devoid of personally assigned meaning, of unknown nature and origin (Fromm, 1955). Hence, irrespective of procurement and production, in the pursuit of forever evasive gratification, individualism opposes both personal and environmental health, by triggering selfishness and waste-inducing greed (Budinsky and Bryant, 2013). Corporations from fast food and soda sectors boost **praiseworthy features that are general, abstract and unverifiable by average consumers** (Pollan, 2017), such as: the guaranteed endorsement of quality and safety regulations throughout the entire supply chain, minimizing ecologic footprints, strenuous support in favor of initiatives for improving individual and community-level quality of life and livelihood, strict compliance with integrity, honesty, transparency standards and promoting equal treatment and zero tolerance for discrimination.

Across their mission statements, such lofty declarative principles potentially exert a Halo effect on health promotion by legitimized consumption that aims to cast away customers' doubt or guilt when purchasing controversial foods and beverages. By and large, corporate discursive means support directly or indirectly product-based research aimed to find healthier substitutes for sugar or additives (Guthman, 2005; Pollan, 2017). However, **corporations claim such research is led by independent scientists, even if producers' or trade associations fund them**. Such studies foreseeably highlight no negative health impact for using the alternative ingredient, regularly labelled as innovative breakthrough (Lipton, 2014).

### **Methodological approach**

The article envisions the objective of examining discursive coping strategies and techniques that fast food and soda drinks companies employ to counter-act scientific findings about the negative health impact of their products. To this end, it relies on critical discourse analysis applied to Romanian-based and global corporate websites of



three case studied organizations: McDonald's, Coca Cola and PepsiCo. The three corporate giants were chosen for scrutiny because they act as **leading voices in the anti-obesity debates** and they share the counter-intuitive position of simultaneously being champions of overweight (through the products they manufacture and trade) and champions of anti-overweight fight (through the healthy living programs that they roll-out in schools), from a **dual perspective of protagonists and antagonists in the war on obesity**.

Critical discourse analysis assumes **language is never neuter, but strategic, and politics purposefully infuse the choice of wording and syntax** (Gibson et al, 2015; Schneider and Davis, 2010). The analysis formally covers a range of press releases, mission, strategy and corporate governance updates, community involvement, CSR support and NGO partnerships relevant for the topic of balanced diet and healthy living. In the search for recurring ideas and inter-connected patterns, the study aims to identify main ideological themes, by depicting foregrounding and backgrounding insight, presuppositions, innuendoes, fronting that requires taken for granted assumptions, (re)framing techniques and omission effects (Huckin, 1997; Budinsky & Bryant, 2013). Critical discourse analysis illustrates an example of **reframing** when using statistics made to shed positive light on children's consumption of a brand of cereals (Bellatti, 2014). Mystified customers are led to believe cereals are perfectly harmless, while the label reframes and disguises the actual consumption to make it appear as the needed consumption.

The genre or text register of corporate discourse carries a promotional - persuasive aim of a specific sub-type: that of **antagonistic advertorial** that intends to overcome dissent and cast away consumers' doubts concerning unhealthy diets. In this context, the critical discourse analysis is essential for discovering subtle rhetoric nuances meant to melt down resistance, whilst eliciting benevolence and, ultimately, confidence among readers-consumers. In this respect, the **text writer's perspective** (i.e. expert or standard consumer) also deserves scrutiny concerning power relations (Alexander and Coveney, 2013). In the former case, the appeal to expert knowledge endowed with **epistemic authority** is expected to generate unquestioning quiescence to statements, leading to **cognitive acceptance**. In the latter, the **symmetry of knowledge and power** regimes means the reader can readily identify with the writer, leading to **emotional acceptance**.

For this viewpoint, it is useful to perform an **in-depth contingent analysis of topicalization**, by inquiring who displays agency, who is proactive and who is passive, who is exerting influence on whom. Political and ideological significance deconstruction also includes the use of passive verbs (Huckin, 1997; Budinsky & Bryant, 2013). Critical discourse analysis activates a network of meaning potentials that Barthes terms "floating chain" (1977, 39). Interpretive cues question the knowledge base on which corporate claims rest and the ways in which they advance social representations which manage to contradict or reconfigure scientific speech for pragmatic reasons.

There are **9 selected texts**, with a length of 1 to 4 pages (an average of 2.3 pages). All of them belong to the sections of official corporate websites tagged as: sustainability,

community and social performance, product facts and corporate governance. 6 texts belong to global websites, including two external links (which are not included on the official corporate website) of Coca-Cola Beverages Institute for Health and Wellbeing whereas the other three are sourced from national websites (two come from Coca Cola HBC Romania, the third from PepsiCo Romania). The **inclusion criteria** for this sample of texts consists of: publication date (during the last 12 months), chosen to feature recent positions on core aspects, and references (i.e. by title, sub-titles and in-text mentions) to these thematic categories, as follows: healthy eating, obesity, consumer health, healthy lifestyles, energy balance, health mission and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). This core wording serves to anchor discursive practices across tactical cues designed to carry out symbolic vehicles of meaning useful to reply to the research questions. The interpretive coding of sampled material is performed according to a series of **key words** (i.e. healthy eating, healthy lifestyle, balanced lifestyle, healthy choices), included in the following sections: product assortment, corporate governance, business strategy, our mission, community development. These catch-phrases streamlined the **identification and ostension of core themes**, complemented by editorial features such as **emphasis, phrasing and tone of voice**.

#### ***Framing techniques across critical discourse analysis***

Framing is a critical discourse analysis category discussed within the domain of semiotics as area of meaning-making across communication. **Semiotics** encompasses the interpretant's internal representation of significance, derived from either denotative or connotative textual or multimodal (e.g. visual-and-text) content (Budinsky & Bryant, 2013). Framing selects and delineates areas of **significance and salience** by use of an angle of focus that streamlines intended content into the spotlight, usually while mapping metaphors and creative meanings. The frame appears as anchor or projector that enhances the power of a message, **selectivity** being its essential feature whilst it employs **foregrounding (filter-in or zoom-in) and backgrounding filter-out or zoom-out) effects**. Thus, framing puts to work classification, stereotyping and labelling mechanisms of selective evocation.

Framing within critical discourse analysis returns valuable results, since it provides traceability by unlocking insights and identifying recurring patterns across unstructured data. In the current study, framing techniques are expected to yield insight into strategies by which corporate discourses tell the story of shared responsibility, by negotiating between individual and institutional explanations about unhealthy nutrition. As per Entman's classical contribution (1993), there are four components of discourse analysis using framing: **problem definition, causal attribution, moral judgments and suggested remedies**.

This technique involves an effort to organize, analyze data and map connections between topics, trends and patterns (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013). This is important from both an analytical and synthetic angle, since text producers filter down argumentative practices to redefine the discussed concept within a narrowed or

expanded frame. However, framing is criticized as scattered, fractured paradigm (Entman, 1993), acting only as empirical cue and conceptual label, not analytical method and recycled from previous notions such as tacit theories.

## Empirical data analysis

### *Coca-Cola*

Coca-Cola is declaratively aware of the need for the company to commit to help people consume less sugar and calories from its drinks. As such, it **self-importantly reaffirms its leading position** as the largest non-alcoholic beverage company and states its interest for the obesity debate:

We naturally wanted to be part of this discussion and believed that using science-based knowledge to better inform the debate about obesity was the best approach to being a **valuable partner** in finding a solution (CC, 2016a).

The use of past tense, together with power-based legitimacy and affirmation of trust in scientific insight comes as justification for depicting an encountered **adversity**:

While well-intended, our focus on scientific research and physical activity created **confusion** that ultimately led to **mistrust** (CC, 2016b).

Corporate representatives attribute mistrust in CC's disinterested support for the Beverages Institute for Health and Wellbeing to unintended, circumstantial factors of misunderstanding and confusion. To contradict the general impression that healthy living and CC consumption are a contradiction in terms and to avoid further confusion, CC commits to **transparency by periodical disclosure of research funding** (every six months) and **retroactive reporting** for the last five years (CC, 2016b).

It tries to correct the image prejudice by reevaluating its position, still on assertive terms but more lenient, by recognizing the value of scientific expertise. In so doing, it tries to gloss over past failure in corporate communication and start anew, emphasizing the **need for compliance to strict quality standards** and **active listening to scientists' insights**:

We are focused on the way forward and evaluating our approach to obesity. Right now, we are listening and learning from leading experts in the public health community to identify where we can be a more helpful and credible partner. We are taking a deeper look at our operations and processes to identify areas where we must adapt and evolve.

Supporting research is juxtaposed to efforts directed at earning stakeholders' trust. The underlying corporate assumption is the acknowledgement of the correlation between sweetened drinks and obesity, with the declared determination to learn, display receptiveness to scientists' recommendations, change processes, adapt operations and improve recipes with the aim of evolution. A noticeable linguistic pattern concerns **the vagueness of terms** - e.g. the targeted improvement according to scientists' input does

not refer to specific operations and processes. Meanwhile, **evolution remains an undefined tag line and another big empty word** in the restated attempt for CC to become “a helpful and credible partner” (CC, 2016b) for health theorists, researchers and practitioners.

In the description of own brands product portfolio, CC boasts technological enhancements made to accommodate healthier options such as low and no calorie, caffeine-free, gluten-free or low sodium drinks (CC Journey, 2017c). **Foregrounding and backgrounding effects** are salient when it comes to the official CC position on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) used as beverage ingredients. Hence, the “some vs. many” dichotomy occurs as under-toned nuance:

GMOs can be found in **some of our beverages, along with hundreds of other items** in the grocery store (CC Journey, 2017c).

This is intended to sound as some trifling detail, an element unworthy of further inquiry, because it remains of minor importance, compared to the large mass of other ingredients, hence it does not make a difference. **Cumulative doubt-dispelling effects** occur with the additional clarification that reputed authorities such as WHO, FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and U.S. National Academy of Sciences consider GMOs as safe. The transparency core discursive theme resurges as CC engages to use smart labels that indicate calorie intake compared to daily needs, list of ingredients and GMO status thereof.

CC further emphasizes its voluntary contribution, by allegedly advocating for a public policy reducing consumption of sweetened drinks in schools under the Clinton administration. It **narrates how it removed regular sparkling drinks from primary schools and gymnasiums**, whereas it enumerates the range of beverages available in U.S. high schools, namely:

... **bottled water**, 100% juice (up to 12 fl oz), and a variety of low- and no-calorie beverages including teas, enhanced waters (vitamin beverages), juice drinks, sports drinks and **sparkling beverages** (up to 20 fl oz) (CC Journey, 2017c)

The **omitting effect** appears when CC brags about the reduction by 90% of beverages distributed to U.S. schools since 2004-2005, meanwhile forgetting to mention that the company was obliged to comply with a legal ban thereof. Another example of **reframing is placing most controversial products (sparkling drinks) at the end of the list built around public acceptability**, ranging from most acceptable – i.e. bottled water, teas to least so. Another misleading communicative tactic relies on repeated use of disclaimers of “yes, but...” type, e.g.

Yes, **some of our products** contain caffeine, but this is significantly less than the amount of caffeine in an equivalent serving of drip-style brewed coffee. – a particular type of coffee (CC, 2017c)

The statement plays on vagueness when framing a contrast between unspecific CC products, compared to a very specific type of coffee that non coffee lovers who are soda drinkers likely do not understand. It thus sends a message of **advanced expertise**, incomprehensible for the larger audience, but all the more **trustworthy while shrouded in hermetic mystery**.

In Romania, CC partners with NGOs (e.g. Green Revolution, students' associations) and retailers to organize healthy living workshops for pupils. The emphasis is on **factual data** (e.g. program guidelines, content of cooking and sports lessons, number of participants, involved schools etc.) in the presentation thereof, and **compared to the international website, the tone of voice is no longer that of an expert, but more than of a neuter observant**. The **appeal to celebrities** is also evident, e.g. cooking shows that CC HBC Romania sponsors are hosted by renowned chefs, while sports medicine representatives and nutritionists provide customized counselling for health, strength and immunity (CC, 2016a).

Supporting the norm of informed citizen, CC Romania states its support for more nutritional information, readily available e.g. via smart phone applications. It also promotes reshaped product range to accommodate low-calorie, low-sugar, low-gluten and low-sodium beverages. However, **the factual focus is lost in the section dedicated to consumers' health**, for the sake of vague declarations of intention, e.g., under the "responsible sales and marketing" heading CC mentions:

We take into account parents' and teachers' opinions to ensure that we provide soft drinks to youth in a responsible manner (CC, 2016b)

Vagueness is also present when discussing the restricted distribution of beverages in schools. The Romanian CC subsidiary proclaims its adhesion to the EU platform on nutrition, physical activity and health. However, it speaks of this engagement only in generic terms, stating that primary schools are exempt from distribution of all of their assortment, whereas in schools wherein children are over 12, company representatives establish together with parents and teachers which beverages are fit to be sold (CC, 2016b). Discursive practices point out to **peak memorable experiences** that are associated to drinking Coke. They are recurring in advertisements and the Happy Moves race, wherein runners are proposed to connect the evocative euphoria of finishing the race with the sensation of drinking ice-cold Coke provided immediately after the finish line.

To sum up, CC's PR rhetoric gravitates to the **compensatory approach**, streamlined by adversative "yes, but" references, omission, disclaimers, equivocal ambivalence and vagueness effects, backgrounding negative insight while foregrounding positive input, narrative association to salient personal pastimes, industry prominence and leadership in alleged transparency and ethical corporate conduct. The self-regulating paradigm is present only in sporadic comments about parents' and pupils' right to choose the product assortment available in their schools, whereas the advisory role is two-fold: nutrition expert knowledge on the global website and testimonials from celebrities for the Romanian branch.

## **PepsiCo**

The global website speaks about **consumers' responsibility** for making informed and healthy choices since its mission statement. It recommends itself as producer of wholesome nutritious food, convenient and delicious beverages (PepsiCo, 2016b), while using ambiguous or equivocal terms, e.g. "simple snacks". **Polysemant ambivalence** surfaces as **simplicity** is linguistically equated with "natural, genuine, clean", although it actually refers in the specific rhetoric context to tasty and nutritionally problematic evening treats such as chips. The corporate sustainability agenda focuses on the survival kit needed for the business to remain profitable, that is – the extension of its portfolio to **reach out to more health-conscious audiences**. The business strategy until 2025 focuses on mainstreaming recipes, attuned to the healthy living trend, primarily meaning the creation of products with lesser saturated fat, added sugar and sodium level (PepsiCo 2016b). Throughout its sustainability agenda, the company acknowledges the need to comply with WHO guidelines, indirectly attesting to the need to change. Different from the other two case studied companies, its objectives for 2025 are defined by **key performance indicators**, e.g.:

At least two-thirds of its global beverage portfolio volume will have 100 calories or fewer from added sugars per 12-oz serving. At least three-quarters of its global foods portfolio volume will not exceed 1.1 grams of saturated fat per 100 calories. At least three-quarters of its global foods portfolio volume will not exceed 1.3 milligrams of sodium per calorie. It will provide access to at least three billion servings of nutritious foods and beverages to underserved communities and consumers. (PepsiCo, 2016b)

Other SMART objectives refer to the focus on delivering whole grains, dairy, protein, fruits and vegetables under the brand label "Everyday Nutrition" as complete makeover from the snacks and soft drinks provided at present. These tangible goals are overshadowed across discursive practices on visionary or forward-looking statements on account of the ensuing disclaimer, referred to as "**Cautionary statement**":

Forward-looking statements are generally identified through the inclusion of words such as "aim," "believe," "estimate," "expect," "goal," "intend," "may," "plan," "target" and "will" or similar statements or variations of such terms. Investors are cautioned not to place undue reliance on any **such forward-looking statements, which speak only as of the date they are made**. PepsiCo undertakes no obligation to update any forward-looking statements, whether as a result of new information, future events or otherwise (PepsiCo, 2016b).

Preoccupations on food security, improved nutrition, health and wellbeing are declaratively assumed "no strings attached", and more urgent priorities, market volatility and regulatory uncertainty are expected to erode the formal long-term commitment. **CSR programs include NGO partnerships** e.g. with United Way Romania (PepsiCo, 2016a) and key target groups for this social performance are under-privileged children who are encouraged to engage in sports, receive medical tests and nutritional advice. It does not

include any mentions of follow-up on this program and implies these beneficiaries will be coopted as brand ambassadors to recommend PepsiCo to peers.

In conclusion, PepsiCo blends the self-regulatory paradigm with the compensation outlook, boosting CSR partnerships and sustainability preoccupations to develop more nutritive, less salty, fatty and sugary products that appeal also to health-conscious audiences. Its rhetoric means play on ambivalence, vagueness, social performance, but without nutrition, such in the CC case.

### **McDonald's**

McDonald's advises website visitors to exercise regularly and draws on counselling from sports physicians. It provides physical activity plans in colorful, user-friendly layout. This marks a distinctive feature from the previous two case studies. Similarities concern healthier menu options. **Attitude towards GNOs** is different in each case, also considering the different product assortment: exclusion in the case of McDonald's, inclusion in the case of Coca-Cola, which advocates for their safety, whereas PepsiCo makes no reference to their use. Similar to PepsiCo, McDonald's makes **intensive use of disclaimers** regarding healthy living, e.g.:

Food additives are eliminated or substituted, as much as possible, so long as this does not compromise our products' safety or their quality. (McDonald's, 2017)

McDonald's boasts its tradition of involvement in high-profile sports events, through a 25-year old partnership with FIFA and sponsorship of Olympic Committees. It also sponsors amateur sports lovers, especially youth, through support for running, but mostly team sports with high popularity (basketball, volleyball, football, streetball tournaments in and between schools under the heading "Olimpiada Liceelor"). This program is most extensively illustrated with **evaluative output - facts and figures** regarding number of participants, time periods and prizes. Open doors policy supports consumers' information by guided visits to restaurants' kitchen. Discursive tactics reflect, like in the case of Coca Cola, **peak memorable experiences and impressions of quality time**. The former are evident in the McDonald's Player Escort competition targeting also children, where the best players can join international football stars on court for important FIFA matches. The association with local football legends (e.g. Miodrag Belodedici and Ion Vlădoiu) acts also an **reputational catalyst**.

To conclude, McDonald's favors the compensatory rhetoric strategy, by boosting its sponsor's role in sports events; it does not explicitly state the self-regulative paradigm. Emotional cues as per quality time, factual output evaluation and celebrities as leading vocals mark discursive trends.

### **Synopsis of findings**

The following table outlines the main rhetoric figures as per Entman's (1993) framing categories, for which the study identifies correspondences.

**Table 1: Framing categories – comparison between three corporate discourses**

Entman's framing categories	McDonald's	PepsiCo	Coca Cola
<b>Problem definition</b>	McDonald's needs to find the right balance between natural ingredients, food safety and price. Categorization, labelling of experience	PepsiCo needs to reduce the salt, fat and sugar intake from its products to remain competitive and become attractive for health-conscious would-be consumers	CC can support the creation of science-based knowledge, however it is hindered by stereotypes and prejudice as to its positive social role
<b>Causal attribution</b>	Consumers lose trust in low-performing brands that are not environmentally and socially savvy. Evaluative output	Disclaimers and cautionary statements: promises and future plans are mere estimations, no guarantee of achievement	Scientific and policy involvement sparked confusion leading to mistrust
<b>Moral judgments</b>	Upheld value meal and pledge to make sustainability and healthy eating more affordable daily.	Natural, additive-free ingredients can endanger food safety. More state regulation is not the solution.	CC deserves to be regarded as genuine, reliable partner in the fight against obesity. Its expertise and leadership know-how recommends CC as innovation hub
<b>Suggest remedies</b>	Display assertiveness and proactivity (i.e. research, innovation, development) to reassert itself in the face of audiences with more nutrition-conscious mindsets Physical activity charts in attractive format Quality time cues Sponsoring elite- and mass sports events	Abreast of nutritional trends -Traceability of ingredients and controlled origin in terms of upholding high regulative standards for food safety across supply chain, reverence towards suppliers, trying to source and purchase local products and introduce seasonal variations.	Transparency, full disclosure, third-party audit and periodic reporting on funding & sponsorship, compliance with quality and food safety standards, objectively measured impact (i.e. KPI assessment of health promotion initiatives)

### Conclusions, implications, impact

In an era of **neoliberal agency and individual governmentality**, critical discourse analysis reveals healthy living recommendations from investigated corporations that mostly imply **compensation and self-regulation** as two apparently opposing, in fact complementary views on corporate accountability. Coded connotatively in metaphoric and narrative vein, the three corporate discourses activate a **transactional interpretive frame** with recurring terminology such as: market, buy, sell, spend, charge, benefit.

Analyzed text illustrates many loose ends in overlapping branding and social pedagogy across discourses, dwelling on ambiguities, vagueness, reframing, backgrounding and foregrounding effects that produce a mostly denotative content that remains nonetheless open to interpretation and oftentimes misleading. At face value, all health promoting programs, projects and plans that corporations propose are well-



intended, promising expressions of care, however the underlying assumption is always profitability. **What rhetoric traces transaction is actually an intangible credence good** (Laufer, 2003), by which corporations try to appease stakeholders about their genuine involvement in improving diets while desisting the burden of proof. The consumer cannot gain insight into the **authenticity of such claims that are more vocal when general legitimacy is increasingly low**. The discursive attempt is that of mainstreaming fast-food and soda as uncontroversial traded goods, and such promotional campaign gain momentum especially in the face of critical reactions from a growing number of supporters of slow food and healthy nutrition.

The conducted analysis boils down to the conclusion that fast food marketers either acknowledge their products' pernicious influence on health and employ the compensatory outlook of giving back to community, or dismiss responsibility altogether by transferring empowerment and agency to the consumer alone. The framing effects that corporate discourse elicits yield an explanatory speech leading to **preferred conclusions and induced normative judgments**. The implicit aim is that **micro-level self-regulation is sufficient** and state authorities do not need to exert a coercive function against health-threatening industries and endorse further normative restrictions to protect consumers against themselves. The exhibited defensive deployment is typical for industries under threat of scientific contestation and decreasing popularity.

The range of corporate counter-arguments to public allegations are four-fold, as follows:

- **Agency and self-determination** – each consumer is responsible for his/her informed choices,
- **Healthy food crusade is hegemonic** and abusive in imposing an arbitrarily determined one-size-fits-all standard,
- **Moderation** – marketers propose a balanced, varied diet as alternative to purist, locavore, vegan, orthorexic or other radical eating practices
- Criticized industries actually accommodate current benchmarks: **shortened supply chain, local sourcing, exerting up-stream control** (e.g. quality and hygiene standards impose on suppliers) and ingredients traceability

Even if they noticeably strive to preserve an axiologically neuter, matter-of-fact discourse, the three case studied organizations display **prescriptive and persuasive discourse tactics**. The synthesis of discursive themes streamlines consumers' empowerment via information and contingent meaning-making reveals corporate advertising of healthy lifestyles peddle a **self-legitimizing rhetoric of constant improvement efforts**. By and large, case studies organizations advocate that soda and fast-food consumption is not incompatible with healthy practices and balanced nutritional choices. They acknowledge to a limited extent the validity and practical relevance of scientific conclusions, whereas their corporate discursive case rests on the added value of **on-going innovation and increased dynamics of new technologies** for food processing, coupled with natural ingredients that facilitate the compatibility between controversial diets (based on soda and fast-food) and intensely active lifestyles, the former acting as efficient fuel for the latter.

As per further **development prospects**, the study can prove fruitful in connection to an extended analytical framework relying on conceptual metaphor theory, while considering a larger array of corporate discourse, more criteria and axis of comparison. The elucidation of self-legitimizing rhetoric means for gaining credibility and brand equity can develop across industries deemed as controversial, as well as through longitudinal approaches to various time coordinates. A noticeable propensity common to the three case studied discourses is that for standardized, highly patterned, schematic discursive practices that strategically recontextualise fast food from its traditional attribute of harmful to health to a new, contrasting and counter-intuitive status of health advisor. The discourse of fast food and soda drinks manufacturers dwells on moral boundary work by which individuals are empowered to deliberate for themselves about what is healthy eating, what is unhealthy and where the line is to be drawn between the two. This debate carried over agency, norm of informed citizen and self-determination points out to the role of critical discourse analyst as observer who exposes discourse synergies and incongruities within the symbolic territory of dissent.

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