

increased size portions, a change that affects what people consider a reasonable amount to eat or drink.

According to Lisa Young, a nutritionist in New York City, when Burger King opened in the 1950s, it offered only two sizes of soft drinks—12 ounces and 16 ounces. Those sizes are now considered “kid-die” and “small,” respectively. “Our perception has completely shifted,” Young said. “And that’s a huge problem for teenagers because they get accustomed to this bigger size at a younger age.”

Fast-food restaurants also work hard to get, and keep, the public’s attention. In 2001, McDonald’s spent \$1.4 billion on advertising. Spurlock reveals the effects of those advertising dollars in different scenes in the film. In one scene, he meets with first graders and shows them a series of famous faces. Several of the kids struggle to identify George Washington and Jesus. However, they all recognize Ronald McDonald. In another scene, a woman who can’t recall the Pledge of Allegiance flawlessly recites the Big Mac slogan.

In response to the film, the National Restaurant Association issued a statement that the film’s premise “is ill conceived and is clearly one person’s attempt to demonize America’s favorite foods and the restaurants that serve them.”

However, weeks after the documentary debuted at a film festival, McDonald’s announced it was getting rid of its supersize options. The company has insisted that the decision had nothing to do with the movie. However, Lisa Harnack, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis-St. Paul, said she is not convinced the timing is entirely coincidental. *Supersize* “has . . . too many negative connotations now,” Harnack said.

Critics of *Super Size Me* say that Spurlock—not fast food—was to blame for the health problems documented in the film. To prove the point, a New Hampshire filmmaker, Soso Whaley, conducted her own experiment in which she tried to lose weight by eating nothing but McDonald’s for 30 days. Whaley chronicled her progress through Web postings. Like Spurlock, Whaley tried everything on the menu at least once. Unlike Spurlock, she continued to exercise, ordered single items from the menu, and did not always clean her plate. Over the course of the month, Whaley lost 10 pounds and her cholesterol level dropped.

Statistics show that 75 percent of teens eat fast food at least once a week. If you’re going to indulge from time to time, keep these facts in mind:

- Don’t fall for portion distortion! Order smaller sizes, or share a “value meal” with friends.
- Skip the extras. You can cut calories and reduce fat by omitting mayonnaise, sauces, or regular salad dressings. Keep food toppings such as bacon and cheese to a minimum.

- Remember to get your calcium. Order low-fat milk instead of a soft drink. If you get dessert, make it a yogurt-and-fruit blend.
- Not all items on a fast-food menu are unhealthful. Ask your server for nutrition information on the food items you are considering.

Questions for Analysis

Logic

1. In paragraph 7 the nutritionist Lisa Young makes an argument about changes over time in the size of the soft drinks sold by Burger King. What do you think Toulmin would call her claim here? Explain your choice.
2. Given the context of the essay as a whole and your own experience of its issues, how would you describe the logic of Spurlock's claims about fast food in general? What would you say is his principal claim in Toulmin's terms? What is his warrant for the claim? His backing? In your view, does he explicitly or implicitly employ a qualifier?
3. In the same way, analyze and describe in Toulmin's terms the logic of Spurlock's critic, Soso Whaley, in her own experiment. What is her claim and so on?

Character

1. In paragraph 7 Lisa Young says, "Our perception has completely shifted" and goes on to talk about the problem as far as teenagers are concerned. What sense of her character does her use of the word *our* work to create? For example, does Young's perception seem to have shifted? What relations of herself to teenagers does her use of language seem to intend? Is her stance critical? Sympathetic? Shocked? Describe it as clearly and as fully as you can.
2. What sense of corporate character is attributed to Burger King in paragraph 7, which discusses the perception of soft drink sizes?
3. McCook begins and ends her essay addressing a "you." What sense of her character is created in each case by taking her own stance on some of the issues presented by the movie she describes in the middle of her piece?

Emotion

1. Morgan Spurlock is said to have adopted a set of "rules" for his experiment. How does this fact work to seek emotions of approval in his viewers or those who read about what he did? How does the adoption of rules help to keep the "experiment" from seeming only a joke or a prank?
2. In paragraph 2 Spurlock characterizes his experimental diet as "every 8-year-old's dream." Does his use of the word *dream* here have

a positive or a negative emotional appeal? Which of the many meanings of the word *dream* or which combination of its meanings does his use of the word express? Surely, for example, he does not refer to mental experiences while sleeping. Given the context of his movie, what does he mean by *dream*?

3. In paragraph 10 Lisa Harnack comments on the withdrawal by McDonald's of the supersize options: supersize "has . . . too many negative connotations now." What were the earlier positive emotional connotations of the term *supersize*? What are some of the negative emotional connotations of the term, those created in part by Spurlock's movie?

DOCUMENTING A SUPERSIZE EGO

Ragini Bhaumik

At the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, Morgan Spurlock won the Best Documentary Director award for his soon-to-be supersized hit *Super Size Me*. Supposedly inspired by the lawsuits of teenaged girls who blame their obesity on McDonald's, the film chronicles Spurlock's experimental diet of McMeals every day for thirty days. The problem is that the film isn't exactly a documentary. Yes, it contains a well-organized display of endless facts about American obesity, and the movie certainly argues a thesis. But *Super Size Me*'s attempts at humor (complete with a rectal exam and vomiting) make its ideas about reality seem no more real than those of a reality show. What is worse, Spurlock's reasoning is way too thin.

The film opens with a large group of children all chanting a song, complete with hand movements, consisting simply of three phrases: "McDonald's," "Kentucky Fried Chicken," and "a Pizza Hut." The fattest children sit at the front while they all sing with a feverish gleam in their eyes and end their performance with an outcry of "food!" The insinuations of corporate brainwashing made by these images of American children demanding fast food are confirmed as Spurlock's voice spews facts about American obesity trends in the past twenty years. It is instantly apparent that he is trying to blame the fast-food industry for the burgeoning number of obese Americans, though he of course has formed and led the grade school glee club himself.

Though the children's chant names three fast-food chains, Spurlock uses McDonald's as his favorite corporate scapegoat. Throughout the film

the audience is bombarded with McDonald's facts: the number of establishments worldwide, the number of calories in a Big Mac, the number of Americans who eat there daily. These facts in conjunction with his McDiet and shots of his many unreturned calls to McDonald's corporate headquarters seeking an interview clearly make McDonald's his preferred adversary.

The film's main problem lies in the question of where personal responsibility ends and corporate responsibility begins. How can Americans collectively name McDonald's and other fast-food corporations as public enemies when the customers themselves are the ones who enter these restaurants knowing full well the nutritional value of the food they plan to consume? How can anyone blame McDonald's for his or her own decisions? This corporation sets out to do no more than what all other corporations in a free-market society do—or what Spurlock himself does for that matter—generate as many satisfied customers as possible. Blaming McDonald's is not going to erase the escalating problem of obesity in America, because personal responsibility obviously comes before corporate responsibility in this case.

The McDiet that Spurlock embarks on gives entertainment value to his list of grievances, but it does so with fatuous self-congratulation and unearned self-pity. Spurlock plans to eat at McDonald's every meal of every day for a month, while tracking his (preplanned) decline in health by regularly seeing a physician, two medical specialists, and a nutritionist. The film shows his health checkups prior to launching the diet with Spurlock smugly asking his doctors to confirm his excellent health. He knows he is in good health, as does the audience, but he insists on showing footage of the doctors all repeating his healthy stats. He then begins consuming over 5,000 calories a day, which even according to his own statistics about the number of calories per McDonald's meal, proves that he eats more than just three meals a day in his month. Maintaining his starting weight of 185 pounds requires only 2,500 calories, but not only does Spurlock double the amount of calories he needs to consume, he also works to cut out almost all physical activity from his daily life. He even goes as far as to attach a pedometer to his person, making sure that he does not walk more than the average American every day. The result is mathematically predictable: He gains twenty-four pounds. Spurlock is so conceited as to think that the American public will believe that his weight gain and health problems are solely a result of the McDonald's food. But as *Washington Times* reporter James Glassman points out, Spurlock probably could have gained as much weight at a health food center by consuming as many calories as he did at McDonald's and remaining equally sedentary.

In *Super Size Me*, Spurlock claims that "everything is bigger in America" while spewing factoids that make America "the fattest nation" and flashing shot after shot of faceless fat Americans. Not just fat, not just

overweight, but extremely unhealthily obese people. Spurlock hides behind a mask of journalistic concern for his country while pointing the laughing finger of his camera at the nation's fattest people.

While the truth remains that America is facing an exponential problem in obesity, that truth does not support Spurlock's vain finger-pointing at McDonald's. Instead of educating the public about a potentially fatal situation, he absolves everyone of their personal responsibilities for fitness and holds corporations responsible for all of America's problems, all the while laughing at those who are suffering the most from the recent epidemic. Spurlock's documentary is simply an arrogant glance at a growing social crisis, and its attempt at cheap sensationalism turns a real tragedy into a reality-show farce.

Questions for Analysis

Logic

1. What do you see as Bhaumik's principal claim in Toulmin's terms? Name one other claim her argument makes.
2. What is the principal claim made by the movie *Super Size Me*, according to Bhaumik? What is another claim the movie makes, according to Bhaumik?
3. Explain in your own words what Bhaumik thinks is wrong with the reasoning behind Morgan Spurlock's "McDiet."

Character

1. What aspects of character does Bhaumik manifest in herself by her admissions in paragraph 1 of the virtues of *Super Size Me*?
2. What aspects of character does Bhaumik attribute to the persona of Spurlock as a filmmaker? Does she see him, for example, as too theoretical and not concrete enough in his approach? Point to the evidence that led to your answer.
3. According to Bhaumik, what aspects of character does Spurlock attribute to the American public in general? Point to the evidence that led to your answer.

Emotion

1. In paragraph 1 what emotions does Bhaumik invite in her audience by her parenthetical definition of Spurlock's "attempts at humor"?
2. In paragraph 4 Bhaumik claims that Spurlock's motives are not different from those of the corporations he attacks. What emotions toward Spurlock does this accusation invite (whether or not you believe what Bhaumik says is true)?
3. According to Bhaumik, what emotions about obese people does *Super Size Me* invite in its audience? What emotions toward the same group of people does Bhaumik invite in her essay? Point to the evidence supporting each of your answers.