



## Supermarkets as libraries of postmodern mythology

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 September 2008

Received in revised form 1 April 2009

Accepted 1 May 2009

#### Keywords:

Package narratives  
Marketplace myths  
Brand stories  
Food  
Qualitative research

### ABSTRACT

Using qualitative research methods this article explores the relationship between the point-of-purchase brand rhetoric and the consumers' reading of the poetry of packaging. The findings emphasize the myth-making function of commercial storytelling, identify the consumer as co-creator of marketplace myths, and theorize the process of myth-making as a projectable field that remains open to interpretations by consumers. Instead of producing a single mono-myth, the research demonstrates, package narratives produce multiple micro-myths. These postmodern fragmented micro-myths more fully connect consumers with brands.

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A supermarket is an important marketplace that can make consumers aware of 11,000 packages within a thirty-minute trip for groceries (Hine, 1995). Packages in the supermarkets act not only as protective containers but as important tools for marketing communications (Kniazeva and Belk, 2007; Santino, 1996). Even a cursory look at modern grocery shelves reveals their striking resemblance to those of the libraries. Like the books on library shelves, food packages often contain mythopoetic stories of iconic anthropomorphic characters. Marketplace mythologies (Thompson, 2004) move beyond such one-dimensional modern characters as the Jolly Green Giant, Mr. Peanut, Charlie the Tuna, and Tony the Tiger. Instead, contemporary iconic (Holt, 2004) and ironic brands participate in grander postmodern narratives (Table 1).

Research on packaging has yet to explore the effect of its overwhelming rhetoric on consumers. Such consumer readings are the focus of the study in this article. This report analyzes how consumers read food brands in ways that make a trip to the supermarket as meaningful as a trip to the library. Whereas Miller (1998) characterizes attempting to win the affection of loved ones through shopping as “making love in supermarkets,” the study in this report finds that shoppers aiming to secure the health and well being of their family members instead are representative of sorcerers' apprentices (Belk et al., 2003) in helping to make magic in the market.

To explore the communicative dimension of packaging, the study focuses on the stories printed on the packages and the meanings consumers derive from these stories. This study's approach informs the

contention that commercial storytelling contributes to creating contemporary cultural myths (Thompson, 2004). The goal here is to develop a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between the point of purchase brand rhetoric and consumers' reading of the poetry of packaging. The present study extends existing research into marketplace communications that has already recognized consumer goods packaging to be a potent yet largely unacknowledged vessel of consumption meaning (e.g., Escalas, 1998; Hine, 1995; Holt, 2004; Kniazeva and Belk, 2007; Santino, 1996). Specifically, the study here explores the consumer's interpretive process and how package stories are read in light of consumer life projects (Mick and Buhl, 1992).

The paper starts with a brief overview of academic research into packaging. The paper then presents the method for a study of consumer readings of packages and proceeds with data analysis and a discussion of the findings. U.S. locations provide the context for the research.

### 1. Consumer and marketing research

Current research on packaging from the marketing perspective has roots in the attempts to understand how packaging elements affect consumers. Early psychological research held that packaging appeals to the subconscious and that the process of consumers choosing products at the store is entirely irrational. Louis Cheskin (1947) highlighted the importance of emotional responses to packages, finding that positive feelings about the package affect positive feelings about its content.

With the rise of consumerism in the Western world in the 1960s came a countermovement from activists who insisted that packaging needs to educate the consumer. The gradual appearance of plentiful factual information on food packages was reinforced in 1990 by the U.S. Nutrition and Education Act that required nutritional labeling for

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**Table 1**  
Brands and sizes in the study.

| Brand   | Size               |
|---|--------------------|
| Lundberg family farms whole grain organic salt free brown rice cakes        | 8.5 oz (41 g)      |
| Back to nature chocolate & mint crème sandwich cookies                      | 12 oz (340 g)      |
| Celestial Seasonings Natural Honey Vanilla Chamomile Caffeine Free Herb Tea | 1.6 oz (45 g)      |
| Nirmala's Kitchen Organic Coconut Milk                                      | 14 fl. oz (400 ml) |
| Libby's Sweet Peas  | 15 oz (425 g)      |
| Brent & Sam's Chocolate Chip Pecan All-Natural Gourmet Cookies              | 7 oz (198 g)       |
| Garden of Eatin' Yellow Corn Taco Shells                                    | 5.5 oz (156 g)     |
| The Original California SnackMasters Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky           | 1 oz (28.4 g)      |
| Kashi's TLC Original 7 Grain Tasty Little Crackers                          | 9 oz (255 g)       |
| Earth's Best Organic Whole Grain Oatmeal Cereal                             | 8 oz (227 g)       |
| Grandpa Po's Original Popcorn Snack with Soy Beans                          | 5 oz (141 g)       |

most foods and authorized the use of nutrient-content claims and appropriate FDA-approved health claims. This in turn, resulted in a stream of research on the effects of such information on consumers (e.g., [Jacoby, 1987](#)). The food label statements attracting the most attention are health claims and claims about fat content, nutritional value, eco-labels, warning messages, and claims related to the absence of genetically modified ingredients (e.g., [Lin and Lee, 2004](#); [Mazis and Raymond, 1997](#); [Nayga et al., 1998](#); [Wachenheim, 2005](#)).

The effectiveness of labels and claims in informing the consumer is one of the most researched topics in this stream of research. These studies found, for example, that believability of health claims increase if the package offers short claims on the front and a long series of information on the back of the package ([Wansik, 2003](#)), that only female respondents with children and strong environmentalists will pay a premium for eco-labeled apples ([Loureiro et al., 2002](#)), and that warning messages on packages are effective if they are short and informative ([Teague and Anderson, 1995](#)). Although such studies recognize the limited attention span and fallibility of the consumer, they seldom doubt that the consumer is a rational information processor seeking quality, safety, nutrition, and product efficacy. Thus, while the literature explores well the informative function of packaging and its power to influence immediate purchase decisions, the narrative role of packaging stories and their effects on consumers still need addressing via broad, less utilitarian, assumptions.

### 1.1. Method

In order to understand the relationship between the marketplace structures (stories that product packages offer) and their impact on those who buy or use the product, the study addresses two major research questions. (1) What myths do packaging stories invoke? (2) What are consumers' responses to these stories and mythologies? This study's contribution lies in providing an understanding of mythic meaning transfer from package stories to consumer interpretations.

To enable hearing the consumers' voice and thus provide emic reader-response perspectives on the packaging stories, eleven food packages were presented to the informants for their interpretation ([Scott and Rajeev Batra, 2003](#)). The packages were chosen in order to offer the informants a variety of product categories they could relate to. Half of the packages represent snacks and include popcorn, jerky, crackers, rice cakes, and cookies. In addition, the study included cereal, taco shells, tea, coconut milk and canned peas. They were all bought at two U.S. national retailers — Ralph's and Whole Foods.

The study includes nine long interviews ([McCracken, 1988](#)). In inviting prospective participants to take part in the study, the informants were told the study was about food and that no preparation was necessary on their part. All of those approached with the request, accepted the

invitation, and most seemed enthusiastic about the topic. Recruitment informants was done in two U.S. states of the West Coast and started interviewing without a preset number of the desired participants, planning to end the data collection at the point when we encountered repetitive patterns in the answers. Invitations were extended carefully, aiming to develop a sample that would be diverse in gender, age, marital status, education, and eating patterns. The selection purposely focused on middle-class mainstream consumers versus a narrower segment such as natural health loyalists ([Thompson, 2004](#)), likely leading to a greater range of meanings emerging from these less committed and less involved consumers. The informants generally lack a strong suspicion of large corporations, heightened ecological awareness, or the willingness to experiment with new and alternative ways of thinking and living that [Thompson \(2004\)](#) identifies as “cultural creatives.”

The in-depth interviews lasted 1–1.5h each and provided 140 pages of transcribed data. During the first part of the interviews we asked our informants about purchase habits, philosophy, or rules followed while buying groceries, whether they look for certain brands, and if they read labels or stories placed on the packages. After that, informants viewed the food packages and were asked if any of the packages looked familiar. Those packages that informants recognized were the first ones chosen for informants' interpretations. The protocol includes asking informants to first read the text on each package one at a time, and then probe with questions, including projective ones, for example, “If this brand were a person, what kind of person would it be?” The purpose was to learn the participants' impressions of the brand. Each participant discussed an average of 4–5 packaged products that included at least one item that was previously unfamiliar to them. The protocol concludes with more general questions, such as “What comes to your mind when I say “food?” In analyzing the data, the analyses include following procedures for developing grounded theory ([Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#)), including open, axial, and selective coding as well as collaborative discussion with each other.

### 1.2. Analysis: What is Turkey Jerky's personality?

One package, of SnackMasters Turkey Jerky, drew attention of all participants in the study, and its two paragraphs produced four different interpretations of the product's personality. “If this jerky were a person,” commented Chrystal, “he would be a big fat guy smoking a cigar.” Julie pictured a cowboy with a cowboy hat, Ken envisioned “just a male,” and Lisa saw her own son. The brown plastic SnackMasters bag with its small transparent window was a perfect stimulus for our research purposes. With no illustrations, it is an example of visual simplicity; the package liberates its story from the possible influence of illustrative imagery and communicates with consumers predominantly through the text:

Thank you! We appreciate your purchase of SnackMasters® “The Original California” Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky. ☆ It's our sincere promise and commitment to provide you, our sacred customer with the finest wholesome, high quality Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky products possible. Our SnackMasters processing facilities are located in the heart of Northern California's San Joaquin Valley. Our secret family recipe, supported by our time tested “Old fashioned” processing technique, emphasizing very strict quality control standards guarantees you, our valued customer, an authentic natural gourmet meat snack that not only tastes great but is also nutritionally good for you. Our Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky is sliced from 100% natural turkey breast meat that is 98% fat free. We have exercised every precaution humanly possible to insure your confident snacking pleasure and satisfaction.

This literary exercise started by marketers was nevertheless finished by consumers who projectively filled-in and embellished the texts. The readers of this and other narratives were not passive

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