

Packaging as a Vehicle for Mythologizing the Brand

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The theoretical contribution of this article lies in the domain of marketplace mythology. By examining stones printed on the food packages that make use of a popular claim of naturalness, we offer a conceptual framework showing how corporations attempt to graft new myths onto old archetypes. We propose that by revisiting traditional mythology, contemporary commercial storytellers collectively create a grand postmodern marketplace myth—that of an empowered and ennobled consumer. We treat packaging narratives as cultural productions and explore them as vehicles for mythologizing the brand. Our findings reveal mythical themes exploited by companies in their packaging stories and messages they convey.

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And yet it seems clear that a poet two millennia hence would certainly learn more about our world by looking at cans from a supermarket than canvases from a museum. (Hine 1995,237)

A visit to any local supermarket reveals that the surfaces of paperboard cartons, aluminum cans, and plastic grocery bags are being used by marketers as narrative vehicles whose purposes far exceed meeting labeling requirements to provide nutritional descriptions of their content. These packages bear stories that celebrate brand origins, echo advertising campaigns, and spin autobiographical tales of the companies they seek to animate. Even a cursory look at modern supermarket shelves demonstrates that a supermarket has become a storehouse of literary text rich in motivational stories, historical tales and artistic renderings of heroic and romantic myths. For example,

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White Wave Foods' Silk soymilk carton reminds us of a time when American women couldn't wear trousers. The carton glorifies "an American hero" Amelia Bloomer for popularizing the Turkish-style pants that later became a symbol of women's rights of self-determination. And a packet of Celestial Seasonings' Honey Vanilla Chamomile tea preaches the power of persistence that may turn "hopeless failure" to "glorious success."

We approach our study of packaging stories—narrative literary texts that go beyond labeling requirements—with the premise that food packages act not only as protective containers, but as important tools for marketing communications that convey values, ideas, associations, and messages to the consumer (Santino 1996; Simonson and Schmitt 1997). Our attempt at unpacking packages is long overdue because the power and signification of packaging is an under-explored topic in consumer research. Thus, although the informational function of packaging labels and its power to influence immediate purchase decisions have been examined (e.g., Mazis and Raymond 1997; Nayga, Lipinski, and Savur 1998; Lin and Lee 2004; Wachenheim 2005), the role of packaging stories as symbolic communication remains to be addressed. As a cultural phenomenon, packaging is under-acknowledged (Mine 1995; Simonson and Schmitt 1997; Escalas 1998).

This paper aims to develop our understanding of the role of packaging rhetoric and to offer a theoretical framework that will explain how packaging contributes to brand conceptualizations (Fournier 1998; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2004). We treat packaging stories as cultural productions, similar to those of art, literature, and advertising. As such, we examine these texts as carriers of mythic content, and our inquiry concerns packaging as a vehicle for mythologizing the brand. Specifically, we address two research questions: 1) How do brands seek to mythologize themselves through the packaging stories? and 2) What can consumers learn about their world from the "poetry" of packaging? To answer these questions, we will discuss how mythological structures are used in packaging texts, what myths they invoke, and what messages they convey.

In doing so, we join a stream of research into marketplace mythology which has offered strong theoretical foundation for understanding the role of myths circulating in the marketplace (Levy 1981; Stern 1995; Holt 2004; Thompson 2004). We intend to fill in two gaps in this theoretical domain. First, because studies in this area have been mostly conducted from the consumers' perspective, we will now go "backward" and focus on how those myths offered by marketers are responsive to what consumers find absent in contemporary culture. Second, because of our emphasis on packaging stories, we will add a missing piece to studies of meaning transfer (McCracken 1988) that have neglected packages in favor of advertising. For example, work on brands (e.g., Aaker 1995; Fournier 1998) and brand personality (e.g., Aaker 1997) has largely ignored the communication function of packaging in favor of advertising claims. Research that uses the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) involves consumer storytelling about brands, but does not focus on stories offered to these consumers through packaging (e.g., Zaltman and Coulter 1995; Zaltman 2000). The marketplace mythology literature (Stern 1995; Holt 2004; Thompson 2004) has also neglected packaging. When Thompson (2004) discusses the primary means through which cultural

meanings are conveyed into the lives of consumers, he talks about media, advertisements, conversational discourses among consumers, and practitioner narratives. Stern's (1995) study of consumption myths examines how they appear in consumer narratives and surface in advertisements. While theorizing the mechanism of iconic brand building as being rooted in storytelling and mythology, Holt (2004) emphasizes advertising campaigns as makers of mythic cultural images for brands. We seek to expand these perspectives on marketplace mythology, starting from the assertion that "prior conceptualizations of consumer myths have largely ignored the interrelationships between cultural mythologies, marketplace structures, and the interpretive predilections of key consumer constituencies" (Thompson 2004, 163). The following sections clarify terminology, provide a brief review of academic research into marketplace mythology, and present our methodology and findings.

Narrative, Myth, Consumer Myth

From Narratives to Myths

Consumer researchers have borrowed from anthropology, folklore studies, and literary studies to define the three terms popular in marketplace mythology studies—narrative, myth, and consumption myth (Stern 1995). Narrative is the broadest of these and encompasses the other two. Narratives (stories) involve a structural sequence of cause and effect related events. They usually have a plot and a central character (the hero). The key structural element of a narrative is a conflict which is resolved by the hero's actions and results in a state of equilibrium. Several forms of narratives are distinguished, including folk stories, historical accounts, personal accounts, and myths.

The term myth derives from the Greek word *mythos*. It is a modern prejudice that sometimes equates myth with "untruth." Myth originally referred to an authoritative speech or story and later came to be associated with ancient tales about the gods. The supernatural forces in these narratives helped people make sense of the surrounding world. Explaining the world and our place within it was, and has remained, the major function of myth (Campbell 1988). According to Campbell, there are two orders of mythology—nature-oriented and socially oriented—and both of them "teach you about your own life" (1988, 11). From a structuralist perspective, myths also follow certain patterns: 1) they are highly symbolic; 2) they are rich in mythic archetypes such as familiar story patterns, characters, images, and experiences; and 3) they convey deep meanings (Levi-Strauss 1963).

Different academic traditions emphasize various aspects of myths: the theological approach views myths as "ideology in narrative form" (Lincoln 1999), while cultural critics and anthropologists examine myths as powerful traditional stories unfolding a culture's beliefs and worldviews (Levi-Strauss 1969; Campbell 1988). Myth was first formulated in marketing by Sidney Levy using a sociological viewpoint that a myth is "a tale commonly told within a social group" (1981, 51). This approach is enriched by a cultural perspective in Barbara Stern's (1995) definition of myths as "the culture's

story stock" that derives from the culture's past and is represented by different narratives, including consumption stories (Thompson 1997).

Consumer Myths

Together Levy and Stern offer a broad structural perspective for understanding consumer myths. Levy defines consumer myths as "consumer protocols ... that use a sociocultural vocabulary" (1981, 60). He also calls them "little myths that organize consumer reality," as opposed to traditional or "grand myths" (Levy 1981, 53). While employing Levy's definition, Stern (1995) stresses the explanatory function of consumer myths is not different from that of general myths. Thus, Stern sees the tales of consumer myths as very much "a part of the cultural fabric" (1995, 184). She also views consumer myths as "a literary production we might interpret in ways comparable to those of... literary critics" (Levy 1981, 49).

Levy's structural approach analyzed binary oppositions found in consumer stories about food consumption and treated them as descriptors of the mythic patterns. This approach to consumer myths derives from Levi-Strauss (1963). Stern (1995) instead borrowed from structural and poetic literary criticism and especially classifications of Northrop Frye ([1957] 1973). Her analysis of consumer myths associated them with archetypal themes such as nature's four seasons and the human life cycle.

Prior analyses of consumer myths are predominantly concerned with the content of mythic narratives (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Thompson 2004). This research adds to our understanding of consumer behavior by articulating mythic themes circulated in the marketplace. For instance, Thompson (2004) discusses mythic constructions of nature, technology, and science and develops the construct of marketplace mythology. Still, these approaches remain largely structural. As Brown observes: "Passe though they are, it cannot be denied that structuralist or para-structuralist approaches to literary criticism are inherently appealing to marketing researchers. Let's be honest ... marketing is a structuralist academic discipline, or semi-structuralist at least" (1998, 154). Alternative approaches including the more post-structural analysis of metaphors (e.g., Zaltman and Coulter 1995), do not as readily lend themselves to understanding the mythic nature of consumer and marketing tales.

The most common unit of analysis in research on consumer myths is that of oral consumer stories (Levy 1981; Stern 1995; Thompson 2004), also called consumption stories (Thompson 1997), consumer texts, consumer protocols, consumer narratives, and consumption tales (Stern 1995). Both approaches to studying consumer myths—structuralist and post-structuralist—have also been used in analyzing texts crafted by marketers. However, these analyses are focused on advertising copy and illustrations only (Stern 1995, 1996; Thompson 2004) and have yet to embrace narratives found on goods' packages. The focus on advertising texts has nevertheless made progress. These studies have identified links between myths, consumer values, and advertising (Stern 1995), articulated the relationship between marketplace mythologies and ideological agendas (Thompson 2004), and explored how myths

come to be used and not simply which myths are used in advertisements (Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001).

Consumer Stories versus Packaging Stories

Consumer stories elicited by depth interviews represent the most common texts in analyses of consumer myths (e.g., Stern 1995; Thompson 2004). Although these stories are often examined as literary texts (Levy 1981; Stern 1995), the consumers themselves hardly regarded their words as well crafted stories. This makes consumer tales different from purposely created works of literature like advertising copy (Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001) or packaging stories. Anonymous writers of advertising and packaging narratives take time to craft their texts and invest them with meaningful messages that their companies wish to convey (Holt 2004). Consequently, we can expect these narratives to be more calculated and to offer a conscious reflection of brand personalities and consumer values (Mick and Buhl 1992; Stern 1996). This development can also be seen in the evolution of packaging.

The very first stories appeared on packages of patent medicines sold in London in the seventeenth century (Hine 1995). For instance, the container for Anderson's pills introduced their inventor and presented him as a former personal physician to the King Charles I. In addition to making this royal connection, the container told that the physician learned of this remedy while on a trip to Italy, adding a more exotic-foreign flavor and some magic to the pills. In America, containers with patent medicines claimed ties with secret Indian remedies, similarly investing a sense of adventure and exoticism to otherwise dull pills. The end of the nineteenth century marked the widespread use of packages for marketing products which was evidenced by the revolutionary makeover of the mundane product of oatmeal. The transformation of what used to be a feed for horses into a desirable human food ("a delicacy for the epicure, a nutritious dainty for the invalid, a delight to the children"), was "alchemy through packaging": putting oatmeal into a small box, investing the box with personality (Quaker Oats), and outfitting it with recipes (Hine 1995, 77). In a similar manner, "it was the package that raised a humble, ordinary food—the biscuit—into a position of importance on the tables of the Victorian diner" (Sacharow 1982). Thereby did Uneeda Biscuit end the bulk packaging of the old cracker barrel.

Historically, packages radically changed the marketplace into one where the selling once done by people was increasingly done through packaging narratives, and the package progressively had to take on the selling function in order to create consumer appeal. The immediacy and intimacy of the package to brand image and brand choice is why interest in packaging looms large in marketing research (Teague and Anderson 1995; Loureiro, McCluskey, and Mittelhammer 2002; Wansik 2003). But the focus of such efforts is on the effects of information presented in the form of labels, claims about fat content, nutritional value, eco-labels, and warning messages, and on claims related to the absence of genetically modified ingredients, not on the stories that many labels help to tell.

Methodology

In this paper, we aim to understand the power of specific marketplace structures—stories that product packages offer—which we treat as cultural productions. The context of packaging lets us explore the communication qualities of a largely ignored marketplace vehicle of meaning transfer (McCracken 1988). Our qualitative methodology includes a close reading of narratives on food product packages that go beyond mere statements such as "fat free" and offer stories and descriptions that may engage the consumer's imagination (Stern 1995; Grayson 1997; Escalas 1998). For example, the text comes from a bag of popcorn: "Better Than Food. In 1963, Grandpa Po invented Nutra Nuts for his children as an alternative to candy. Family and friends went 'nutty' for the irresistible, all natural snack. You'll go 'nutty' for Nutra Nuts too. Enjoy!" We provide an etic analysis of packaging narratives and employ procedures for developing grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Our initial analysis of the extensive set of over one hundred narratives was conducted using several coding techniques: beginning with open coding, line-by-line, and by whole sentences. Axial and selective coding then led to building a better understanding of the mythological structures on which these stories draw. This helped us generate initial concepts, define starting points for the research, and center our analysis on eleven stories containing mythic themes common to our pool of narratives.

Data have been collected from food packages bought in the US supermarkets Ralphs and Wild Oats over the last two years. Products were chosen to represent a wide variety of categories purchased by consumers on a regular basis. They included popcorn and jerky snacks, crackers, rice cakes, cookies, cereal, baby food, taco shells, tea, and peanut butter (see Table 1). In addition, so that our stories had a common general theme, we considered only those packages that prominently contained the word "natural."

We focus purposely on food packages that make use of the highly popular claim of naturalness. From a marketing perspective, being natural is an emotionally charged category, and not a physical quality of the product. Unlike claims such as "organic" or "fresh," whose use is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, the label "natural" lacks any specific requirements and has no official definition. It is a mythical construct that is constantly created by marketers and recreated by consumers (Kniazeva 2002; Thompson 2004). According to *Marketing News* (2004), "natural" was the most popular tag that fruit juice marketers used on their product introductions in 2004—three times as often as the label "organic".

We see naturalness as an important cultural concept. Regard for nature has changed considerably from a time when it was seen as wild, savage, and uncultured, full of dirt and primitives, and "red in tooth and claw" (Coward 1989, 148). Instead, in the West, nature has become the emotional source of all that is good (Kniazeva 2002; Thompson 2004). As such, our study focuses on appeals employing what Thompson (2004) labels the romantic metaphor of "nature as maternal power" engendering a myth of magical regeneration.

Table 1 Sample of data set

Category	Product	Parent company	Store
Snack	The Original California Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky	SnackMasters	Ralph's
Snack	Grandpa Po's Original Popcorn Snack with Soy Beans	Nutra Nuts, Inc.	Ralph's
Snack	TLC Original 7 Grain Tasty Little Crackers	Kashi Company L.L.C.	Ralph's
Snack	Lundberg Family Farms Whole Grain Organic Salt Free Brown Rice Cakes	Lundberg Family Farms	Whole Foods
Snack	Back to Nature Chocolate & Mint Creme Sandwich Cookies	Back to Nature Foods	Whole Foods
Snack	Garden of Eatin' Yellow Corn Taco Shells	Garden of Eatin', a division of The Hain Celestial Group, Inc.	Whole Foods
Snack	Brent & Sam's Chocolate Chip Pecan All-Natural Gourmet Cookies	Brent & Sam's Cookies, Inc.	Whole Foods
Cereal	Whole Kids Organic Rainbow Rings	Whole Foods Market	Whole Foods
Tea	Celestial Seasonings Natural Honey Vanilla Chamomile Caffeine Free Herb Tea	Celestial Seasonings, a division of The Hain Celestial Group, Inc.	Ralph's
Butter	Maranatha Crunchy Organic Peanut Butter	Maranatha Natural Foods, a division of nSpired Natural Foods	Whole Foods
Baby food	Earth's Best Organic Whole Grain Oatmeal Cereal	The Hain Celestial Group, Inc.	Ralph's

Reading Packaging Narratives

The main motif of the myths always relates to power; and in ancient myths the presence of gods, demons, and other supernatural forces was needed to symbolize the ultimate authority responsible for the social and natural order. On the surface, such supernatural forces disappeared from the many contemporary myths. However, this does not diminish the importance of power. In the packaging analyzed we find old wine in new bottles.

Many of the packaging stories position the brand through a personal brand biography that seeks to convey to the consumer that it is a warm sympathetic character. Rather than providing impersonal information, the packaging narratives offer a dialog with the customer. "I personally guarantee this tea will meet your highest expectations ... let us know how we can serve you better," says the founder and chairman of Celestial Seasonings who leaves his signature on the package of Honey Vanilla Chamomile tea. "Enjoy!" invites the package with Lundberg Family Farms' rice cakes, concluding the narrative with the names of four members of the Lundberg family. But it is not a friend-friend relationship that is invoked between the two sides; it is more of a self-imposed servant-master connection. The master here is the consumer, whom the companies address not only as a familiar "you," but also with self-deprecating adjectives that in turn flatter and elevate the customer's majesty:

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. You can see, feel and taste the SnackMasters advantage (Quote from the package of Snack Masters Natural Gourmet Turkey Jerky).

The discourse of inverted power is strong in this narrative and implies three influential forces: aborn-to-enjoy-life master, a subordinate servant, and an indifferent or deceitful surrounding world whose malevolence and carelessness can be resisted through the idealized servant-master union, in which the protective servant exercises "every precaution humanly possible" or, as the box with Whole Kids Organic Rainbow Rings cereal promises, always uses "all organic ingredients available." This is necessary to shield the master from the vices of the modern world. Thus, a mythological role of being a master is assigned to a consumer by marketers of the products, which echoes foundational writings about mythology. But while Campbell (1988) talks about mythological roles human beings have to play when they move between stages of life or enter into new professions, mythological roles of the marketplace are appointed in a symbolic response to the realities of the surrounding world. To justify such role allocation, marketplace mythology as exemplified in packaging narratives, centers around the theme of the world condition—as it is viewed nowadays, as it supposedly was in the past, and as it ideally should be in the immediate future. Consequently, while playing their own role of brand signifiers, packaging stories participate in grander postmodern mythical narratives like that of the Macintosh computer as rebellious trickster (Belk and Tumbat 2005).

Myth of the World in the Past

Packaging narratives depict the modern world as a deeply distorted reflection of what it originally was—the garden before agro-chemical technology. While the values of the past include family, tradition, authenticity, peace, and simplicity, the current era is associated with broken family ties that need to be restored, scientific "advances" that pose threats, constant pressure on the well-being of humans, and unnecessary complexity in everyday life.

The time motive—venerably old versus dangerously modern—strongly permeates the packaging narratives. For example, Garden of Eatin' counts the years separating it from a glorified past while announcing that it has been making its finest tortilla chips "for over a quarter of a century." The word "century" by itself carries the ponderous importance, adding momentous significance to the company's products. But it seems, it doesn't really matter how far in the past the reader is invited to travel. As soon as the packaging narrative is able to indicate the product's ties with older times, meaningful

weight is added to its content because it ceases to be just a food item and becomes a symbolic bridge between a romanticized yesterday and a prosaic present. This nostalgia theme leads us to the complexity of the relationship between the sacred and profane in the contemporary world (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

"When you find a quiet moment, ease into a cup of contentment with Honey Vanilla Chamomile Herb Tea," invites the packet of Celestial Seasonings' tea. Thus, it is not the tea that the company is offering to its consumers, but a cup of gratification and soothing pleasure. This pleasure, the narrative implies, is much-needed in a hectic world where a person needs to put effort into finding a moment of calm which is necessary to survive everyday challenges.

"At Kashi," claims the narrative on the package of Original 7 Grain Crackers, "we know there's a time in the day when we need to take a moment to give ourselves some tender loving care: a minute to refuel bodies and our spirits. So, we're offering you a great-tasting snack you can feel great about." The company's crackers even come under the brand name "TLC." But this abbreviation officially means "Tasty Little Crackers," one learns from the fine print on the package. Offering a double reading of the popular acronym, the packaging narrative makes a connection between its material content and the mythical meanings it conveys. In a world, where humans are forced to act and be like machines, where both the people and technology share the same need for refueling, TLC crackers stand out not as a source of necessary physiological energy, but as a means of spiritual rejuvenation. And while the package describes crackers as having attractive taste properties such as being crunchy, being "the right size for popping in your mouth," and "baked to crispy perfection," it is the constellation of metaphorical words that elevates the snack to the position of "heavenly" food. When the story repeats the word "heart" and its variation "hearty," it isn't talking about the physiologically vital part of the body, but builds upon the symbolic connotations of the word as meaning love and vitality. The "heart" is used to describe the incredible efforts put into creation of the snack ("we put our hearts into bringing you ..."). In a similar manner, when the snack is described as "hearty," it is presented as jovial and energetic.

Even TLC's combination of ingredients appears to be sacred, as it consists of seven whole grains and sesame seeds. The number "seven," long endowed with religious and mystic connotations in the West, was believed to be a magic number by the Greeks (Crump 1992). As for sesame seeds, besides their nutritional value as a good source of protein and fat, they too carry mythical associations. For example, according to an Assyrian myth the gods drank sesame wine the night before they created the earth. And it was the now familiar exhortation, "open sesame" that Ali Baba uttered to open the treasure cave in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The exploitation of a spiritual vocabulary can also be seen in brand and company names. Thus, the Hain Celestial Group offers a wide variety of Celestial Seasonings teas, and its "Garden of Eatin'" division makes transparent reference to the Garden of Eden. The latter, the original beautiful and worry-free home of Adam and Eve, links with the creation myth of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and earlier religions. By marking their messages with religious connotations through the packaging rhetoric, branded food

products equip their consumers with powerful tools. Religious motifs have been found to be central among loyal members of brand communities who adopt them to sustain their brand faith (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Belk and Tumbat 2005), to resist the disappearance of brands (Muniz and Schau 2005), and even revitalize them (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003).

Myth of the Corporate World

The Back to Nature cookies' narrative offers a glimpse into the history of the company: "It began very simply. In 1960 in the back of a small health food store in Pasadena, we created something people really liked: a delicious, naturally low-fat granola. Soon it was our most popular item, and health food stores across California were asking for it." The story puts emphasis on the simplicity of the birth of the company's products, an inauspicious beginning "in the back" of an unknown local store, and the "small is beautiful" philosophy that eventually resulted in well-deserved recognition across the state.

This account goes on by indirectly contrasting the company with other firms representing the big corporate world. The latter are implied to offer unnecessarily complex products with ingredients that consumers can't even pronounce, and to go after customers by boasting about their companies' size and making a lot of marketing noise. Here, bigness is posited as the enemy of moral goodness, and the narrative hints at the irresponsibility of the corporate world that Back to Nature positions itself against. Compromises are the province of global corporations which estrange themselves from nature. Corporate farmers, reports the Lundberg Family Farms Rice cakes' narrative, "burn entire fields of rice straw after harvest, polluting the air and depleting soil nutrients." They use potentially harmful pesticides and herbicides, adds the package of Earth's Best Whole Grain Oatmeal cereal. Conventional manufacturers sabotage your health, implies the story on the package of Kashi's Original 7 Grain Crackers. It describes most conventional snack choices as being full of highly refined sweeteners, artificial ingredients, hydrogenated oils, and cholesterol. Conventional products are made with genetically engineered ingredients, warn the packages that prominently display "No GMO" labels. This critical packaging chorus is very much in line with how Thompson's (2004) informants perceive conventional medicine, that is, represented by grim and emotionally detached doctors imposing doctrinaire, draconian, disempowering, and degenerative treatments and making the whole medical system even more adversarial and alienating.

Back to Nature's self-described mission silently declares opposition to all the negatives imposed on consumers by large corporations. Myth making in the company's narrative draws a clear line between "us" and "them" where the "us" is positioned as not being threatening, greedy or profit-driven, much in contrast to the "them." Moreover, our analysis reveals the deliberate exploitation of the words "only," "always," and "never" that are frequently used in packaging narratives—as if sending a strong message to the reader that there is no place for compromises only in the natural world.

Myth of the Natural World

The package of Lundberg Family Farms Whole Grain Rice cakes portrays its idealized relationship with nature. Its commitment to nature extends to multifaceted framing: political, economic, and psychological. In presenting such an encompassing construct of nature this company is not alone. All narratives from the packages selected carrying the label "natural" participate in creating the world they claim to be natural. True, real, pure, simple, wholesome—these are the meaningful descriptors that are used in the narratives while distancing the "natural" world from a fake, artificial, tainted, and mechanistic world. The truly natural world is the one providing the greatest similarity to long-gone "simpler times"; it is the world that appreciates purity of nature and that generously offers "truly flavorful, wholesome foods made with simple ingredients." Here the reader can also hear strains of Henry David Thoreau: "Back to nature; simplify, simplify, simplify; nature is full of genius, full of divinity" (1947, 344).

Naturalness appears as a rich emotional construct that connects with positive contemporary images of nature. For instance, ostensibly negative descriptors obtain a positive connotation among Kniazeva's (2002) informants: brown spots on tomatoes are romanticized for being caused by insects, creatures of nature; and scarcity and seasonality of fruit are linked with the pleasure of anticipation of favorite mangos ripening. People "do not want to remember that nature can also be destructive as in deadly hurricanes and poisonous mushrooms," reports Kniazeva (2002, 101). In a natural health context, Thompson (2004) also finds nature to be a positively framed powerful mythic construction; and his informants attribute magical, regenerative powers to nature. They firmly believe that aligning with what nature has to offer for one's health lets them assert control over their lives and bodies versus losing control by being complicit in a scientized medical system.

We can see here the spiritual treatment of nature that Coward (1989) found pervades alternative medicine, vegetarianism, voluntary simplicity philosophies, the natural childbirth movement, and dietary beliefs linking food to health with a resulting reverence for magical, harmonious, whole, natural foods free of herbicides, pesticides, and genetic modification. These beliefs are in turn linked to puritanical American beliefs that we must take responsibility for our bodies, work hard to perfect our health, cleanse our environment and system of pollutants, and choose the foods that will make us healthy. At the same time, Coward (1989, 148) concludes that these choices embrace a purely fanciful myth of achieving health through eating. Too much is out of consumer control and dependent on the environment, so that only collective and political actions are likely to alter the food production system. But as Franklin, Lurry, and Stacey (2000) point out, "natural" is being reconfigured by branded food corporations and others in ways that serve their ends. Just as other "organic" street styles have been co-opted and appropriated for commercial ends (Frank 1997), so too have nature, natural, ecology, and environmentalism been co-opted, appropriated, commodified, and transformed in order to sell brands. Rather than attempting to fill cultural needs like Volkswagen or Apple as valiant underdogs (Holt 2004), or early

Kellogg's cereal or Graham Crackers as health foods to suppress carnal urges (Wyman 1993), this is trendy opportunism.

Myth of the Idyllic World

Many packaging lyrical stories collectively build up a mythical idyllic world in which not only are fields never burned, they are anthropomorphized and treated as live creatures. They are a part of Mother Earth. Our fields, describes the Lundberg Family Farms Rice cakes package, are periodically kept out of production "so the soil may rest." In this perfect world, rice straw is chopped, rolled, and turned back into the soil to replenish organic matter, and there is no place for pesticides, herbicides or commercial fertilizers. Like the body's purported desire to heal itself (Coward 1989), the earth is alleged to be regenerative if it is not poisoned with chemicals, scarred by burning, or tricked by genetic meddling. This is the symbolic paradise where harmony thrives and all living creatures peacefully coexist and take care of one another. "Our fields furnish essential winter habitat for thousands of migratory waterfowl. Not only are the majestic flocks beautiful to behold, they help the rice straw decompose and provide natural fertilizer;" so culminates the story from the Lundberg Family Farms package showing an exquisite appreciation of nature in its wild state.

The processing techniques are no less celebratory of the triumph of tradition. These ideal manufacturers not only would not call themselves manufacturers. They appear to enjoy living in the past: they stone-grind their grains, mill their own rice, pop their rice cakes right at the farm, and bake their cookies to crispy perfection. They "minimally process," treasure original recipes, refrain from using preservatives, and slice their jerky from "100% natural turkey." Their final products are not mechanically or automatically made, but thoughtfully invented and crafted. And if in some rare instances they are made, they are handmade from scratch. For example, the TLC crackers, asserts the narrative, are not manufactured, they are created, as from the onset they were "dreamed up," which brings them farther and farther away from a profane, mechanically calculated product and closer to that of a "fantastic" creation. To think of these snacks as manufactured is an inappropriate intrusion of the profane machine into the sacred garden (Marx 2000). This idyllic world downgrades the role of technology, elevates "from scratch" to the pedestal of ultimate naturalness, and invokes the words "nothing added" as a symbol of utmost authenticity.

Discussion

As literary productions, our packaging stories follow the basic structure of the narrative (Grayson 1997). They have a formal main character, represented by a company or a product inventor, and offer plots that take readers from their initial setting's state of chaos and crisis to the final destination of satisfaction and happiness. As cultural constructions, these stories are full of mythic archetypes: they make use of culturally familiar symbols and carry along mythic meanings reflective of cultural values. When a package informs that "the irresistible, all natural" snack was originally invented by

Grandpa Po for his children as an alternative to candy, it implies how careless the world was in failing to take proper care of its children until Grandpa Po offered his solution. "Grandpa Po" here is a metaphor for a strong traditional, extended family, the ultimate family authority, a cornerstone, the one who cements all its units together. And although packaging stories provide various metaphors and symbols, they are all utilized to arrive at the same destination—that of harmonious existence. Harmony is a desired outcome, culmination of these packaging narratives.

Our analysis of these stories leads us to conclude that marketers heavily exploit the notion of myth to give a grand sense of purpose to their otherwise mundane and commoditized products. They mythologize their ordinary staple foods by fitting them in the surrounding world. This is why myths of the world—past and modern—are so prominent in the contemporary storytelling. They implicate the consumer in glamorization of the past, criticism of the present, and idealization of the desired future. Like myths of the past they help us dream of a better world. The mechanism of such mythologizing movement includes employing narrative structures, filling them with mythic archetypes, and thereby constructing messages full of hope and deep meaning (see Table 2).

Empowering and Ennobling Consumers through Myths

We support findings by other researchers that commercial storytelling is not an innocent exercise in word crafting, but an important brand building function (Holt 2004; Thompson 2004). In that sense, we extend the latest and most comprehensive examination of commercial storytelling offered by Holt (2004) in which he focused on advertising texts and concluded that they contribute to myth making by providing what is needed or eroded in everyday beliefs. Companies play significant roles in creating these myths by shaping the meanings of their brands to offer that which consumers find missing or threatened in their culture. Crafting their packaging stories, firms mythologize their brands by poetically reflecting societal dreams, hopes, and wishes. Moreover, we propose that contemporary commercial storytellers revisit traditional mythology in order to make an illusion of empowering and ennobling consumers as masters served by subservient, if not worshipful, brands. By doing so, they collectively create a new grand postmodern marketplace myth—that of a powerful regal consumer.

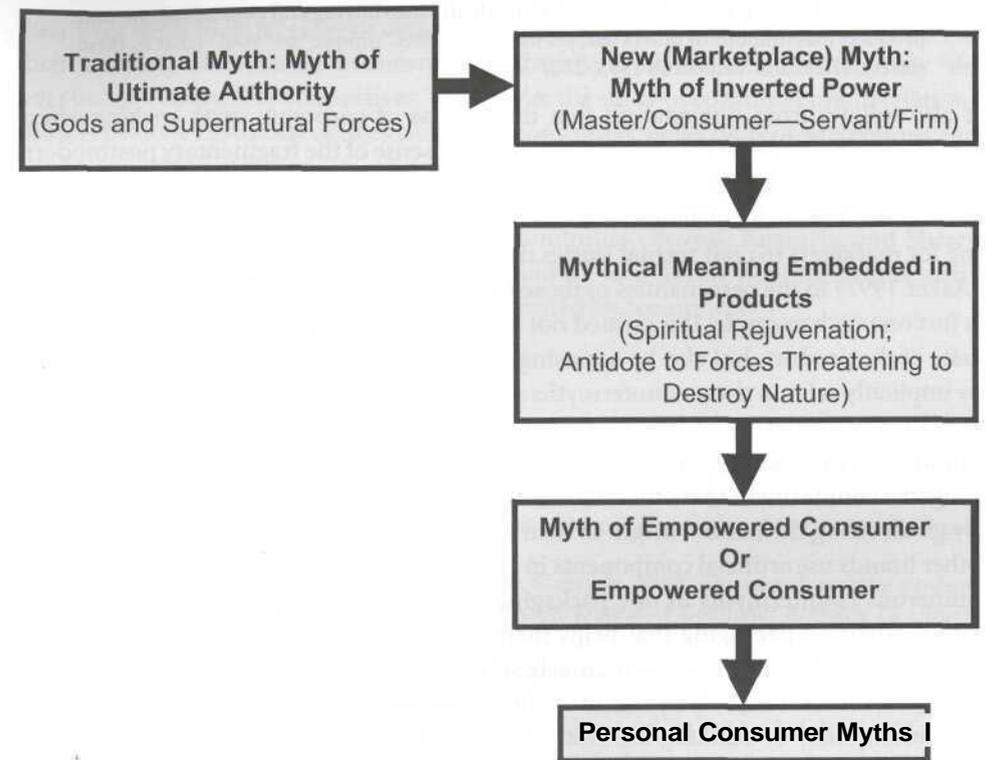
As a first step in this process (see Figure 1), a traditional myth of an ultimate authority is used to offer a contemporary vision of power distribution in the marketplace. This action gives birth to the myth of inverted power which suggests the master-servant relationship as that of being reflected by consumer-firm relationship. The myth-making process then centers on this newly created myth of inverted power and continues by embedding products with mythical meanings meant to magnify mythological roles allocated to products. Finally, when the two—products and their consumers—meet, all the significance attached by storytellers to the products transforms otherwise powerless consumers into the powerful marketplace players. As a result, newly empowered consumers can temporarily escape imposed world conditions by shaping their personal

Table 2 Marketplace myths as cultural constructions

	Myth of the World in the Past	Myth of the Modern World
Archetypes	Gods Garden Paradise Nature Mother and father Peace Soul Heart	Corporations Agro-chemical farms Labs Technology Strangers Stress Dollar Robots
Descriptors	Wholesome Romantic Slow Happy Small Pure Natural Idyllic Magical Quiet Generous Creative Safe Real	Chaotic Prosaic Hectic Worried Large Tainted Artificial Sinful Scientific Noisy Greedy Mechanistic Dangerous Fake
Values	Tradition Authenticity Simplicity Centered co-existence Modesty No compromises Harmony Relationship Family Eternity	Science Change Complexity Survival Success Compromises Profit Partnership Business Now

myths and servicing their individual lives. Thus, myths of the past are meaningfully used to serve the present.

Specifically, our findings reveal two major contributions offered by packaging narratives: they empower consumers by providing spiritual rejuvenation and representing an antidote to all the forces threatening to destroy nature. In truth, there may be little that an individual consumer can do about global warming, threats to endangered species, and the proliferation of chemical and genetic uncertainties in the world. But packaging narratives offer a clear and simple symbolic affirmation of values that oppose such ominous trends: buy this product. All these myths are communicated by

**Figure 1** Empowering consumers through packaging narratives.

utilizing archetypal symbols associated with a romanticized past where harmony thrived, relationships were personal, corporate compromises were unheard of, technology had not come to dominate, and families were strong. These myths are offered by the companies to counterbalance the social realities of the contemporary world, that are far from the intimate paradise of an idyllic past and desired future.

When Campbell talked about the meaning of "being mythologized," he explained it by making reference to people: "When a person becomes a model for other people's lives, he has moved into the sphere of being mythologized" (1988, 15). Our study supports this mythologizing mechanism in relation to brands that are being made to exemplify life-motivating models. Similarly to Campbell's interpretation of myths as offering life models, those myths that we detected in the packaging narratives, aim to provide meaningful guidance and become directing agents (Campbell 1997).

From our analysis of these narratives it is clear that myth-making activity engages two major participants—companies and consumers—and that it is the consumer who finishes the challenging postmodern marketplace activity described by Firat and Venkatesh:

Marketing is the major practice in society that consciously resignifies words, terms, and (brand) names. Consider the use of words, such as, "natural," "unique," "individual," and "you!" in the context of representing brand images for products that are used to change

one's "natural" features and convince "individuals" into buying and consuming the same products that millions of others use, yet make them feel "unique" or "you!" (that is, themselves). (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, 230)

It also follows from our analysis that the process of corporate myth making offers consumers the building blocks necessary to make sense of the fragmentary postmodern age (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

As a result of such collaborative myth making, it is becoming increasingly challenging for marketers to craft textual stories that link together the personalities of products (Aaker 1997) to the personalities of those consuming them. The myth of being natural is just one such example. It is created not only by descriptions of the heavenly delicious taste of the product, but also by opposing multiple countermyths. Marketers explicitly or implicitly refer to these countermyths on their packaging. By stating that their foods contain no genetically modified material, they promulgate the countermyth that other brands do. By stressing that they are, for example, "Lundberg Family Farms," they suggest a countermyth that other brands are mechanistic corporate farms and factories. By glamorizing the natural origin of their ingredients, they oppose a countermyth that other brands use artificial components in their products. By simultaneously addressing numerous countermyths in one packaging narrative, marketers offer a multidimensional poetry of packaging that helps their ultimate readers—consumers—finish the myth-making process by subconsciously screening the literary material in a search for desired symbolic cues and by creatively inventing and reinventing multiple myths.

A multiplicity of building material for creating desired consumer myths is what a postmodern consumer arguably needs. These building materials are not the uniform myths of Holt's (2004) iconic brands, the singular brand personalities of Aaker (1997), nor the deep self-transformative myths of Thompson (Thompson and Troester 2002; Thompson 2004). Rather, "mythology is the song. It is the song of the imagination" (Campbell 1988, 22). In the world where "there is no longer a metanarrative, one dominant ideology, philosophy or agenda" and where fragmented and heterogenized markets and consumers rule (Firat and Venkatesh 1993), there is no such thing as a mono-myth regarding nature that marketers can borrow, dust off, embellish, and multiply. As previous studies have demonstrated, to associate the product with the mythical natural world, one consumer may need to envision a grandfather guardian, another a bruised tomato representing the non-GMO natural product (Kniazeva 2002). But as soon as marketers manage to invest their brands—through either advertising or packaging narratives—with multiple seeds that creative consumers can skillfully cultivate into desired plants of their own, the communicative job of the postmodern marketer will be done. The myth-making consumer will take it from there.

Conclusion

By examining the packaging narratives as a means of mythical meaning transfer, our study has focused entirely on the verbal "seeds" disseminated by marketers. But current research suggests there is a necessity for marketers to more holistically recognize that consumers are not just markets and segments, but whole people. Consumers negotiate

their lives while making sense of commercial messages, assert Mick and Buhl (1992) in their meaning-based model of consumers' advertising experiences. As such, they "do not choose brands, they choose lives," concludes the study of consumer brand relationships (Fournier 1998) that defines a brand as consumers' collections of perceptions and a source of added meanings in consumers lives. Moreover, consumers manipulate and hybridize marketer-created brand narratives (Muniz and Schau 2005) and use them to sacralize, individualize, and build brand communities (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). That is why the next logical step should be to examine how the verbal seeds planted by marketers are metaphorically cultivated by consumers.

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