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The making of healthy and moral snacks: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of corporate storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how snack brands represent themselves as producers of healthy food through corporate stories on their websites. The increased emphasis on health in "the new public health era" has created a market for products promoted as healthy or with some kind of wellbeing association. Riding on this trend, many companies have emerged and positioned themselves as providing good food options. Employing the theory of social semiotics and using multimodal critical discourse analysis, we ask the following questions: How do these companies use corporate stories to make themselves appear as a better alternative than their competitors? How do they make their products appear healthy and attractive to consumers? And how can this kind of marketing help consumers choose healthier products? The analysis of 22 corporate stories of healthy snack companies shows that healthy eating is colonized by a moral discourse for marketing and branding purposes. Furthermore, the health qualities these companies claim to have are abstract, symbolic, and commercialized. We argue that these corporate stories provide no meaningful indication as to the healthiness of these products and can mislead consumers to consume less healthy food while having the intention to eat healthily.

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1. Introduction

In many countries around the world, improving peoples' diets, and in turn their health, is on top of the political agenda. This is considered as a way to address the increasing problems of overweight and obesity, depicted as an "obesity crisis," and to minimize health care costs (Patterson and Johnston, 2012). Extant research has shown that this is realized by making health an individual's responsibility (de Souza, 2011; Petersen and Lupton, 1996). Now, in what is termed "the new public health era" (Petersen and Lupton, 1996), health is something individuals achieve through implementing a self-care regime (O'Neill and Silver, 2017; Schneider and Davis, 2010) and through adhering to a generally active lifestyle (Crawford, 2006).

The increased emphasis on health has created a market for products promoted as healthy or with some kind of wellbeing association (Hudson, 2012). Currently, what is sold as "good" and nourishing snacks is the fastest growing food trend in many parts of the world (cf. Griffith, 2018; The Nielsen Company, 2018). New companies with the ambition to gain shares of this market have emerged. Like many other businesses today, these companies position themselves through creating specific corporate stories. Such stories – appearing on the companies' websites and carefully designed using various semiotic materials such as language, visuals, symbols, and colors – provide the brands with an identity to distinguish them from traditional food producers and make their products appear as good and healthy food options. Employing the theory of social semiotics and using multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Ledin and Machin, 2018; Machin and Myar, 2012), in this paper, we critically examine such corporate stories with particular interest in how this positioning is done. How do these companies use corporate stories to make themselves appear as a better alternative than their competitors? How do they make their products appear healthy and attractive to consumers? How can this kind of marketing help consumers choose healthier products? As the healthy snacks market is growing in many parts of the world, the data of this study comprise 22 stories from six countries across four continents.

2. Background

2.1. The new public health era and healthy food

With the new public health era comes a particular morality system, which involves suggestions on how people should live their

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lives (Petersen and Lupton, 1996). Along with this morality, health has become strongly associated with, or even a metaphor for, self-control, self-discipline, and willpower, and, in the end, being a "good" and successful citizen (Guttman, 1997). However, people who do not adhere to these norms of healthiness are easily seen as lacking morals and having a flawed lifestyle (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Unhealthy diet habits then appear as a signifier of weakness, laziness, and lack of drive (cf. Traverso-Yepez and Hunter, 2016; Rao, et al., 2013).

However, health as a concept does not have a "unitary existence" (Radley, et al, 2006: 391), and thus, what is healthy to eat is far from straightforward (de Ridder, et al., 2017; Rousseau, 2012). Within nutritional research, there is consensus about what not to eat in excess, such as processed food, sugar-sweetened beverages, trans-fat-based food, and added salt and sugar, and most official dietary guidelines suggest a varied and balanced diet that includes a large amount of fruits and vegetables (de Ridder, et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it has been proven difficult to specify the exact nutritional elements that contribute to health, and there is little agreement on the exact elements of a healthy diet (ibid). Additionally, one cannot overlook the fact that there is an extensive financial interest in nutritional research, which may have an impact on the research process and how this research impacts the marketing of food (Nestle, 2018). On top of this, previous research shows that people have different ways of perceiving healthiness of food depending on their gender, knowledge, socioeconomic status, age, and individual experience (cf. de Ridder et al., 2017; Iles, Nan and Verrill, 2017; Harrison, 2005).

This ambiguity regarding healthy food and the pressure on people to stay healthy and eat well is what can be exploited by food producers in marketing their products (Ayo, 2012). Using terms such as "organic," "natural," "raw," "low calories," "low sugar," "low fat," "lactose free," and "high protein," producers reformulate their products to appeal to consumers (Finn, 2005). This is done even though such terms can be misleading (cf. Siipi, 2012; Aarset et al., 2004). This vagueness of healthy food allows producers to position themselves as solution providers and emerge as actors doing good for individuals and the society at large.

Importantly, like other forms of consumption, food choices are laden with multiple possibilities of cultural meanings and a way to adhere to a particular lifestyle (Chaney, 1996; Glennie and Thrift, 1992). Food consumption is, as wearing branded clothes and using designer perfumes, a way to show status and group belonging. Food producers can, therefore, appear as offering healthy options as key elements of a winning lifestyle. Discourses on food, indicating what "good food" is, and as Shugart (2014: 261) demonstrates, can be a way to distinguish social classes, especially "to the end of remaking the myth of the middle class." Products claiming to be organic, natural, or protein rich can signal "good food" and as fitting into particular ways of life. For marketers of healthy snacks, such signaling is central, as it is a way to connect these products to certain cultural values and lifestyles and thus fit into particular patterns of consumption.

2.2. Corporate storytelling and "conscious capitalism"

It is against this backdrop we study company stories from food producers targeting the growing market of healthy snacks. Company stories are seen as a powerful and effective way to construct a brand (cf. Laurence, 2018; Stern, 1994). Through such stories, marketers can load symbolic ideas to the brand, which compellingly persuade consumers to associate the company with broader and deeper values that will increase sales potential. Marketing scholars have shown that consumers interpret their exposure to and experiences with brands through company stories (Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote, 2016). Stories can create a narrative transportation phenomenon that activates consumers' imagination and can make them reach a state of detachment from reality (van Laer et al., 2014; Escalas, 2007). It is argued that when story receivers are transported to the story world, their information analytical process becomes narrative-driven instead of being paradigm-driven (Gerrig, 1994). Narrative processing can produce higher product evaluations through lower negative cognitive response and increased realism of experience and allows consumers to interpret the world around them to make sense of it (Gerrig, 1994; Escalas, 2007). Gilliam and Zablah (2013) pointed out the narrative transportation mechanism is especially crucial in decision making and dealing with incomplete information or ambiguity. Using this logic, company stories can affect how consumers perceive and understand the ambiguous concepts of health and food and can influence their food choices.

Previous research has looked at how the food retailer Whole Foods Market (WFM) uses corporate storytelling to appear as a vendor of healthy food (Aschoff, 2015; Ottman, 2011; Chrysochou, 2010; Johnstone, 2008). The WFM claims to be "America's healthiest grocery store" and to keep "an unshakeable commitment to sustainable agriculture" (Whole Food Market, 2018). This brand is underpinned by the creator John Mackey's mission: "He wants the planet to eat better, and he wants to teach other entrepreneurs the secret of 'conscious capitalism" (Aschoff, 2015: 43). The WFM was formed in an era when there was an increasing consensus of global capitalism leading to environmental deterioration and social inequality and mega food corporates contributing to the obesity epidemic. Mackey, therefore, positions his business as a helping and healing company that solves the problems caused by global corporate businesses. As pointed out by Johnston (2008), the WFM allows customers to play the role of "consumer-citizen" and exercise lifestyle politics. Consumers are empowered by the impression that they have the power to shape and drive global value chains through buying organic and sustainably produced products from the WFM. Shopping at the WFM, therefore, means not only eating well for yourself but also doing good for the society, from saving the planet and helping farm animals to ameliorating conditions for poor women in the Global South. The brand is thus benefitting from a "do-good" and "feel-good" ideology (ibid), which allows consumers to achieve distinction through celebrating their autonomous consumer choice and through carefully crafted identities and lifestyle (Turow, 2000; Taylor, 1992). As Aschoff (2015) argues, the underlying idea of the WFM is not merely to offer healthy foods. Associating the brand with the idea of "conscious capitalism" is a way for the firm to gain new customers and make more profits in an increasingly competitive market.

Building on the insights gained from these studies on a single case, we further proceed to more systematically and critically examine how producers of healthy snacks position their brands through corporate stories. Unlike most of the existing research on such stories, seemingly dedicated to finding ways to maximize the marketing effects, this paper discusses the ideology and myths articulated in the stories and the potential social and ethical impact these stories have on consumers' choice of food.

3. Methods and data

This study takes as its point of departure from the theoretical perspective of social semiotics and MCDA (cf. Ledin and Machin, 2018; Machin and Myar, 2012; van Leeuwen 2005). Social semiotics concerns the nature of the relationship among semiotic materials, power, and ideology. Power is seen as transmitted and practiced through the choices of semiotic materials. The analysis looks at how the semiotic materials are used to construct certain ways of understanding the world; for example, how such choices

embed taken-for-granted assumptions and favor particular ideologies.

In this study, we see discourse as "recontextualization of social practice," which is a way to theorize the processes in which particular social practices are realized in representations of these practices (van Leeuwen, 2005; van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). In such processes, aspects of social practices may be excluded or transformed from the discourse. Some aspects may also be added, for example, as purposes and legitimations for certain actions. As a result, some recontextualizations transform much of the actual details of the social practice and create a version of reality. That is to say, representing a social practice in, for instance, texts and visuals inevitably means making choices about how this should be done. Different semiotic materials will be chosen for different purposes, and this is the result of choices that are analyzed. The choices we examine include the lexical choices and how participants, activities, places, times, attributes, and eligibility conditions are represented in the company stories.

The data consist of the websites of 22 "healthy" snack companies globally (Table 1). The analysis mainly focuses on the texts and images used on the company story pages. However, the content on the website is not subject to a particular order or confined to content on a single page. When browsing a website, consumers can easily jump through content on the same page or across pages. We therefore also consider other semiotic materials used on other pages of the websites that act as part of the whole company story. One important concept for analyzing web pages is integrated design (Ledin and Machin 2018). These stories consist of fragments of background, food information, and company practices and values, presented linguistically and visually in separated sections on a page or across pages. The overall cohesion of the stories is achieved through the way semiotic materials are deployed together. This allows fragmented, symbolic, decontextualized information to be presented as logical without the need to explicitly specify the relationships, causalities, and sequentiality that exist between them. In this paper, we will use five company stories as examples to present and illustrate our findings, namely, Oppo, Squirrel Sisters, Beanfields, Nick's, and Leezen.

Table 1
Overview of the data of "healthy" snack companies.

Country Origin	Company	Products
U.K.	Oppo	Ice creams and cheese cakes
	Squirrel Sisters	Snack bars
	Nom's	Popcorns and snack bars
	Raw Halo	Chocolates
U.S.	Beanfields	Chips
	Purely Elizabeth	Granola, oatmeal, and bars
	Hail Merry	Snack bars and popcorn
	RXBAR	Snack bars
	Emmy's Organic	Cookies
	Seven Sundays	Muesli
	Go Macro	Snack bars
	Skratch Lab	Drink mix, candy, snack bars, and cookie mix
New	Zealand	The Healthy Discovery Co.
	Crackers and snack bars	
	Pure Delish	Cereals, biscuits, and snack bars
Nibblish	Baked fruit	
Australia	Loving Earth	Chocolates
	Coconut Magic	Coconut oil, snack bars, coconut butter, and other coconut products
	Cobs	Popcorns and chips
	Thomas Chipman	Chips
Sweden	Nick's	Snack bars, ice cream, sweeteners, drink mix, and pasta
	Njie	Coffee, snack bars, drinks, ice cream, and granola
Taiwan	Leezen	A wide range of daily groceries and snacks ranging from rice, oil, and vegetables to biscuits, jellies, and cakes

4. Analysis

The following analysis is thematically organized. It first discusses the moral discourse strategically created by these companies. This is followed by explanations of how this moral discourse is further reinforced by recontextualizations of businesses as something very authentic, uncomplicated, and friendly. Finally, the analysis concerns how these companies communicate the healthiness of their products to consumers.

4.1. Morally righteous brands

The stories we examine express the companies' good intentions, their will to take on responsibility and to do good for people's health and/or to the society/environment. It appears that these companies are following a particular, but implicit, code of conduct, which distinguishes them from the big corporate food industry. We find good examples of this underlying morality in how Beanfields communicate their care about the future, the environment, and their good relationships with farmers (Example 1).

Example 1 (Beanfields)

"*Over here at BEANFIELDS, we care just as much about how our chips taste as we do about how the future tastes, and so do our bean farmers. [...] ... these farmers know that beans are one of the most sustainable crops to grow. They require less water than other crops and improve the overall soil health. Corn and soy require an increase in fertilizer. Whereas our bean buddies are certified NON GMO*".

Using a rhetorical trope "we care just as much about how our chips taste as we do about how the future tastes." Beanfields demonstrate the care for the product (and thus the consumers) as well as an environmental concern, however, through an abstraction. As the future is something one cannot "taste," the word fills a symbolic function, being a way to say that they want the future to be good. The mental process "care" is thus not linked to any concrete material outcome for the future of the environment; hence, what Beanfields really care about and think is a good future is certainly unclear. While this construction links some positive values to the brand, it obscures the fact that the future (and the care for the climate) is a very complex issue.

Beanfields also foreground their high moral standards by demonstrating their knowledge about sustainable farming, stating as a fact that beans are "one of the most sustainable crops to grow." It follows logically that, with this knowledge, producing bean chips is just the most logical thing. The sustainability is further stressed by adding in capital letters that the beans are "NON GMO." Therefore, in this case, Beanfields argues that its products will not harm the Earth more than necessary and the consumers will, therefore, do something good, not only for themselves but also for the environment when consuming the products. However, here the intricate issue of sustainability is simplified to "require less water," "improve the overall soil health," and "NON GMO" in a questionable way. For instance, research regarding the positive impact on the environment of non-GMO products is, in fact, inconclusive (cf. Mahaffey, Taheripour and Tyner, 2016; Oaim, 2009).

Fig. 1. Beanfields company story page.

The image in Example 1 shows an extract and a male, whom the viewer of course sees as a farmer walking in a green field with two young kids (Fig. 1). Beanfields' sustainable practice is then visually romanticized by the beautified and overly green field, which also communicates an idealized future Beanfields is creating. At the same time, the two young kids symbolize the care and nurture to the future, thus linking to claims made in the text. The image is carefully integrated with the overall design, which helps to support the optimism and care for the future coming along this kind of farming. We see no clear border between the sky over the field and the big open white space in the frame. Moreover, with the green fields running into the horizon and the bright frame, the design seems to suggest the vast potential of the suppliers' ways of growing beans. But what farmers actually do to achieve sustainable farming is omitted and hides Beanfields' role in it for being sustainable. Through this form of integrated design, the story uses and reproduces a myth about the farming in the past, what Kniazewa and Belk (2007: 60) call a "back to nature self-described mission," as a way to show care for the future and separate the company from more industrial and cynical farming. However, these ideas, and thus the underlying morality, are communicated at an abstract and symbolic level.

A similar morality, expressing the care for the future, for farming, and for the environment, as shown in Example 2, is foregrounded in Leezen's story.

Example 2 (Leezen)

"*Leezen believe the benefit of sincerity ultimately comes from achieving mutual benefits hand in hand, not from self-interest. The most peaceful, beautiful and sustainable corporation is from supporting each other and appreciation. Leezen retains such simple and pure heart to treat people and soil. Due to the compassion to the hardship farmer friends experienced transitioning to organic farming, Leezen protected the income of farmer friends through contract planting, joyfully accepted the vegetables and fruits during the transition period, and called like-minded consumers to action, by procuring organic products, to support farmer friends to survive from struggling to make ends meet during the transition years*".[1]

The story begins with the headline "Start from a compassionate heart,"[2] This virtue of being a good company, from taking righteous actions in the production process to enacting a supportive and kind relationship with people, especially with the farmers, characterizes the whole story. The linguistic tone used is formal but soft and characterized by spiritual feel. The phrases "the benefit of sincerity," "mutual benefits hand in hand," "not from self-interest," and "pure heart to treat people and soil" connote Buddhism and suggest high moral standard. It is far from clear what these phrases mean. For instance, what is the "sincerity" about? Being sincere is here turned into a nominalization, which does not say anything about what kind of action this actually is and what does "mutual benefits hand in hand" and "supporting each other" really signify? The story suggests that some kind of unity and harmony between people will lead to a better world. As there is no concrete information how this could happen, this appears to be about keeping a particular (righteous) attitude or spirit.

[1] Original Chinese text: 里仁相信最真實有感的好處, 始終來自攜手互利而非自利: 最靜美長遠的合作關係是彼此扶助感謝，而非成爲相互逐利的競爭者。里仁靜守著這樣簡單的純心，對待人及土地。因爲同感農友轉作有機的艱辛，里仁以契約種植來保障農友收入，並滿心喜樂接納轉型期蔬果，號召志同道合的消費者，以實質購買，一起陪伴農友度過掙扎糊口的轉作歲月。

[2] Original Chinese text: 從一顆慈悲的心出發。

The Leezen story is part of an integrated design, which further promotes the moral righteousness of this company. The content is placed against a light wood color background, and the color green is used across the different elements (Fig. 2). The font of the Leezen logo appears as hand-written, not designed, and has rounded edges. Both color and font choices are connotative of organic and natural. The image, also containing the headline, is coordinated with these different choices. The focus of the image is on a hand holding a tiny bird. The tiny bird signals the fragility of the environment and the hand holding the bird symbolizes Leezen protecting nature and giving them a future. The bird stays on the palm voluntarily and comfortably. This suggests the trust between the bird and Leezen. The bird is not worried about being harmed, which indicates a sense of unity and harmony between nature and Leezen. The overexposed and blurry background suffuses the image with a religious and zen-like atmosphere. This kind of image, as Hansen and Machin (2008: 790) point out, does not just bring morality into the corporate world of branding and consumerism but also brings "a sense of 'philosophy'" to this world. Nevertheless, both textually and visually, the morality stays at a symbolic and abstract sense. The story tells about Leezen's will to do "good," but what the good is and how it actually could be achieved is concealed to the reader.

Another tactic used by these companies to distinguish their businesses from the big corporate world is underlining an othering discourse. They obviously place the own brand on the good side by presenting themselves as humble, ordinary, struggling people who started with "two empty hands," while the profit-driven mega food corporates come across as villains on the other side. The story of the UK-based brand The Squirrel Sisters starts with references to founders' childhood and provides personal details (Example 3).

Example 3 (The Squirrel Sisters)

"We are the Gracie & Sophie Tyrrell... aka The Squirrel Sisters, a nickname which has stuck with us since childhood (Squirrel rhymes with our surname 'Tyrrell' and is much more fun to say!). Coincidentally and perhaps luckily, we also love nuts"!

The personalization occurring here allows consumers to see the brand as "real people," that is, "people who are like us," in contrast with the anonymous corporate face of mainstream brands. The story then goes on with an addition foregrounding the sisters' ordinariness, "[people] connected with our mission and the fact we are two normal girls with a busy lifestyle that want to enjoy life while feeling great."

We find a similar approach in the Oppo's story. The two founders got the idea of inventing Oppo ice cream while traveling to Brazil, where they "had to drag our buggies over 30 miles through mangrove swamps, and subsequently ran out of food." When on the return to the UK, one of them (Charlie) "immediately got into the kitchen and didn't leave for two years (except to sleep on Harry's sofa)." These personalizations and descriptions of simple origin contrast with industrial product development, which would involve huge labor and investment of big capital. This works as an effective quality of morality in which doing good arises out of personal choices. The construction of ordinariness and simple origin also separates the brand from the negativity and blames that have been associated with global capitalism. The ordinariness and simple origin of the founders substitute other qualities that one needs when considering whether a company is moral or not, for instance, ethical issues regarding the supply chain or the welfare of its employees. Yet being ordinary or having a simple origin does not guarantee one will operate a moral business.

Therefore, what we see in these corporate stories is that the brands construct an ideal of conscious and good consumption being a way to counter the increasing critique targeting megacorporations and the unscrupulous global capitalism. The stories create identities for the brands as companies take on responsibility for health and society, a discourse of morality echoing the ideas of "conscious capitalism" (Aschoff 2015). This identity is, as we will show in the following section, further strengthened through recontextualizing the businesses to background that competition and profits are still the defining features of these companies.

4.2. Authentic and friendly businesses

To further differentiate themselves from the corporate world of global capitalism, these brands recontextualize their businesses as something very authentic, uncomplicated, and friendly. In this process, highlighting the context of the kitchen is a means to achieve this. The passage in Oppo's story saying Charlie spent two years in the kitchen developing the product is presented with a picture of him in a kitchen holding a glass as he was smelling or testing the white liquid in it (Fig. 3). On the top of the Squirrel Sisters' story page, a picture of the two sisters looking relaxed and happy and

Fig. 2. Leezen company story page.

Fig. 3. Oppo company story page.

seemingly in the process of making food in a kitchen is placed right below their mission statement (Fig. 4), creating an association that their mission is executed in a kitchen. In Beanfields' story, kitchen has an even more foregrounded status. The story starts with an image of generic participants sharing Beanfields chips in a kitchen with "OUR MISSION" written over it (Fig. 5). The impression that the mission is carried out in a kitchen is emphasized repeatedly. It is stated with the big red capital text "EVERY CULINARY CRUSADE SHOULD START IN A KITCHEN." This phrase contains the presupposition that a "culinary crusade" is something common, something taking place now and then. Then follows the first paragraph of the story (see Example 4):

Example 4 (Beanfields)
"*After all, a proper war on corporate snack foods, shouldn't start in a boardroom by a bunch of pressed suits. Nope. Because it was in the kitchen that we discovered that healthy and tasty can coexist in a bean chip. And so our mission to rid the world of unhealthy snacks began*".

In the following text, it says again that "[i]t all started in our foudners' family kitchen" when they "fired up the oven and baked some bean chips." Kitchen is a setting associated with home and family life, and here it appears in stark contrast to boardrooms or factories of massive industrial production. This kitchen context is also linked to other lexical choices such as "fired up the oven," which points to traditional, small-scale cooking to clearly distinguish this brand's products from industrial production. So, in these stories, the foregrounding of the kitchen setting is a way to load the brands with a range of positive connotations such as homemade, handmade, small scale, and authentic. However, this also backgrounds that these corporations' current production is, in fact, more likely to take place in more industrial settings, as is the case with the production of giant food companies.

Fig. 4. The Squirrel Sisters company story page.

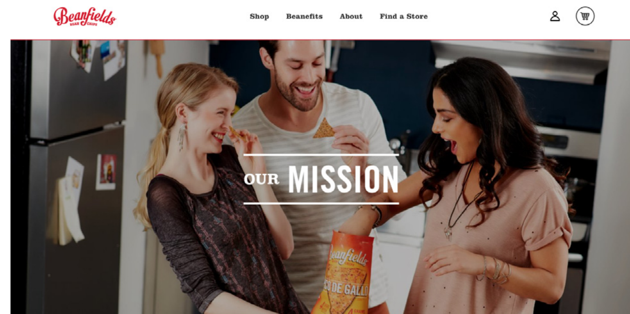

Fig. 5. Beanfields company story page.

The recontextualization of business activities is also achieved by the choices of participants and transitivities. Through the choices of participants, certain aspects of identity and the connotations that come with the identity can be highlighted or omitted. These choices can influence readers to align with or against the participants without overtly stating that this should be the case. Similarly, through the choices of transitivities, what participants are represented as doing or not doing can be given an identity that is not overtly stated. In the case of the company stories we examine, participants who are likely to be involved in a food company, such as businessmen, managers, sales, factory workers, or lawyers, are deleted from the stories. There is also a deletion of activities we normally associate with the development and growth of businesses. Aspects such as market research, negotiations, contracts, profits, and other business decisions and transactions are deleted. For example, Oppo describes their business expansion as "So far Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Finland, and Luxembourg have joined the Oppo family." Using "family" to substitute business relationship signals to a more intimate and warm process rather than the rational, strategic, and scheming associated with the corporate world.

Family is also foregrounded in other company stories. In Squirrel Sisters' story, the reference to family is embedded in the brand name. In the Beanfields' story, as already mentioned, their chips are said to have been invented by the founder's family. Leezen, on their side, say they "wish to become a family with you" and that "farmer friends care the ecology of trees, grass, worms, and birds like cherishing their own sons and daughters; suppliers make every single product as they are making it for their own family." Family is a concept that sits nicely next to the kitchen setting. It reinforces the connotation of homemade and authenticity and establishes a particular relationship with the customers. The link to the idea of the family also favors the products. It appears that these brands convey, as it was made for our own families, it is done with the greatest care. More importantly, it substitutes seller–consumer relationships and allows these brands to approach consumers emotionally.

A striking example of how the seller–consumer relationship is substituted is the image contained in Leezen's story (see Fig. 6). Here we see Leezen, the farmers (depicted as "farmer friends"[3]), visually represented as generic participants. Through their expressions, grooming, and the neat and coordinated clothing, they emerge as a particular, but indistinct, type. Their actions are abstract. The image shows three people holding hands in a circle, floating in the air. Holding hands symbolizes a firm kind of collaboration and the smiles indicate that they are pleased with it. The attributes are rather abstract, as there is no script on what is actually being done to achieve this harmonic cooperation or what is done concerning the complex issues of organic agriculture. Altogether, the generic participants with nontransitive actions serve the purpose of emotive resonance to foreground symbolic moods (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) and work to positively evaluate the discourse of the relationship between vendors, suppliers, and consumers. This kind of representation strategy is similar to the strategies of advertisements, magazine features, and corporate websites. It has the ability to signal to a wide range of lifestyle and emotive associations and shift away from reality. In other words, it is a representation strategy commonly used to appropriate a certain ideology and/or persuade consumption.

So on a surface level, these stories communicate that these corporations are different, that they are the righteous brands, and that they are offering something distinctly different from the cynical profit-driven industrial production causing social and environmental issues. These companies, however, and the way

Fig. 6. Leezen's image on company story page.

they present themselves, might just be a part of the homogeneous structure of "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007), in which "consumption leans on an extraordinarily ruthless economic engine, yet it speaks to the softest crannies of our psyche" (Illouz, 2009: 278). In the next section, we will further this analysis by looking at the claims of these companies made related to health and being providers of healthy and better and good food options.

4.3. Brands of healthy snacks?

An overall claim constructed in these stories, which adds to the morality righteous brand, is their promise to offer a healthier food alternative. These promises, often expressed through a mission-rhetoric, involve high ambitions and emerge as the key motivating factor behind the healthy snack brands. For instance, Nick's presents itself as being "A SWEDISH MISSION TO IMPROVE THE WORLDS' SNACKS", the Squirrel Sisters say they are "on a mission to help people make better and healthier choices more often," and Beanfields' ambition is "to rid the world of unhealthy snacks," Through this rhetoric, companies appear as taking some form of responsibility for peoples' health. Even though this responsibility varies from story to story, it boils down to finding a solution, which includes the consumption of the particular company's "healthy" products. But in most of the stories, what make the snacks healthier than others is far from evident. A broad range of terms are used to describe products and ingredients, and many of those appear to be empty buzzwords carrying connotations, seemingly supposed to appeal to consumers rather than providing relevant nutritious information.

In the extracts described in Table 2, we find examples of statements in the stories regarding the health quality of their snacks. Here, we see words and phrases (underlined in the table) such as "nutritious," "sustainable," "superfood capable of super things," "Non-GMO," "Non-allergen," "Gluten-Free," "vegan," "paleo," "refined sugar free," "100% raw," "local," "organic," "natural,"

[3] Original Chinese text: 農友

Table 2
Extracts related to products' health qualities.

Beanfields	(1) *"It wont end until every last glow-in-the-dark chip, artificially infused food-like-object is extinguished from this beautiful planet, forever and replaced with delicious, nutritious, sustainable chips like Beanfields".* (2) *"WE ARE HUMAN BEANS We know it sounds strange but it's true. We are part bean. Not ALL bean, just the part that's a superfood capable of super things. Because the bean and chips we make from them are everything we expect from our snacks today: Non-GMO. Non-allergen. Gluten-Free".* (3) *"If you care about craft and the world, that Nacho can be vegan too".*
Oppo	(4) *"Fresh milk from meadow-grazed cows, Stevia leaf. Wild harvested virgin coconut oil. A fraction of the calories and sugar found in regular ice cream".*
Squirrel Sisters	(5) *"Our bars fit in with a number of lifestyles such as vegan, paleo, gluten and refined sugar free, and they are 100% raw".* (6) *"They can be eaten any time of the day; pre/post workout, for breakfast, the snack between meals, after dinner as a healthy pudding - they are the perfect guilt-free treat"!*
Leezen	(7) *"Encourage food suppliers to prioritise local organic or natural ingredient, "no adding" as far as possible, reduce repeatedly processing which the industry takes for granted, completely refuse artificial flavouring, chemical food dye and synthetic preservative. Honestly share the safe ad true flavour of real natural food".*
Nick's	(8) *"Had we only focused on the taste from the beginning, we would never achieved the 'close to blood sugar neutral' chocolates we have today".* (9) *"We never add sugar to any of our products. Not now, not ever".* (10) *"All our products are free from wheat and gluten. Not because it's trendy but because wheat turns in to sugar (glucose) very fast in your body".* (11) *"We never use sweeteners such as Aspartame or Acesulfame K".*

"refuse artificial flavouring," "true flavour of real natural food," and "never use sweeteners such as Aspartame or Acesulfame K." Buzzwords like these appear as hollow healthy-equivalent promises. They are problematic, as they can reproduce mythical ideas that could trigger health halo effects (Hartmann and Siegrist, 2016). For example, a product that has no added sugar can still be high in sugar, fat, sodium, or other characteristics that are unhealthy for certain consumers. Previous research shows that while consumers tend to associate natural and organic with healthiness (Siipi, 2012; Aarset, et al., 2004) in fact, both terms can be misleading. Nutrition scientists deny that natural food is distinguishable from conventional food with regard to healthiness (Saher, 2006). This association between naturalness and healthiness is rather to be considered as "magical thinking" (ibid). The term "organic" can also be problematic, as it can be interpreted by individuals in various ways and contexts and is often confused with other terms such as "green," "ecological," "environmental," "natural," and "sustainable" (cf, Schifferstein and Oude Ophuis, 1998; McDonagh and Prothero, 1997).

The extracts listed in Table 2 also contain a considerable amount of presuppositions, which allow untested ideas to be presented as facts. It is simply assumed that food is healthy when vegan, sustainable, raw, paleo, natural, blood sugar neutral, etc. Explanations or any evidence why such features make products healthy is absent and just assumed. An interesting example of such assumptions is when Oppo [Table 2 (4)] describes the key ingredients in their ice cream, saying they use "Fresh milk from meadow-grazed cows." To start with, if the milk is not fresh, should it be used to make any ice cream? And why is milk "from meadow-grazed cows" healthier than other milk when producing ice cream? What is "Wild harvested virgin coconut oil"? No evidence for why this particular coconut oil is healthy is provided. Can virgin coconut oil really be harvested? Coconuts are harvested but are then processed to virgin coconut oil. Furthermore, before Stevia leaf is used in the ice cream, it is likely to be liquefied or powdered. The terms chosen have connotative ability to indicate naturalness and authenticity and then imply the products' healthiness, although there is no such evidence. These lexical choices, of course, serve marketing purposes, but there is no transparency for consumers.

Another example adding to the confusion about health is the story of Beanfields, which says some "super things" in human bodies can be found in beans, and hence Beanfields beans chips are healthy [see Table 2 (2)]. There are a numbers of evident logical flaws in this statement. First, beans might have other components that cannot be found in human bodies and have no benefit to human bodies. Second, having more amounts of the components already existing in the human body may or may not be healthy. Third, if ingredients are broken down to micro-components, there will always be some components that exist in human bodies and are good for humans. Fourth, vice versa, components that exist in human bodies and are good for humans can be found in many other ingredients. So, using Beanfields' logic, almost any food can be classified as healthy. Beanfields here also use nonallergen as a healthiness indicator. However, ingredients that some people are allergic to are not necessarily unhealthy to others, while some people are allergic to certain healthy ingredients. How can they make sure the product is nonallergen for the whole population? These are buzzwords, with no logical reasoning and evidence, connoting an abstract and very vague idea of healthiness in these stories.

In the Beanfields story, visual diagrams play a key role in communicating product quality and the production process. The diagram included in the Beanfields story consists of icons of beans plus a globe plus a fork with leaves, which equals a tick icon (see Fig. 7). What these icons mean is unclear, but the diagram

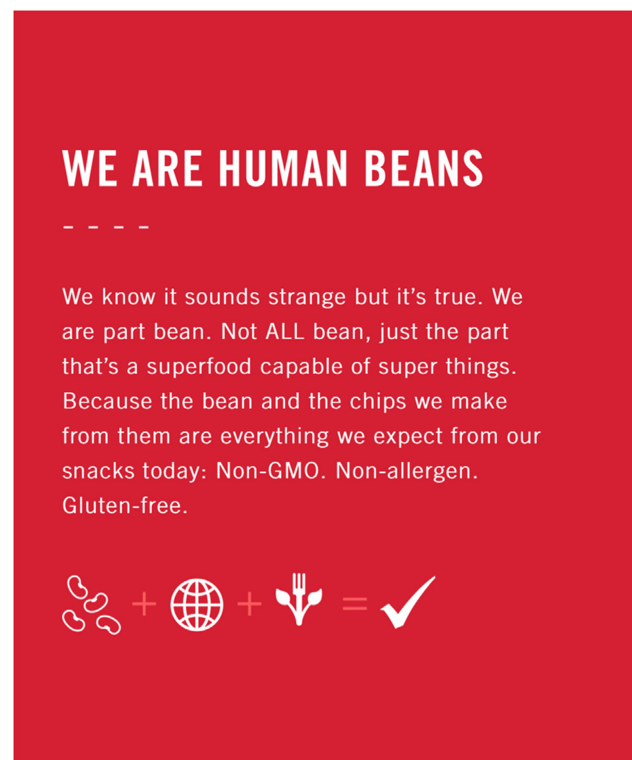

Fig. 7. Beanfields company story extract.

communicates simplicity, breaking things down into extremely basic components, suggesting that the production process as if all parts of the process can be coded, measured, and carefully regulated to ensure a good result. These symbols do not provide consumers with any information from which it would be possible to evaluate the healthiness of the chips. How one element plus other elements lead to the outcome is far from obvious, but what these icons really represent is not important in the communication process. On the contrary, they are designed to be opened to a wide range of interpretations and to allow consumers to fill in the "right" symbolic cultural values consumers feel important and appropriate to them. In this case, placing the diagram below the text consumers can associate the globe and the leafy fork with some sort of environmentally friendly and natural connotation. This kind of integrated design, as Ledin and Machin (2018) have explained, serves the ideology of marketization.

5. Concluding remarks

In the new public health era, consumers' health consciousness has become a pursuit of healthiness that is facilitated by a burgeoning health industry. "Healthy" snacks are products that are created in this context to capitalize on consumers' health consciousness. To achieve this, the healthy snacks companies that we examine position themselves as solution providers of the problems of snacks on the market and create a moral discourse to construct their eligibility. This kind of moral discourse reflects "conscious capitalism" and "citizen consumer." On the one hand, it allows these companies to differentiate themselves from mega-capitalists who are blamed for causing social inequality, environmental degradation, and health-related problems. On the other hand, this discourse makes consumers feel as "good" consumers. It can provide a feeling of being empowered to be a citizen-consumer enacting a more ethical and righteous consumption, which fits with an active and conscious lifestyle typically for the middle-classes in many countries today. The moral discourse is further accentuated through recontextualizing business. Our analysis, however, shows that the discourse of these companies is lacking genuine moral content and fails to identify any substantial health outcomes. The communication strategies these companies adopt are inclined with strategies that are used to persuade consumptions by advertising.

The analysis further looks at the healthy quality these companies claim to have. We argue that the healthy concepts communicated in these company stories are abstract, symbolic, and commercialized. At best, these stories provide no meaningful indication to the healthiness of these products. At worst, they can mislead consumers to consume less healthy food while having the intention to eat healthily. As different from mega-food corporates as these companies claim to be, they simply represent the existing balance of neoliberal capitalist force. This echoes to what Aschoff (2015: 68) has criticized, conscious, eco, green, sustainable, or, in this case, moral and healthy, are used as "a way for firms to speed up growth, speed up their ability to enter new markets, gain new customers, and make more profit."

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors, Ariel Chen and Göran Eriksson, declare there is no of conflict of interest

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