

THE FANTASTIC AND ILLUSORY WORLD OF SPAM®: HOW MARKETING PROMOTES DECEPTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE “FOOD”

JORDAN MacKENZIE

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carla Marie Reid
Department of Religion

Jordan MacKenzie is pursuing a double major in French and Interdisciplinary Humanities, with a minor in Linguistics. He studies chiefly the conveyance of meaning in social discourse through proverbs and propaganda and hopes to pursue graduate studies in Linguistics.

Faced with the consequences of the industrialization of agriculture taken to the extreme, the nature of food itself must be reexamined from various nutritional, functional and philosophical standpoints. This essay gives an introduction to the practical and legal aspects of food marketing in the US and considers SPAM® from multiple angles. Post-modern Marxist thought is introduced to propose the notion that the collusion of industry and greed coupled with general obliviousness has given rise to a repressive state apparatus that has no shame in calling nearly anything “food” and can only be addressed effectively by informed consumers.

In a contemporary context, the basic perceptions of food cannot be appreciated without an examination of marketing and the two domains of what a food product is and what the food industry says it is. This is the central question of this examination, which will also consider the marketing, societal role, and nutritional aspect of SPAM®. Furthermore, a background of the conceptualization of marketing and efforts to regulate food labeling will be established. All of this will culminate in a philosophic consideration of the role of marketing in society and also answer the central question of the research.

What is Marketing?

Surprisingly, the notion of marketing is not wholly monolithic and there exist several conceptualizations of what it entails precisely. According to Darrah, an early 20th century theoretician of food marketing, possible

understandings of the term can be 1) what comes of a product after it leaves the original owner, 2) any change that occurs to a product or, 3) whatever change the product undergoes from the time it leaves the possession of the original owner until it is eventually purchased by a consumer.¹ For this examination, 'marketing' will be taken to entail any change that is made to a product, whether internally or in its form of containment, so as to compel a transaction between a producer or seller and a consumer.

Advertising and Packaging

This examination hinges on two central aspects of marketing: general advertising and packaging. Darrah explains that "packaging, rather than being a necessary evil, is a necessary component of an effective sales program. Good packages protect and display the product, provide convenience in buying the item, and appeal to the customers."² It is important that within any study of food and marketing that the packaging is considered an essential component from the health standpoint, which is also the domain in which the government is most likely to intervene. The Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1938, which replaced the original Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, is the central legislation that maintains that packaging must keep food safe for consumption and demonstrate the actual amount of product being purchased.³ Though this is a broad national regulatory instrument, individual states can make further regulations as they see fit. The legislation of 1936 is still the cornerstone of legislation for food safety and packaging regulations. Yet it has been amended as recently as 2011, when greater provisions were put in place within the broad category of "food safety." Of forty-two sections in the most recent amendment to the original act, ironically only two address food safety issues that could be posed through elements introduced into the food: *sec. 106. Protection against intentional adulteration* (which addresses the threat of food contamination within the context of terrorism) and *sec. 113. New dietary ingredients* (which states that products cannot contain anabolic steroids if their presence is demonstrated as a legitimate risk).⁴ The reasons for which the mention of nutritionally detrimental preservatives and additives has not been included in either section will be delved into later. It reveals an uneasy balance between government and industry, in which industry arguably has the upper hand.

In 1975, Jim Hightower, a consumer rights advocate, maintained that advertising in the United States had become a process whereby the object was in no way to prepare consumers to make informed or educated decisions at the grocery store, but rather to simply have them recognize a brand and buy

it.⁵ According to his assessment, it is rare that advertising reveals much of anything about the product itself. Instead, it relies on a catchy tune or slogan as a means of implanting a product in the public's conscious or subconscious with the aim of achieving greater profits. This underlines the entire

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competitive aspect of the market, as the ability to “win” coveted shelf space in a grocery store often hinges on the demonstrated success of a product, which is

often tied to how it is marketed. Hence, the promotional budget of a product will likely determine its overall success. This system, which Hightower termed the “oligopoly of the shelves,” thus makes it difficult for small companies with low budgets to thrive.⁶ Granted, when supermarkets have tremendous capacities to produce and market their own generic versions of specific brands, it has been observed that, “manufacturers [have] lost control of their brand,” demonstrating that the oligopoly paradigm does have some limitations.⁷ Yet it remains constant in this paradigm that within the large market, small operations are at a severe disadvantage and generally can only “survive” by either consolidation or acquisition by a larger parent entity.⁸

Another central aspect of advertising is the marketing scheme of “tinkering and littering” or “product differentiation,” which entails giving a product the illusion of continued improvement for the good of the consumer but “amounts to little more than frequent and meaningless design changes.”⁹ The impetus of these schemes is a need for continued consumer interest in a product. This makes sense within the construct of the “oligopoly of the shelves”, as any sudden loss of interest or notion of a product as “outdated” could be fatal for the venture. Stores want to stock the shelves with products that will be purchased rapidly, as they too have a vested interest in generating the greatest amount of revenue in the shortest amount of time.¹⁰

Duplicity in Marketing:

Regulation, Health Claims, and “Functional Foods”

Marion Nestle, professor of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University, explains that anything fit for human consumption

undoubtedly has some health “benefit.” Without any strict and honest regulations, various companies create arbitrary claims that are generally logical but so broad as to approach insignificance. Furthermore, Nestle identifies an entire subgenre of “functional foods” created solely with the intent of marketing them according to a health claim.¹¹ She exposes most of these products as having negative consequences for health, yet within the absurd domain of the “lesser evil” they can be quasi-demonstrated to be, *by comparison*, “healthy.”¹² Governmental regulation is the mechanism that can most effectively limit this frenzy of disingenuous marketing schemes. Essentially, the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990 set a precedent whereby virtually any health claim, legitimately substantiated or not, could appear on a label. The law achieved a level of ambiguity that presented consumers with the illusion of healthy products. This clever and obfuscatory process had tremendous benefits for the food industry.¹³ The back-and-forth that ensued between the FDA, USDA and industry served to pit the tremendous power and capital of the industry and its lobbyists against disinterested health experts. One needs only to examine the resulting large-scale deregulation to determine who had the most sway over the final law.

What is SPAM®?

Now that a sufficient background on labeling, nutritional dilemmas, and other basic considerations of marketing has been provided, the examination benefits from delving into the existential comparison of what food is as opposed to what we are told it is. SPAM® is located, in the case of Publix Supermarkets, on the central fifth aisle, along with, as listed on the placard at the top of the aisle: cookies, crackers, canned meats, soups, and candies. Ironically, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, crackers, soups and meats are unambiguously among the top-ten foods that contribute to an excess of sodium in the diet of 90% of Americans. A recent report details that the “average person consumes about 3,300 milligrams of sodium per day, not including any salt added at the table, which is more than twice the recommended limit for about half of Americans.”¹⁴ Essentially, aisle five is a hotbed for the dissemination of salt to American consumers, many of whom are likely being sold some of these products via illusory yet wholly legal health claims.

The three varieties of SPAM® available at Publix will be taken as exemplary cases in marketing, branding, differentiation, and “health” claims. A 12 oz. can of SPAM® costs, as of April 2012, \$2.93. The three varieties in consideration in this examination are SPAM® Classic, SPAM®

LITE and SPAM® *25% LESS SODIUM*. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the labels feature the name of the product in large yellow letters against a dark blue backdrop. SPAM® Classic is actually a bi-lingual reversible tin, the English side featuring a SPAM® burger and the Spanish side showcasing a tin worth of SPAM® that has been scored and spiced so as to resemble a holiday ham. The *LITE* features a salad with lettuce, carrot slices, radishes, and cubes of SPAM®. The *25% LESS SODIUM* features a pasta salad of broccoli, cauliflower, celery, red peppers and SPAM®. The reverse of the reduced-sodium varieties contains a promotion that suggests “Just add SPAM®...Break the Monotony™” and features a grilled cheese sandwich and scrambled eggs to which SPAM® has been added.

The marketing scheme apparent here is not simply the attempt to sell a canned meat product; it is rather the presentation of an entire food context made possible by SPAM® and, as evidenced by just three cans, at least six possibilities as a food item. The trademark, “Break The Monotony™,” even goes so far as to imply a social and personal dimension to the food; it has the ability to give life a new and exciting variety that it otherwise lacks. This social dimension is evidenced in the non-academic novelty book, *SPAM® A Biography*, which dedicates a section to “Meating [sic] the Nonfood Needs of SPAM® Eaters” and features Swiss army knives, phones, flip flops, and even snow globes that in some way incorporate the SPAM® marketing scheme.¹⁵

A pivotal consideration at this point is the branding of SPAM®. As SPAM® is not simply a canned meat *per se*, it could be argued that it constitutes its own category among food types, that of “SPAM®.” Furthermore, due to extensive blending and introduction of non-food elements, SPAM® could also be argued to entail a preliminary “non-food” item.¹⁶ According to the Hormel website,

No single product in history is better known for its heroics during wartime, its accomplishments during peacetime and its popularity during mealtime than SPAM® classic. After more than seven decades in the marketplace, the SPAM® family of products is still the tasty, high-quality kitchen staple made of 100 percent pure pork and ham that the world has come to know and love... The SPAM® family of products are great for yesterday, today and tomorrow. Give it a try, and find out why.¹⁷

It is abundantly clear that this is not simply a product, but a vital facet of US and global culture. By consuming it, individuals are given the highly polished impression that they are figuring into something bigger than themselves. SPAM® is not so much a canned meat product as an indispensable

component of a complex social environment that invokes a shared human experience. Even the SPAM® website in this respect does not emphasize the food, but rather creates an alternative reality in which the product almost occupies a subliminal place among pop culture references, social media, and electronic games.¹⁸

Refocusing on the product itself, SPAM® is arguably the epitome of the modern convenient food. It is lightweight, portable, does not expire until three years after canning, and according to the label is “fully cooked, ready to eat-cold or hot” and can be fried, baked, microwaved, or grilled. Hormel describes SPAM® Classic as “The Miracle Meat of a Million Uses.”¹⁹ This marketing scheme, coupled with virtually no generic store brand competition, promotes product recognition and accounts for the longevity of the product in the market

Nutritional Content of SPAM® and the Absurdity of “Differentiation”

In *Spam® A Biography*, which takes a pre-emptive apologist/novelty platform, the section on “What’s in there” states, to the point of absurd comedy:

Perfectly rectangular, pansy pink, soft and mushy, Spam is like nothing found in nature. No wonder people are nervous about its ingredients—a nervousness that comes out in joking speculation that it contains ‘everything but the squeal.’ The truth is that by modern-day packaged food standards, Spam has a very short, and not at all scary, ingredients list.²⁰

Notwithstanding the radically altered aesthetic and moral system conveyed, one must consider why a product would have to make justifications for the ingredient content. Directly to the left of the word “SPAM® Classic” the seemingly innocuous enumeration of “Pork with Ham, Salt, Water, Potato Starch, Sugar, Sodium Nitrite” appears. Interestingly the two differentiated varieties both contain this slightly altered set of ingredients: “Pork with Ham, Mechanically Separated Chicken, Water, Salt, Modified Potato Starch, Sugar, Sodium Phosphates, Potassium Chloride, Sodium Ascorbate, Sodium Nitrite.” Ignoring the fact that a product selectively marketed as pure pork indeed contains chicken, it is evident that the reductions of sodium have been accomplished through the introduction of even more non-food items. Hence one arrives at a strange consideration of what is “healthier”: a product ridden with salt or a differentiated version with less salt but even more preservatives? This recalls Nestlé’s argument of “lesser

of two evils.” When personal health is at stake the most informed decision seems to be forgoing both products, yet when ignorance of the detriments of sodium and excessive preservatives is coupled with a tight budget, a bad choice is inadvertently going to be made as the vast majority of affordable products made available by the industry contain large quantities of both.

Though the three tins of SPAM® are marketed using very different schemes, a quick glimpse at their nutrition facts labels reveals they are, largely, the same product. SPAM® *LITE* proclaims on the label, “50% less fat 25% less sodium 33% fewer calories...than SPAM® classic.” Yet, in marking the difference of the product against the standard version of the product, what is established about nutrition independent of arbitrary comparison? It is as if SPAM® Classic has been accepted as the standard and because differentiated varieties cut back on their respective salt content they are, by natural consequence, healthy. Of course Hormel Foods is in no way brazen enough to explicitly suggest a health claim; however, words such as “less” and “fewer,” used in the branding of SPAM® products, implicitly suggest a parallel to a healthy diet.²¹ The sole difference between SPAM® classic and 25% *LESS SODIUM* is the sodium content, which as explicitly stated on the bottom of the label, “has been lowered from 790 mg to 580mg.” Thus, a 2 oz. serving contains just 24% of the recommended DV of sodium as opposed to the original 33%.²² The rationale for loading foods with salt is itself quite explicit. In the words of an anonymous expert in the industry, “The more sodium you add-and it’s cheap to do that-the more you help the flavor.”²³ In reducing the salt content of a food already saturated with it, the industry is able to maintain the extended shelf life and flavor of a product and appear concurrently to conform to official standards of health. Because of this system of obfuscation foods like SPAM® occupy a realm in which illusions of tasty, convenient food and nutrition collide and are readily accepted by a public hypnotized by marketing.

Philosophic Appreciation of the Question of Marketing and Existential Consideration of Food

Though on the surface wholly unrelated to the subject of food production and marketing, the philosophy of Louis Althusser, a French structural Marxist, provides a supplementary perspective to the purely nutritional and economic assessment of SPAM® presented thus far. In his formulations of ideology, discourse, and repression, every individual has an imagined relationship to reality, which is in turn embodied in a collective ideology

of the entire society. By extension, ideology itself is an entire structure of disparate representations, which does not find a basis in reality but is nonetheless imposed on society. A similar assessment of his theory states that for him, “ideology comprises the stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time, into which we are born, in which we grow up, and in which we live, think and act.”²⁴ Above all ideology is conveyed through what seems manifest, what is regarded as common sense. In the final assessment, ideology is simply a means of making sense of the world. To this end it is suitable to conceive of food as another form of ideology, especially in a context in which the nature of food, as defined by illusory and duplicitous marketing, bears no resemblance to what food actually is. Yet, as revealed within this examination, several constructs working in concert maintain within collective ideology the notion that ground-up animal protein mixed with a plethora of chemicals and placed into a can is food.

Should the question “but how?” arise, a suitable explanation is also provided in Althusser’s assertion that ideological apparatuses exist as a means of reinforcing ideologies, whether they be logical or completely inane.²⁵ As marketing appeals to social conformity and vague notions of nutrition, it necessarily serves as such an ideological apparatus and effectively reinforces discourse that allows for the continuation of social and economic dominance by manufacturers of food items such as SPAM®. The dominant apparatuses in the American food supply are evidenced by the types of products for sale in the grocery store. This is a reflection of cultural hegemony, itself another means of reinforcing discourse. The marketing of food is also an effective tool for building on cultural assumptions, reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies, and maintaining monopolistic schemes.

Personal assessment of the question

Hightower, the consumer rights activist, wrote in 1975 that declines in the food system were present and even more were on the horizon. He said cleverly, “It is not that food firms are trying to produce bad food. Rather they are *not* trying to produce *good* food.”²⁶ Food is just one half of what should be an intensely personal and meaningful relationship. When industrial agriculture and mechanized food production is coupled with notions of nutrition that wholly contradict common sense, food becomes nothing more than sludge hardly fit for human consumption. This unholy union requires a degree of spiritual and social revolution whereby the dignity of man and his food is reclaimed. Thus the repressiveness of inauthentic marketing that

holds up the immoral food producers would be thoroughly exposed as a scam. Duplicitous marketing creates a world of wonderful yet tragically false images. However, this illusory world is annihilated every time an informed consumer decides not to buy into that scheme. Food is what we make it and what we say it is. SPAM® is thus only food if we actually accept such a ridiculous notion.

- 1 L. B. Darrah, *Food Marketing* (New York: Ronald, 1967) 5-8.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 242
- 3 *Ibid.*, 241-242
- 4 Public Law 111-333, §§ 106-113 (2011).
- 5 Jim Hightower, *Eat Your Heart Out: Food Profiteering in America* (New York: Crown, 1975) 112.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 124-125
- 7 Paul Roberts, *The End of Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) 51.
- 8 Roberts, 264-265
- 9 Hightower, 122
- 10 Hightower, 124
- 11 Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002) 315.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 333
- 13 *Ibid.*, 250-260
- 14 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Press Release: Nine in 10 U.S. Adults Get Too Much Sodium Every Day," http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2012/p0207_sodium_food.html, 18 April 2012.
- 15 Carolyn Wyman, *Spam: A Biography* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999) 53.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 1
- 17 Hormel Foods SPAM® Family of Products, "Our Brands," <http://www.hormelfoods.com/brands/spam/default.aspx>, 18 April 2012.
- 18 Spam®, <http://www.spam.com/>, 18 April 2012
- 19 [hormelfoods.com](http://www.hormelfoods.com), 2012.
- 20 Wyman, 33
- 21 Nestle, 39
- 22 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012
- 23 Roberts, 49
- 24 Luke Ferretter, *Louis Althusser* (London: Routledge, 2006) 75-77.
- 25 Ferretter, 82-85
- 26 Hightower, 74