Branding Beef: Marketing, Food Safety, and the Governance of Risk

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Abstract: This article situates brand-based marketing within broader processes of risk communication. Over the past few decades, branding has become more pronounced in the Canadian beef industry, due in large part to structural changes that have placed greater emphasis on marketing and promotion as ways of responding to and managing consumer concerns. Government-mandated levies on the sale of livestock provide funds for these initiatives, blurring the line between industry and government support for agricultural commodities. To illustrate, I examine the Alberta beef industry’s branding initiatives prior to and following the BSE-inspired trade ban. These campaigns negotiate messages about risk by enhancing the links between beef consumers and small-scale producers while rendering opaque more complex processes of industrialization and globalization.

Keywords: Risk communication; Advertising; Food safety

In July 2003, at the “Molson Canadian Rocks for Toronto” benefit concert for severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Albertan and other Canadian beef
producer organizations sponsored “Canadian Beef Rocks,” where free beef was served by political officials and beef industry spokespersons to concert attendees. The aim of the concert was to demonstrate that, despite being placed under a SARS advisory by the World Health Organization, Toronto was a safe place to visit. The event was also an opportunity to show domestic and international consumers that, despite a recent case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Alberta’s cattle herds, Canadian beef was safe to eat. As former Agriculture and Agri-food Minister Lyle Vanclief commented, “We are feeding the hungry music fans, but, more importantly, we are promoting the safety and quality of our beef” (Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, 2003).

Both BSE and SARS highlight the ways in which global trade and transportation create new challenges for the governance of risk. Pathogens that might previously have been contained within national borders can now spread globally. Moreover, as the public demonstration of the safety of Canadian beef attests, in export-driven commodity markets such as the beef industry, domestic and international consumer perceptions are central concerns. Although this is true for commodities in general, it is particularly salient in the politically charged context of food safety (Leiss & Nicol, 2006; Phillips & Wolfe, 2001). While some food safety issues affect individual companies, which can in turn respond by recalling or redesigning their products, other issues, such as the threat of BSE in beef, can compromise entire industries, as well as the communities that rely on these industries. The “Oprah crash”1 in 1996 provides a stark reminder of the effect consumer perceptions can have on food commodity markets.

This article locates branding as an increasingly central strategy for the governance of consumer perceptions of food-related risks such as BSE. Although a great deal has been written about BSE in relation to risk communication (for example, Adam, 2000; Berg, 2004; Frewer & Salter, 2002; Jasanoff, 1997; Leiss & Nicol, 2006; Leiss & Powell, 1997; Phillips & Wolfe, 2001; Ratzan, 1997; Wynne & Dressel, 2001), attention to contemporary marketing practices within this literature is notably absent. This is somewhat surprising, given the range and scope of contemporary analyses of the extent to which promotional activities have expanded in recent years and opened up aspects of everyday life to the “age of branding” (Klein, 2000; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007).

Drawing from Moor’s (2007) argument that branding is a way in which culture is mobilized for the purposes of governance, this paper situates the branding of beef within broader processes of risk communication. To illustrate, I examine the Alberta beef industry’s branding initiatives prior to and following the BSE-inspired trade ban in Canada. These campaigns represent the most sustained branding efforts to date by Canadian beef producer organizations.

As a marketing strategy, branding is used widely by fast-food corporations. The Wendy’s “Where’s the Beef?” campaign, with the feisty Clara Peller’s demands for bigger beef burgers, provides a popular example. Beef producer organizations differ from their corporate counterparts because they receive financial support from government-endorsed and -regulated check-off programs or levies. These programs take a certain amount of money, anywhere from $1 to $3 per head, from the sale of domestic and imported livestock to support product promotion, consumer educa-
tion, and monitoring, as well as product development. These campaigns warrant critical attention because they signal a deepening convergence between industry and government promotion of agricultural commodities.

**Consumer perceptions of risk: The case of BSE**

Increasing public awareness of environment- and health-related issues, coupled with a decline in public confidence in regulatory institutions, has emphasized the need for government and industry to respond to and govern consumer perceptions of risk, particularly in relation to food and agriculture (Miles & Frewer, 2001; Phillips & Wolfe, 2001; Verbeke, Frewer, Scholderer, & de Brabander, 2007). Generally speaking, risk refers to the potential for physical harm, as well as the perception of harm. Risk, in other words, is both a material and social phenomenon. Modern societies are characterized increasingly by risk, as well as by a heightened awareness of risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). Although science-based accounts approach risk as a calculable entity, the concept of risk is also freighted heavily with cultural meaning and moral significance (Douglas, 1992; see also Leslie, 2006, on SARS and risk discourse).

Rapid scientific and technological developments in food production over the course of the past century, combined with advances in global trade and transportation, have brought new challenges to the governance of food-related risks. These transformations have raised food output, but they also have profound social and environmental consequences. Most significantly, these developments have introduced entities into the food chain that both pose the potential for harm and increase the perception of harm. BSE, E. coli 0157:H7, dioxins, hormones, antibiotics, and melamine, to name just a few, are now familiar entities circulating in global industrial food chains and sparking public concern. Public concern over the safety of food is related to a general decline in consumer trust in regulatory systems, as inadequacies in these systems are exposed routinely to public scrutiny (Frewer, 1999; see also Greenberg & Elliott in this issue). Consumers do not always trust the information provided by government and industry, particularly in light of recent retractions of claims reassuring the public of the safety of the food system. Consumers are also increasingly suspicious of biased or self-serving claims: “[I]f the public believe that governments work closely with industry, which may be seen as possessing a vested interest in putting forward a particular point of view, trust in regulation and legislative controls may be reduced” (Frewer, Howard, Hedderly, & Shephard, 1996, p. 474). Risk perception among consumers is a major factor affecting food choice, as assumptions about heightened risk usually result in the active avoidance of a given food item. Risk perception is also tied intimately to the media accounts of food scares that have become a recurrent feature of contemporary public discourse in North America and Europe. Ambivalence concerning food, scientific uncertainty over emergent toxic and infectious agents, as well as intensive media coverage serve to amplify food-related concerns (Beardsworth, 1990). Whether or not consumer perceptions of risk are reasonable, they present communication challenges for government and industry.

The case of BSE in the U.K. illustrated the importance for both government and industry of addressing consumer perceptions of food-related risk. In the U.K.,
BSE differed from other health-related hazards such as genetically modified foods, hormones, or toxins due to the manner in which information was provided to the public (Frewer & Salter, 2002). The shift in government discourse from its initial claim that beef is safe to the public declaration in March 1996 that beef can spread a fatal disease to humans resulted in increased public concern, not only about the food chain, but also about government and industry commitment to protecting public health. In the week following the media publicity concerning the possible link between BSE and its human variant, beef consumption in the U.K. fell by almost 40% (Cade, Calvert, & Barrett, 1998, in Frewer & Salter, 2002). Although the U.K. government responded accordingly by implementing appropriate controls on the feed chain, they were unable to deal with the communication demands placed upon them. BSE opened up the regulatory apparatus to the “unaccustomed glare of the public arena” (Frewer & Salter, 2002, p. 137). Key decision-makers became acutely aware that government policy, particularly around issues of food safety and public health, could quickly transform into highly politicized arenas due to public scrutiny and distrust.

Sheila Jasanoff (1997) uses the term “civic dislocation” to describe the unprecedented breakdown of communication between British citizens and their public institutions immediately preceding and following the public announcement of the link between BSE and its human variant, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD). The legitimacy of public institutions depends on meeting the public’s need for credible reassurance. The mismatch between what citizens expected their governmental institutions to do for the public and what they did in reality lead to a dislocated state, where trust in the government vanished and people turned to other institutions (supermarkets, media, restaurants) for information and advice. At least temporarily, the loss of trust resulted in public disengagement from the state. In contrast with the government response, the food industry responded quickly and effectively to restore consumer confidence, with gestures that went significantly beyond the government’s repeated reassurance claims. The supermarket chains Tesco and Sainsbury’s, for example, issued detailed fact sheets outlining the precautions taken to monitor beef production: “[O]ffered under private auspices, and without the constraints of legal and political accountability, these policies nevertheless appropriated the look and language of public monitoring and enforcement programmes” (Jasanoff, 1997, p. 224).

The discovery of BSE in Canada’s beef herds did not trigger the same degree of public outrage or concern as in the U.K. during its BSE crisis. Canada was the first country to increase beef consumption after reports of domestic cases of BSE. Moreover, Canada’s beef industry, as well as its broader regulatory institutions, did not suffer the public crisis in confidence over the efficacy of regulatory institutions that the U.K. experienced after its BSE fiasco.

Why did similar instances of civic dislocation not appear in Canada? The most straightforward explanation is that Canadian consumers accepted the government and beef industry assurances that the risk of contracting BSE was low. To date, 13 cases of BSE have been discovered in Canadian herds since the first domestic case was confirmed in May 2003. Thus far, no cases of the human variant have been traced to Canadian beef. The risk management strategies of the fed-
ERAL AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEEN, FOR THE MOST PART, PROACTIVE. THESE INCLUDE REGULATORY CHANGES SUCH AS FEED BANS, ANIMAL TRACKING PROTOCOLS AND TESTING FOR BSE, AND FEDERALLY AND PROVINCIALY FUNDED ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS, AS WELL AS NEWLY ESTABLISHED RESEARCH NETWORKS. NATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF BSE IN CANADA ALSO MAY HAVE BEEN A FACTOR, AS BSE WAS FRAMED MORE AS A TRADE CONCERN THAN A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE (BOYD, JARDINE, & DRIEDGER, 2007). THESE MESSAGES WERE-supported by a range of efforts from public officials, beef industry spokespersons, food industry representatives, and food activists who encouraged beef consumption openly and actively as a way to support the struggling beef industry. LEISS & NICOL (2006) SUGGEST THAT THE INCREASE IN CONSUMPTION IS RELATED TO THE PUBLIC’S LOVE OF BEEF OR THEIR DESIRE TO SUPPORT THE FARMING SECTOR. OTHERS HAVE ATTRIBUTED THE RISE IN CONSUMPTION TO THE SUCCESS OF HIGH-PROFILE MEDIA AND ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS SPONSORED BY THE BEEF INDUSTRY (NATIONAL BEEF INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT FUND REPORT, 2007).

THE CONSOLIDATION OF EFFORTS TO PROMOTE BEEF CONSUMPTION IN THE FACE OF ONE OF THE MOST PUBLICIZED AND DREADED FOOD SCARES IN RECENT DECADES WARRANTS ATTENTION. MY AIM IS TO SITUATE BRANDING INITIATIVES AS A SIGNIFICANT FORCE IN NEGOTIATING THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH BSE AS WELL AS IN FOSTERING CONSUMER SUPPORT FOR THE BEEF INDUSTRY. I AM NOT CLAIMING THAT INDIVIDUAL ADVERTISING INITIATIVES INFLUENCED CONSUMER REACTIONS DIRECTLY, BUT THAT THE BRANDING INITIATIVES BY THE ALBERTA BEEF PRODUCERS CONTRIBUTED TO AND HELPED CONFIGURE A BROADER DISCOURSE WHERE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CONTEMPORARY BEEF PRODUCTION IN CANADA WERE DOWNSIZED.

**BRAND-BASED MARKETING AND THE BEEF INDUSTRY**

Branding has a long history as a commercial practice, developing from the early use of brands to mark property and ownership. Although brands themselves are not new, in the past few decades, branding initiatives have transformed into an integrated approach to marketing and business. Recent scholarship positions brands as a key cultural force as well as an important vehicle of globalization (ARVIDSSON, 2006; DU GAY & PRYKE, 2002; LURY, 2004; MOOR, 2007). Brands differ from advertisements in that they are not simply images attached to commodities; rather, as CELIA LURY (2004) DESCRIBES, THEY ARE COMPLEX COMMUNICATION DEVICES THAT FRAME EXCHANGES ACROSS DISUNIFIED AND DISPARATE TIMES AND SPACES. IN ESSENCE, BRANDS CREATE RECOGNIZABLE PATTERNS OF INFORMATION THAT STRUCTURE BROADER SYSTEMS OF MEANING AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS. MOREOVER, BRANDS INCREASINGLY PLAY A PRODUCTIVE ROLE IN GLOBAL ECONOMIES. VALUABLE COMMODITIES IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, BRANDS ARE A DEFINING FEATURE OF GLOBAL ECONOMIES, AS THEY PLAY A ROLE IN STRUCTURING THE COMPLEX FLOWS OF TRANSCONTINENTAL EXCHANGE. NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES EXPAND THE SCOPE AND RANGE OF CONTEMPORARY PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES, AS CONSUMER MONITORING AND DATA COLLECTION ARE LOOPED BACK INTO PRODUCTION PROCESSES AND MANAGEMENT DECISIONS. BRANDING IS NOT LIMITED TO THE DESIGN, PROMOTION, AND CIRCULATION OF CONSUMER GOODS; IT FACTORS INTO A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES, FROM URBAN REGENERATION TO SOCIAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS AimED AT PROMOTING HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES (MOOR, 2007). Charities, governmental departments, cities, and even countries increasingly make use of brands to enhance visibility and competitiveness in global marketplaces, as well as to govern the conduct of citizens.
With respect to beef, branding has two interrelated definitions. Branding livestock with hot irons dates back at least 5,000 years (Mollerup, 1997). These early brands marked ownership, as the owner’s insignia was literally burned into the animal, a practice that continues in ranching communities to this day. Efforts to use brands to inscribe cultural meanings, rather than simply indicate ownership, gained momentum in the nineteenth century, due in large part to technological developments in the packaging and transportation of mass produced goods. Manufacturers associated images, or logos, with their products, enabling differentiation from their competitors as well as providing a way to assure consumers of the origins of products. As Naomi Klein describes, competitive branding was necessary within the context of mass production. In order to create value and consumer recognition of particular products, “image-based difference had to be manufactured along with the product” (2000, p. 6).

Branding is part of a wider context in which culture is used strategically, not only for the purposes of commercial activities, but also for the purposes of governance (Moor, 2007). Liz Moor situates branding within a broader cultural framework characterized by neo-liberal economic and political policies, in which deregulation and free trade are priorities, and where many areas of activity that were considered previously the responsibility of the state have been left to market mechanisms or transferred to non-state organizations. According to Moor, the meaningful patterning of information that brands make possible is a form of governance because it provides a way of organizing experience and perception in line with strategic ends. Brands make use of culture to govern consumer activity in two ways. First, they harness the productive potential of ideas, values, and aesthetics in an attempt to shape the perceptions, feelings, and behaviours of target audiences. Second, brands work on and through the ongoing production of common social worlds by embedding themselves into existing webs of meaning.

Moor’s claim that branding operates as a form of governance is applicable to understanding how perceptions of risk are negotiated, particularly in the context of the beef industry. Although branding efforts have historically been an integral component of the food industry, used to create product differentiation as well as enhance product recognition with consumers, these efforts can also be understood as playing a role in the governance of consumer perceptions of risk. Brands can operate as powerful agents in establishing consumer confidence by bridging the gap, at least symbolically, between production and consumption. In other words, branding renders the complex global and industrial processes of modern beef production into familiar, palatable, and consumable images. The increasing complexity and reach of global food systems have disconnected consumers from food production processes (McMichael, 2000). These gaps have consequences for the ways in which consumers perceive food commodities, as well as the ways producers and regulatory institutions build relations with consumers. The gap between consumption and production is particularly pronounced in the beef industry. Many people who consume meat do not participate in the raising or slaughtering of livestock; rather, they purchase ready-cut or prepared meat. Cultural differences also tend to exist between urban consumers and rural livestock producers, as “city dwellers” often do not share the same moral,
economic, or political concerns as their rural counterparts. Indeed, mitigating consumer concerns about beef production has been a central focus of the beef industry since its inception (Brom, 2000; Verbeke & Viane, 2000). Since the formation of the Chicago Union Stock Yards in the late 1880s, the beef industry has needed to address concerns about meat that is processed and packaged at a distance (Cronon, 1999). Moreover, since the publication of Upton Sinclair’s muckraker account of the beef industry in 1906, the news media, as well as activists, have alerted consumers consistently to the possibility that lax government regulations might be jeopardizing meat supplies (Friedberger, 1994). Government and industry have responded historically by establishing regulatory bodies, as well as by implementing informatics and labelling systems to reassure consumers of the safety and quality of beef production.

The promotional activities of beef producer organizations signal a relatively new strategy for negotiating consumer perceptions of risk. These efforts have been made possible by structural changes in the beef industry in response to declining domestic sales of beef, as well as by the implementation of government-mandated levy programs in both Canada and the United States. Whereas beef was once the meat of choice in North America, since the 1970s, it has seen a steady decline due to concerns over the health, environmental, and ethical implications of red meat production and consumption. In the 1990s, the North American beef industry responded to declining beef sales by restructuring (Wachenheim & Singley, 1999). Overall, the food sector is characterized by large-scale concentration and centralization, with a general trend toward vertical integration (Lang & Heasman, 2004). Restructuring in the beef industry occurred later than in other food industries, as the beef industry has been divided historically into two relatively incompatible sectors: the agricultural sector, consisting of small-scale producers (farmers and ranchers), and the agribusiness sector, comprising feed lots, slaughterhouses, packing houses, chemical industries, marketing divisions, and retail outlets. Vertical integration has enabled closer relations at all levels of the beef industry between agriculture and agribusiness, as well as between the industry and consumers.

Check-off programs increase the resources available for fostering consumer relations, including marketing research and branding campaigns. In the United States, beef producer groups have a pronounced national presence, representing the largest sector of the nation’s food and fibre industries. National check-off legislation was implemented in the mid-1980s, with the passing of the Beef Promotion and Research Act and the Pork Promotion, Research, and Consumer Information Act. Unlike in the United States, in Canada beef producer marketing has, until recently, been focused provincially as opposed to nationally. It was not until 2001 that a national beef check-off program commenced in Canada, when the Canadian Beef Cattle Research, Market Development and Promotion Agency formed under the federally operated Farm Products Agencies Act.

The Alberta Beef Producers marketing campaigns are noteworthy, as these campaigns represent the most sustained efforts by Canadian beef producers to brand beef. Alberta is the centre of Canada’s beef industry, and it was the site of Canada’s first discovered case of BSE. A year after its inception in 1969, the
Alberta Beef Producers began collecting fees from cattle sales in Alberta to help fund the organization, whose primary mandate at the time was to serve as a lobby group to promote the interests of provincial cattle producers at a federal level. In the late 1980s, this organization began its first major marketing initiative, with the launch of the ranchers campaign, which ran from 1988 to 2001. The second campaign ran from 2002 to 2007, for the duration of the BSE crisis in Canada. Although these campaigns were not created as a direct response to BSE, they nonetheless played a role in configuring a broader discourse regarding the processes and practices of beef production in Canada.

**Alberta ranchers brand beef**

The Alberta Beef Producers began their first major marketing campaign in 1988, concurrent with the Winter Olympic Games in Calgary. This campaign consisted of a series of photographs, postcards, and billboards featuring three cowboys leaning on a wooden fence in front of a mountain range, with the tagline “If It Ain’t Alberta, It Ain’t Beef.” Hayhurst Communications, a Calgary-based advertising agency, was hired to develop the campaign (Cope, 2004). The Olympics provided an opportunity for the organization to showcase its industry, particularly for international consumers. By 2000, following a public-opinion survey, the Alberta Beef Producers’ marketing division decided to revamp and modernize the ranchers campaign on the grounds that the male cowboy was an outdated stereotype. “Modernization,” in this sense, meant replacing the male ranchers with female “ranchHERs” [sic]. Similar to their male counterparts, the female ranchers appeared in traditional cowboy outfits, in front of an open range with the mountains as a backdrop. This new campaign, created by the internationally renowned advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, had a more systematic and strategic approach than its predecessor, as it integrated consumer reactions through focus groups and opinion surveys.

As a representational strategy, both ranchers campaigns extend culturally salient images that resonate locally, nationally, and globally. The cowboy image, combined with the incorrect grammar of the tagline, play on stereotypes of the province to differentiate Alberta beef from other beef products. These campaigns draw on Calgary’s reputation as a rural, relatively unsophisticated “cow town,” an image fostered and reproduced annually by the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. As journalist Michael Janofsky (1988) described to the readers of *The New York Times*, the Stampede is a “ten day party of rodeo events and folks wearing Wild West get-ups.” These campaigns deploy the internationally recognizable icon of the cowboy, which travels across spaces, conveying certain values (independence, strength, courage, trustworthiness) as well as assumptions about beef production comprising rugged, hard-working, honest individuals (Willard, 2002).

The ranchHERs campaign differs from the first campaign, however, in two important respects: the women are personalized and they are active spokespersons for the beef industry. Their biographies are posted on the Alberta Beef Producers website as a testament to the authenticity of the characters. Erin Butters is a fifth-generation rancher who is also studying psychology at university, Patti Scott is a mother of two and fourth-generation rancher who owns and operates a cow-calf ranch, and Lenore McLean is a wife, mother, and grandmother with over 60 years
of experience on the ranch. Each rancher represents part of an intended message about the beef industry. Erin suggests that the beef industry is fresh and innovative. Since she is an organic farmer, she represents a different mode of agricultural production. Patti is a mother and caretaker; she represents the maternal, caregiver aspects of the industry. Lenore represents tradition, as a producer who has been in the industry for years. These women also served as active spokespersons for the beef industry during the course of the campaign. Most significantly, following the BSE trade ban, they voiced their support for the beef industry in rural and urban communities across Canada. In 2003, they served beef at the SARS benefit concert in Toronto. In 2004, a postcard mailing campaign was launched in conjunction with Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Over one million postcards were sent to Alberta consumers to express gratitude for supporting the beef industry. The women were not simply represented by their images in photographs; they engaged the public actively by making public appearances, sharing recipes, and serving beef at high-profile events.

It bears emphasizing that “modernization” in the context of the ranchHERs campaign meant transforming the gender of the producers. It did not alter the representation of small-scale, cowboy-style beef producers. This shift in gender is most likely an attempt to address and incorporate a range of cultural changes without altering the brand strategy significantly. The original ranchers campaign, unfortunately, bears a striking resemblance to Leo Burnett’s brand marketing of Philip Morris’ cigarettes. Launched in 1954, the Marlboro Man and subsequent Marlboro Country advertisements were the longest-running ad campaigns in history (Klein, 2000). The Marlboro Man is an entity in his own right, topping Karlan, Lazar, & Salter’s (2006) list as the most influential person “who never lived.” The deaths of former Marlboro models Wayne McLaren in 1992 and David McLean in 1995, the growing public concern over the links between smoking and cancer, and films such as Michael Mann’s The Insider (1999) make the Marlboro image a problematic branding strategy for commodities such as beef.

The Alberta Beef Producers campaign kept its branding strategy intact, however, while transforming it along gender lines. This is a significant shift, as red meat has been portrayed historically as “man’s food,” both in terms of its consumption and production. Masculinity has been historically ubiquitous in the symbolic association with red meat. For centuries, it was believed widely that the consumption of animal flesh would endow people with masculine traits (strength, aggressiveness, violence, power, and lustfulness) (Adams, 1990; Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Fiddes, 1992; Lupton, 1996). By the late 1970s, in large part due to the feminist, peace, and animal rights movements, as well as growing awareness of health and environmental issues, women, more than men, became increasingly concerned about red meat consumption (Lupton, 1996). As a demographic, female consumers favoured symbolically less potent meats, such as poultry and fish, or, following the burgeoning vegetarian movement, eschewed meat consumption altogether. The failure of the Australia Meat and Livestock Corporation’s “Feed the Man Meat” campaign is indicative of shifts in the cultural meaning of meat (Lockie & Collie, 1999; Lupton, 1996). Launched in the mid-1980s in response to the declining demand for red meat, this campaign’s
focal point was a television ad with a young boy running to his working-class home for dinner. The family sits down to roast meat, with a jingle in the background: “feed the man meat.” Although it deployed all the necessary appeals (catchy jingle, cultural associations), the ad failed to capture consumer attention, because the social context had changed, “rendering those signifiers of patriarchal masculinity, stereotypical gender roles and a ‘good hearty meal’ . . . of declining relevance to those consumers who had reduced their consumption of red meat” (Lockie & Collie, 1999, p. 255). The campaign was replaced with ads and recipe cards that emphasized how red meat could enhance the lifestyles of modern consumers, particularly female consumers. The more successful second campaign portrayed red meat as contemporary: sophisticated, convenient, and part of the meal rather than the meal itself. Around the same time, beef producer groups in North America also began modernizing their campaign strategies. For example, in the mid-1990s, the United States National Cattlemen’s Association released a series of ads depicting cattle producers who had traded their John Wayne image for that of a modern, technologically savvy, commercially oriented, and networked producer. This new cowboy used modern technology to produce safe beef, while at the same time upholding traditional values such as hard work and integrity (Willard, 2002).

“Modernization,” in the context of the second ranchers campaign, meant shifting gender, not changing representations of production. The replacement of male beef producers with female producers is consistent with food advertising in general, which tends to target White, middle-class women (Parkin, 2006). In this regard, it has quite conservative representational strategies compared with other consumer products that reflect shifting consumer demographics and pay closer attention to the particularities of race and class niche markets. Food advertisers reinforce traditional gender roles by entrenching the “world of food preparation firmly in the hands of women” (Parkin, 2006, p. 14). Food production, in this case, is extended from the kitchen to the ranch. The ranchers branding strategy differs from the use of female personalities to brand commodities, such as Aunt Jemima or Betty Crocker, because the ranchHERs, like their male counterparts, are actual agricultural producers. As described by the Alberta Beef Producers website, the ranchHERs campaign reflects “the contribution made by women to Alberta’s ranching legacy as well as women’s role as primary household food purchasers” (Alberta Beef Producers, n.d.). This campaign draws attention to a demographic that Caroline Sachs (1983) refers to as the “invisible farmers.” Although women’s work has always been integral to farming, women are seldom represented as agricultural producers, farmers, or ranchers.

A similar campaign, entitled “Aisareru (desire) beef,” was launched in Japan in 2002 (Ono, 2002; U.S. Meat Export Federation, 2002). This campaign is noteworthy as it deploys a comparable marketing strategy. Japan is the United States’ largest export market. Following announcements of domestic cases of BSE in Japanese cattle herds, regardless of industry assurances of safety, Japanese beef consumption dropped significantly. The campaign, funded by the United States Meat Export Federation, delivered messages of safety, taste, and nutrition to Japanese consumers. It featured photographs and biographies of three American
wives and mothers who work in the beef industry and who presumably share the concerns of Japanese women about the safety of the meat they serve their families. For example, one television ad features a California cattle breeder, Abbie Nelson, who appears on horseback, describing to viewers the care she takes in raising her cattle. In the next scene, she is at home, adding the final touches to a beef stew. The tagline of the campaign is “Beef that you can trust for your loving family.” In addition, Yu Hayami, a noted celebrity as well as a wife and mother, appeared in print and television ads, made public appearances, and released a beef cookbook.

Both the ranchERs and Aisareru campaigns extend the gendered representation of food production from the kitchen to the field. The women raise, prepare, and provide recipes for beef. They engage with consumers as images, as well as through recipes, interviews, and public performances. They not only portray small-scale beef production techniques—they perform them. No machinery or complex technology is represented by these performances; agriculture, rather than agribusiness, is the focus of the marketing.

Although the Alberta ranchers branding initiatives enhance the links between beef consumers and local, small-scale producers, particularly female producers, they also render opaque more complex and contentious processes of industrialization and globalization that have altered Western Canadian agricultural practices dramatically. As the Canadian population urbanized increasingly, the population of rural communities fell dramatically. Food production increased, however, as chemical fertilizers, as well as larger and more efficient machinery, enabled farm operations to become more productive and efficient. This, in turn, increased the cost of running farms, as most farmers had to rely on off-farm income sources or on increasing the size of their operations (Skogstad, 2005). Although these transformations have been taking place for the past 50 years, they have become more pronounced over the past few decades, particularly in Western agricultural sectors, due in large part to the turn toward neo-liberal trade agreements that have fostered rapid expansion, consolidation, and globalization. Relative to agribusiness, agriculture lost its economic and political influence. Farmers’ economic and political bargaining power decreased as a result, forcing farm organizations such as the Alberta Beef Producers to form alliances with corporate agribusiness in addition to their relations with small-scale producers. These transformations resulted in new political actors, most notably agribusiness representatives and commodity groups that benefit from global agricultural markets (Skogstad, 2005). Unfortunately, these benefits have not been distributed evenly. Small-scale producers and rural communities have been disenfranchised increasingly by neo-liberal globalization (see Epp & Whitson, 2001, for a more detailed discussion). Moreover, small-scale beef producers bore the burden of the BSE-inspired trade closures disproportionately. Although these trade bans have lifted, provincial and federal governments and the Canadian beef industry continue to promote and foster export-driven beef commodity markets, as well as neo-liberal economic policies.

Brands play a role in structuring a growing range of social, economic, and political activities, including the negotiation of consumer perceptions of risk. The
branding efforts of beef producer groups are noteworthy, particularly because these organizations are supported by government-endorsed levies on the sale of livestock. Although government support for the promotion of agricultural commodities is not new, check-off programs signal a deepening integration of industry and government efforts. By enforcing a mandatory collection of fees from the sale of livestock, check-off programs provide financing for sophisticated marketing initiatives by livestock producer groups. As Ian MacLachlan emphasizes, with meat advertising, no assurances are made about sanitary preparation, nutritional value, or fat content. Instead, we are offered commodities for sale via “simple declarative visions: dinner and the sizzle” (2001, p. 314).

In Canada, the branding initiatives of the Alberta Beef Producers contribute to a discursive terrain where the risks associated with contemporary beef production in Canada are downplayed. By appropriating a range of cultural images, from the cowboy to female food icons to the family farm, the Alberta Beef Producers ranchers campaigns configure an image of what it means to produce beef in Canada. The ranchers, both male and female, embody the Alberta beef brand, conjoining production and consumption in a way that makes the brand tangible, meaningful, and personable. These campaigns brand beef not only with the faces and personalities of beef producers, but also with their bodies and connections to the land. The ranchers are, in essence, living testimonies to the simplicity of the province’s beef production processes, where agriculture, not agribusiness, is the focus.

These branding efforts may explain, partially, why beef consumption in Canada increased after a domestic case of BSE was discovered. These branding efforts operated in conjunction with a range of efforts by government and industry. In 2003, following the trade ban on cattle, the government, the beef industry, and the media actively encouraged citizens to consume more beef as a way to support beef producers. While the public health risk of BSE was not substantial, perhaps more significantly, the government failed to communicate the risks associated with beef production in an export-driven, global economy. As William Leiss & Anne-Marie Nicol highlight, Canadian government officials “failed to identify and manage the single most serious risk to a specific segment of the Canadian public, namely, the risk of economic catastrophe—and its attendant social consequences” (2006, p. 894). In 2003, the consequences of finding even a single case of BSE in a domestic herd were catastrophic for small beef producers, as Canada was bound by strict international food safety policies. These risks were not communicated, either to consumers or producers. Rather, the dominant message from both government and industry was that Canadians should support small-scale beef producers by consuming more beef. The dominant public representation focused on traditional forms of agricultural production, rather than on the more complex and contentious transformations in agribusiness practices. Ranchers are indeed an integral and important component of the beef commodity cycle, but they are a small, and increasingly vulnerable, sector of the entire industry. They also bear a disproportionate percentage of the costs and risks associated with export-driven beef markets.

The Alberta Beef Producers package the image of the small-scale, traditional rancher for domestic and international markets. Their newest campaign, “Raised
“Right,” continues to promote beef production as small scale and traditional, embedded in local communities. A website dedicated to the campaign provides videos of beef producers, drawing viewers into the daily operations of beef production. Caitlyn McLean, the granddaughter of rancher Lenore McLean, is also scheduled to appear in this campaign. Her presence links the Alberta beef brand even more profoundly within embodied representations of family farming.

Arguing that branding plays a role in the negotiation of the risks associated with beef production in Canada in no way suggests that people are manipulated or “duped” by these branding strategies. We inhabit information-rich environments in which the realities and problems associated with industrial globalized livestock production are exposed routinely and made available for public consumption. Moreover, brands do not always work in the ways intended by those who create them. This does not mean that the implications of branding should be overlooked, however, particularly in the politically and emotionally charged contexts of food safety. Branding, as Liz Moor argues, is part of a wider context in which culture is used strategically for the purposes of governance. Our engagement with brands not only reflects our tastes, but also our ability to make sense of broader public discourses. By appropriating existing cultural meanings and values, brands play a role in making particular configurations available and meaningful, integrating them into ongoing discourses of everyday life.

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Notes

1. This term is used by industry analysts to describe the effect Oprah Winfrey had on the beef market. On the “Dangerous Foods” segment of her broadcast on April 16, 1996, upon learning that cattle feed contained ruminant protein, she proclaimed that she would never eat another hamburger. This comment sparked a major decline in beef contracts in Chicago cattle futures, triggering the Texas Cattlemen’s Association to sue Oprah for causing a substantial devaluation of beef.

2. Statistics Canada (2004) reported a 5% increase in disappearance rates of beef in the year following the BSE trade closure. BSE did not alter supermarket or restaurant beef purchase patterns in Canada substantially, unlike the case in the U.K. (Maynard, Goddard, & Conley, 2008). Consumers reacted most likely in a variety of manners: some stopping the purchase of beef and some reducing beef consumption, while others increased beef consumption as a show of support for ranchers.

3. The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association is the marketing and trade organization for United States beef industry. Check-off funds support the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s “Beef: It’s What’s for Dinner” campaigns; this is often cited as one of the most recognized taglines in American marketing.

4. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, these portrayals warrant more attention. What are the implications of the complex intertwining of gendered, racialized, and classed representations of beef producers when viewed in the context of risk governance? What role does the White female body play in negotiating perceptions of risk, particularly in international food markets?

5. Both campaigns downplay the presence of agricultural technology. This campaign did not appeal to everyone. As Dave Riley (1992) describes, in rural Australia, where people are “not renowned for subtle language,” a popular bumper sticker emerged on automobiles around the same time: “Eat more meat, you bastards. Ten thousand dingos can’t be wrong.”
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