Myth Busting: Living in Harmony with Nature is Less Harmonic than it Seems

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This paper explores a pervasive yet little explored myth that underlies much marketing theory and practice: living in harmony with nature. While previous research typically presents “harmony with nature” as something consumers can easily find by returning to a benevolent “Mother Nature,” the current research problematizes how “harmony with nature” is discursively constructed in contemporary advertisements.

Methodology/approach: This paper traces the visual genealogy of contemporary advertising imagery to explore different discursive constructions of the harmony myth. Over 600 advertisements published in Backpacker magazine between 2007 and 2009 form the database for this research.

Findings: Drawing on a more nuanced understanding of the organic framework of nature, and representations of nature in the artistic genre of Romantic landscape painting, the current research finds that divergent images of an “Arcadian” and “Dynamic” nature give rise to different constructions of harmony that are fraught with tension. Harmony might be as easily lost as it is found, or it might never be achieved at all.

Originality / value of paper: This research shows that living in harmony with nature is less harmonic than it seems. It extends previous research that adopted an implicitly unproblematic un-
derstanding of finding harmony in nature by uncovering nuances and contradictions within con-
temporary manifestations of the harmony myth. Implications for marketers and for our under-
standing of the human/nature relationship more generally are offered.

Keywords: advertising, art history, harmony, myth, nature, Romanticism, visual genealogy

Classification: Research paper
The relationship between humans and nature is a central yet often unrecognized component of much marketing research and practice. One of the most influential conceptualizations of the human/nature relationship is the longing for harmony between humans and nature. This “harmony myth” is almost ubiquitous in marketing practice. For example, the Toyota Prius is promised to bring “harmony between man, nature, and machine” in a commercial that shows how the Prius breathes new life into a winter landscape made out of children. Similar to how Toyota employs the harmony myth to position the Prius as an environmentally sustainable product, consumers also draw on the idea of living in harmony with nature in their pursuit of environmentally sustainable lifestyles (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). However, the harmony myth is not limited to the domain of sustainable consumption, but influences many other economic sectors such as natural health (Thompson, 2004) or tourism (Waitt and Cook, 2007) and underlies other theoretical concepts and issues such as experiential service encounters (Arnould and Price, 1993), consumer fantasy enactments (Belk and Costa, 1998), and the ideologies of technology (Kozinets, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of the harmony myth in marketing theory and practice, what it means to live in harmony with nature has remained largely unexplored. Previous research that thematicizes consumers’ quest for harmony with nature (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Thompson, 2004) typically traces the harmony myth to a rather undifferentiated conceptualization of nature as a benevolent mother and, as a result, presents the longing for harmony with nature as a relatively unproblematic affair. However, even though the aforementioned Toyota commercial suggest that harmony with nature is just a matter of choosing the
“right” car, it is clear that living in harmony with nature is not as easy as it seems. Instead, the harmony myth is rather fraught with inherent paradoxes that arise from the fact that all consumption must have some impact on nature, from the idealization of certain images of nature, and the experience of natural forces that impact and sometimes threaten human life (Cronon, 1996).

In order to better understand the complexities and paradoxes of the harmony myth, the current research analyzes how the myth of harmony between humans and nature is discursively constructed through the ways in which advertisements visually represent nature and the relationship between humans and nature. In particular, this paper focuses on two variations within the broader organic framework that both conceive of nature as a living, organic entity, but diverge in their interpretations of the “personality” of nature. In the “Arcadian” image of nature, which comprises classical (e.g., Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being) and Christian motifs (e.g., the Garden of Eden), humans live in harmony with a passive and calm nature by virtue of divine design. A second variation of the organic framework is presented in the “Dynamic” image, in which nature is seen as both an active, nurturing, and benevolent Mother Nature, and also as a violent, disruptive, and fiercely competitive force that threatens humans. By tracing how these two variants within the broader organic framework underlie marketing communications, this paper offers a more detailed view of the socio-historical context of the harmony myth (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) that uncovers nuances and complexities of what it means to live in harmony with nature.

The remainder of this article first explains the differences between Arcadian and Dynamic variations within the organic framework of nature, and how these two images of nature give rise to different manifestations of the harmony myth. This environmental historic framework is then complemented with an art historical discussion of how both images of nature are
reflected in the genre of Romantic landscape painting. The resulting visual genealogy (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004) serves as a lens to explore how contemporary advertisements discursively construct how harmony can be found, achieved, simulated, and lost in nature.

**Harmony Myth**

The contemporary longing for harmony with nature can be traced back to a revival of pre-modern, organic views of nature during the Romantic movement (Lafreniere, 2007; Pepper, 1996; Thompson, 2004). In the organic framework, which guided humans’ understandings of and interactions with nature up to the Renaissance, all things were seen as permeated by life. As Merchant (1990, p. 100) describes, the “Renaissance cosmos was a living unit, of which all parts were interconnected in a tightly organized system.” This pervasive animism created a relationship of immediacy with nature, in which nature was seen and treated as another human being.

Images of nature as a beneficent, receptive, and nurturing Mother Nature loom large in the organic framework, and they also dominate consumer research that explicitly or implicitly explores Romantic images of nature (Arnauld and Price, 1993; Belk and Costa, 1998; Thomson, 2004). This is not to say that alternative images of nature do not emerge in previous research; however, these are not discussed or developed in detail. For example, Arnauld and Price (1993, p. 34) note that “beliefs about the enduring power of nature and humans’ vulnerability to immeasurable natural forces” complicate river rafters’ quest of achieving a harmonious communion with nature. Likewise, Thompson (2004) discusses how anxieties about technology, expressed in the revenge-of-nature trope, call for a Romantic return to nature. In both cases, the concept of nature is reduced to the image of a benevolent, maternal force, while revenging and dangerous aspects of nature remain unexplored.
A more in-depth study of environmental history (Lafreniere, 2007; Merchant, 1990; Pepper, 1996) allows researchers to account for these conflicting and complicating images of nature. In particular, this paper focuses on how two variations within the organic framework, called “Arcadian nature” and “Dynamic nature”, give rise to differing manifestations of the harmony myth. While both of these images carry connotations of nature as a benevolent mother, they differ sharply in how much they emphasize the threatening aspects of an active nature.

The Arcadian variation within the organic framework idealizes nature as a benevolent nurturer and provider while downplaying its dangerous and threatening aspects. This view of nature is associated with a longing for a Golden Age in which life was easier, more plentiful, and peaceful. While it might be evident that this view of nature became popular during the Romantic Movement in response to the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, longings for a return to an unblemished Golden Age have existed throughout the Middle Ages and the Classical Age as well. For example, Roman writers glorified a life close to nature over that in crowded cities, and Renaissance artists such as Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin gave expression to pastoral idealization of nature by painting mythical landscapes of innocence and calm repose (Herlihy, 1980; Hughes, 1980; Pepper, 1996). Wild beasts, thorns, and other dangerous forces of nature were purposefully omitted in these paintings in order to emphasize the nurturing aspects of nature and to idealize nature as a Garden of Eden: a quintessentially calm and peaceful place, where humans can escape the ills and anxieties of the hectic urban life and find psychological and spiritual renewal (Merchant, 1990, 1996).

Harmony, in the Arcadian tradition, is thus an intrinsic property of the natural world, one that is missing in the crowded cities but that can be regained by finding one’s way back to nature.
Humans can find spiritual nourishment in a garden-like landscape in which all beings and nature more broadly are in harmony with each other by virtue of God’s design. However, while the Arcadian tradition presents nature as a benevolent, nurturing mother, it also presents nature as a “subordinated and essentially passive” (Merchant, 1990, p. 9) entity that can be plowed and put into service for human desires for food and spiritual nourishment.

The Dynamic conceptualization of nature carries images of a benevolent Mother Nature as well, but it also emphasizes the opposing image of a wild and uncontrollable nature that can render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos (Herlihy, 1980; Merchant, 1990). During much of the Middle Ages, nature was seen as an adversary to humans, and a deep seated fear of wild nature persisted for centuries. For example, up until the Great Clearing of forests in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, human settlements in central Europe were isolated islands in a sylvan sea, and people were fearful of forests that were seen as the enemy of man and the habitat for hobgoblins and demons. In the early fourteenth century, a combination of soil exhaustion, wood shortages, and climatic changes gave rise to general and recurring famine, which further reinforced human fears about the destructive and malevolent forces of nature (Bowlus, 1980). Nature is thus “strength and gentleness hewn as one” (Merchant, 1990, p. 7): enchanted, sacred, and a nurturing maternal force, but also bewitched and capable of destroying human life.

This view of nature as a benevolent yet dangerous force has implications for how harmony with nature is conceptualized. In contrast to the intrinsically harmonic nature of the Arcadian tradition, harmony in the Dynamic tradition is contingent upon one’s proper interactions with Mother Nature. Merchant (1990, 1996) describes how the dialectic view of nature as a nurturing mother and a potentially fierce force gave rise to normative constraints against mining.
For example, Roman author Pliny warned against mining the depth of Mother Earth as these violations of ‘her body’ would summon nature’s destructive force in the form of earthquakes, and up to the Early Modern Age miners observed strict sacred rituals before sinking a mine. Harmony with nature, therefore, is not unilaterally found in a passive, idealized, Edenic landscape, but achieved through respecting nature’s will and fearing nature’s force.

In sum, both Arcadian and Dynamic images of nature adopt the main tenets of the organic framework in conceptualizing nature as a living, benevolent, and nurturing entity; however, they differ to the extent to which they recognize nature as an active and destructive force in addition to these peaceful images. Recognizing these variations of the organic framework extends our understanding of modern manifestations of the harmony myth. In the following section, this environmental historic framework is extended with insights from art history to explore how contemporary advertisements draw on Arcadian and Dynamic images of nature. This environmental-art-historical framework serves as a lens to explore the complexities and paradoxes of the harmony myth as discursively constructed by contemporary advertisements.

**Visualizations of Nature**

I draw on the concept of a visual genealogy (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004) to analyze how visual images in contemporary advertisements construct a discursive space that both enables and constrains consumers and producers in their negotiations of what it means to live in harmony with nature. A visual genealogy posits that recognizing the influence of art-historical traditions on contemporary advertisements can provide insights into the meanings and strategies of a brand (Schroeder, 2006). In much the same way, a visual genealogy can be a useful tool to explore how contemporary advertisements shape broader cultural notions like the harmony myth.
A visual genealogy suggests a resonance between contemporary advertisements and historical artworks. For example, fashion photography for CK One draws on stylistic elements of the group portrait established in Dutch paintings during the sixteenth century (Schroeder, 2006). While it is possible that creatives and advertisement executives have one particular painting in mind when devising an advertisement, a conscious imitation of a particular painting is not the only way in which contemporary advertisements are influenced by previous artists. Rather, the overall system of art historical conventions provides stylistic references that influence contemporary images both directly (e.g., through artistic training and the cultural capital of specific images) and indirectly (e.g., through artists' influence on the cultural system that informs our interpretation of the world).

One basic step in a visual genealogy is to place advertisement image(s) in an art genre that offers a historical context for interpreting the ads. The genre of Romantic landscape painting offers a suitable interpretative frame because it focuses on depicting nature and the relationship between humans and nature (Cox, 1988; Pepper, 1996). Furthermore, the modern emphasis on living in harmony with nature was established during the Romantic Movement, and thus artistic expressions during this period are especially important for understanding how the harmony myth is discursively constructed in contemporary advertisements.

While no single genre cannot exhaust the genealogical influence upon contemporary advertising images (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004), considering different styles within one particular genre allows for a deeper understanding of the nuanced differences in the discursive constructions of the harmony myth. For this purpose, the styles of two of the most representative painters of their age, John Constable and Joseph Mallord William Turner, are contrasted in the following.
Both artists explored Romantic ideals of harmony with nature in their paintings. Yet, especially later in their careers, they portrayed their subject matter in distinctively divergent styles (Rees, 1982) that can be set in relation to Arcadian and Dynamic variations within the organic framework of nature. Through contrasting these different styles of Romantic landscape painting, a theoretical vocabulary concerning the visual construction of nature can be developed, which in turn can guide interpretations of contemporary advertisements in the following section.

Constable was a naturalist painter who sought to produce detailed and accurate representations of streams, fields, and other features of the natural terrain. Inspired by earlier painters of pastoral and nostalgic Arcadian landscapes such as Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin, Constable’s paintings emphasize the harmony and the spiritual qualities of nature. His images depict scenes of calm repose, from which all threatening expressions of nature are banished. The weather is always fair, or showery at worst, and the landscape is veiled in the calming light of a late summer afternoon. Nature is harmonic by virtue of a divine design, and so are humans’ interactions with nature. Signs of human civilization (such as fields, hedges, barges, and houses) are “as integral to the landscape as the trees and the streams” (Rees, 1982, p. 261), and human are shown in distance and indistinct from the surrounding landscape, thereby emphasizing the harmony between nature and man (Barrell, 1980; Cox, 1988).

In contrast to Lorraine and Poussin, Constable depicted humans as laborers in the countryside. However, as for example seen in one of his main works, The Haywain, the laborers are shown without toil and without being engaged in a struggle with nature (Cox, 1988; Pepper, 1996). Constable’s style of Romantic landscape painting, therefore, remains an expression of the rural tranquility of the Arcadian landscape; a harmonious place in which humans can rejuvenate
and replenish their souls and psyche from the ills of urban and modern stresses. Constable’s paintings harken back to a Golden Age in which humans and nature lived in harmony, and for the Romantic enthusiast as well as many consumers today, going back to nature is connected to the promise of finding the harmony that had been lost in modernity.

Turner, on the other hand, was more interested in the forces that governed nature. To express these forces, or as Piper (2004, p. 321) remarked, to measure “the mood of nature,” Turner emphasized color and light over forms, and, later in his career, denied individual identity to different objects in his paintings altogether. He focused on mountains, seas, and atmospheres, and most often these were depicted in a style of violent motion that portrayed the mysterious and often threatening cosmic energies of nature. Turner’s maybe penultimate work, Snowstorm, presents a vortex of wind, snow, and water that draws the observer into the violence of natural forces and thereby plays with instinctive human fears of an uncontrollable nature (Hirsh, 1974). It is “a picture of being in a storm, not a view of one” (Rees, 1982, p. 267). In those paintings that include human figures in the scene, such as The Shipwreck or Calais Pier, humans have challenged nature’s force by going out to sea and in return are dominated by the elemental forces of nature. However, men are not mere passive hostages to natural forces, but they struggle back and try to survive in active postures that counterbalance the whirling movements of the sea (Gatt, 1968; Toth, 2010).

In sum, while Constable drew on Arcadian images of nature and strived to visualize the harmony between humans and nature that exists due to a divine plan, Turner drew on Dynamic images of nature and visualized the struggles between human and natural forces (Pepper, 1996;
These different images of nature are also represented in contemporary advertisement, to which I turn next.

**Findings**

This paper explores how Arcadian and Dynamic images of nature result in different manifestations of the harmony myth by analyzing advertisements that appeared in *Backpacker* magazine between 2007 and 2009. *Backpacker* magazine, one of the leading publications targeted at outdoor enthusiasts, is chosen as a context for this research because advertisements in this magazine frequently feature images of nature. While the back-to-nature trope of the Arcadian tradition is one of the core tenets of outdoor enthusiasts, experiences of nature that are collected during backpacking, hiking, and mountaineering trips do not always conform to the Arcadian ideal of a benign and peaceful nature. Sometimes, enjoying the outdoors means struggling with dangerous natural forces – such as storms, floods, and animals – that can threaten human life. Hence, Dynamic images of nature exist next to Arcadian ones in the backpacking context, and both images are expected to influence the visual components of advertisements.

Over 600 (half-page or larger) advertisements that included images of nature were collected in a dataset and interpreted in light of the theoretical framework derived from environmental history and art history. In a first step, all images were coded in descriptive terms (e.g., “clouds”, “mountains”, “storm”, “car”, “Marmot”) as well as in regard to how much they exhibited concepts that were derived from the environmental and art historical discussion above (e.g., “domination”, “struggle”, “threat”, “force”, “Arcadian”). In a second step, these concepts were aggregated into three different themes that highlight internal contradictions and paradoxes within three different discursive constructions of the harmony myth.
A first theme, which reflects the Arcadian tradition, presents harmony with nature as something that humans will find immediately and without difficulties once they leave behind their normal lives in civilization and return to nature; however, this version of harmony also carries with it the potential of dominating nature. A second theme, which reflects the Dynamic image of nature, presents harmony as a precarious achievement created in a struggle between humans and an active nature, but it also demonstrates that harmony might not be achieved at all. A third theme combines Dynamic and Arcadian images of nature and thereby complicates the quest for harmony even further in that harmony is simulated on an island of civilization from which wild nature is banished.

**Theme 1: Finding Harmony in an Arcadian Nature**

A large percentage of advertisements portray an Arcadian nature by adopting style elements that resemble those of Constable and other naturalist landscape painters. Although skies are occasionally dark or foggy, these advertisements predominantly show a calm nature free of any threatening expressions. The observer gazes, from the outside, onto humans (or anthropomorphized products, such as cars) who show no sign of distress or toil. These images (and often their accompanying texts) harken back to a lost Golden Age that can be found if civilization is left behind just far enough. By entering nature, humans find harmony with nature instantly and without effort.

One advertisement for Wyoming as a travel destination (*Backpacker* issue 2008-08, p. 51, see http://tinyurl.com/harmonymyth1 for original ad) presents a nice example of how nature is portrayed as intrinsically harmonic and peaceful. In this advertisement, naturalist influences are visible in the close attention to details in the landscape, the horses, and the riders. Furthermore,
mountains, tree-line, grass, and river are clearly differentiated from each other in an ordered composition, and the riders and their horses move through the sunny and calm day without any signs of strain or toil. By being in nature, the riders not only find harmony in their union with their horses and in the presence of a pristine and magnificent landscape, but they are also transported back in time to the Golden Age of “the West.” While their gaze is turned over their left shoulder towards something outside the picture, possibly the civilized world they leave behind, the riders’ reflections in the water show them as Indian and Mountain Man who ride without a saddle and whose gaze is directed towards the mystical past they are approaching. The ease of transition to the Golden Age of the West emphasizes how in this theme, harmony with nature is found effortlessly by leaving behind civilization and returning to an idealized, calm nature.

However, this version of the harmony myth is not without its contradictions. Merchant (1990, p. 9) observes how nature in the Arcadian tradition is presented as a “subordinated and essentially passive” entity that can be put into service for human desires, and this tendency can be indeed observed in how the Arcadian version of harmony can sometimes conceal how nature is in fact construed as a commodified resource. For example, different natural regions (e.g., advertisements for Utah or Montana as a travel destination) are said to have a greater harmony-value than others, or they can provide all kinds of different activities. Nature is commodified into a playground, where humans can get instant gratification and of which they can always have more.

The ways in which Arcadian imagery conceals how nature is easily commodified and exploited is especially apparent in an advertisement for Subaru (*Backpacker* issue 2009-11, back cover, see http://tinyurl.com/harmonymyth2 for original ad). Many elements in this advertise-
ment are presented in a naturalist style as inspired by Constable. Again, the observer gazes from the outside on a calm scene of a car on a hill plateau. The mountains in the distance offer a grandiose scenery, and the sky seems to be brightening up in the early hours of a late summer day. The light that touches the rim of the far away mountains casts the scene in a soft and golden light that leaves the observer with little doubt that the presence of the car reassures, not contradicts, the intrinsic harmony found in this peaceful landscape. Like a horse carriage of the Golden Age, the car is traveling on an unpaved path, its color matches the surrounding field, and it seems to have stopped on its path to enjoy the calm scenery before slowly continuing on its morning stroll.

The contradiction does not lie in the presence of a car in this advertisement, which is an integrated part of the harmonic Arcadian landscape like the *Haywain* is in Constable’s classic painting. The contradiction is created by the advertisement's textual component instead. Through assuring that the observer is "going to need a bigger map," nature becomes commodified as a resource that is readily and inexhaustibly available for human enjoyment. Instead of traveling in tune with nature's pace and moving through this landscape with the speed of humans or horse-powered carriages, the driver of a Subaru can consume nature at a fast pace without having to worry that it might end or that nature might object. Nature is fully at the driver's disposal, who is "going to need a bigger map" to make use of all that nature that is offered to him.

**Theme 2: Struggling for Harmony with a Dynamic Nature**

A second theme presents harmony between humans and nature as a precarious and fleeting outcome of a struggle with a Dynamic nature that is both vicious and nurturing. Advertisements that display this second theme seems to take clues from Turner by showing the violence of
natural forces and emphasizing color and light over objects and detailed forms. In contrast to the Arcadian-like advertisements discussed in the first theme, humans are displayed struggling with a rough nature in a way that sucks observers into the scene and leaves them with a certain unease. However, despite the sometimes oppressive display of threatening natural forces, harmony between humans and nature is hinted at in how people and objects blend with the environment, how the sun warms an exhausted face, and how a hiker quenches her thirst from an icy pond. These are examples of harmony, but it is not a harmony that is found by humans in an ordered landscape. It is a harmony that is achieved after a struggle with nature as an active and testing counterpart: the “mountain speaks to me” (Power Bar) and the weather, rock, and gravity “are all out to get you” (The North Face). By being a worthy partner in these struggles, harmony with nature is earned, and nature rewards those who listen to it with its nurture and protecting care.

A The North Face advertisement (Backpacker issue 2009-11, 2 page cover inlay, see http://tinyurl.com/harmonymyth3 for original ad) nicely illustrates the struggle for harmony with nature. Compared to the Wyoming advertisement, this The North Face advertisement puts much less emphasis on forms and instead emphasizes a vivid play of color and light between the clouds, sky, and mountains. Stones and leaves in the front and mountains in the back are out of focus, and it is unclear where the ice on the left side ends and where the rock starts. While the Wyoming advertisement features clear lines of an ordered, harmonic landscape and shelters the riders from the wild mountains through distance and a comforting belt of trees, The North Face advertisement displays the chaotic and threatening side of nature. The harsh mountains overshadow the scene, and the weather is cold and windy, as evidenced by the snow, ice, and the hiker’s apparel. The observer, who seems to kneel down on the other side of the puddle, joins the
scene as the hiker is in the middle of her struggle with nature. She challenged nature by venturing up high into the Patagonia mountains, and nature answered by dominating her with harsh conditions. The hiker’s face shows exhaustion, her fingers the physical strain of climbing, and her posture close to the ground and the fact that she is drinking ice-cold water suggest that she desperately needs to hydrate. Yet, this advertisement also shows how harmony is achieved in this struggle with nature. The sky on the left is clearing up and the sun breaks through the clouds and illuminates the mountains to the right. Based on the hiker’s posture and the overall composition, one can assume that she will continue moving towards the left, into the warming sun, once she has quenched her thirst with the water that was provided by a Mother Nature that is fierce but that also nurtures those who persist in the struggle and “never stop exploring.”

However, this version of the harmony myth is complicated by the fact that harmony is uncertain and might not be achieved even despite continuous struggle. In a variation of this theme, many advertisements leave the observer in the unknown of whether or not harmony between human and nature will be achieved. The imagery of these ads is dominated by the natural forces such as snow storms, dark skies, desolate lands, and insurmountable cliffs. Humans often appear small, frail, and exhausted as they are captured in these images mid-way through their challenging path.

For example, a Marmot advertisement (Backpacker issue 2009-11, p. 16, see http://tinyurl.com/harmonymyth4 for original ad) shows a mountaineer who seems to be on the loosing side in his struggle with nature. Again, this advertisement displays the threatening side of nature like The North Face advertisement does: The dark rocks in the front and the white snow, ice and fog in the background create strong contrasts in this image, which are further increased
through the intense orange of the hiking gear and textual elements. The hiker himself is displayed in an almost hopeless struggle with the fierce forces of nature: He seems lost in the fog, struggles strong winds, and appears frail between harsh rocks and wrapped in a jacket and blanket. The symbolic qualities of orange as a color of emergency further add to the impression that the hiker is fully dominated by nature.

In contrast to The North Face advertisement, the Marmot advertisement does not suggest that harmony with nature might be achieved if the hiker just struggles a little longer. No sun is breaking through the fog and blizzard, and the only way for the hiker to survive is to warm himself with a survival blanket and the gas cooker he is holding on his lap. As it is technology that keeps him alive and protects him from nature, man and civilization are ultimately pitched against nature in a struggle that has no chance to be resolved in a harmonic unity. This Marmot advertisement therefore demonstrates the contradiction within the second discursive construction of the harmony myth: Even if continuous effort is exerted, achieving harmony with nature is never guaranteed.

**Theme 3: Simulating Harmony in a Civilized Nature**

A third theme combines images of a threatening Dynamic nature with a harmonic Arcadian nature. While the dangerous forces of nature are recognized, humans are not shown in a struggle with nature, but rather how they avoid and evade the struggle by creating an island of safe civilization within a dangerous and wild nature. This is often done through textually alluding to the dangers of nature while at the same time using imagery that blends a foremost Arcadian style with aspects of a Dynamic nature.
A PrimaLoft advertisement (Backpacker issue 2009-04, p. 117, see http://tinyurl.com/harmonymyth5 for original ad) offers a good example of how harmony is simulated in a civilized nature. The background of this advertisement predominantly draws on Dynamic images of nature, in that the ground is covered with snow, and the peaks of the mountains in the background resemble the toothed jawbones of pre-historic predators that would have been dangerous to humans. Much of the image is dominated by the dark night, and the stars in the sky are shown in movement, making it clear that the observer is not looking at a scenic landscape in the mountains, but at a display of threatening natural forces such as a long and cold winter night. The tagline also alludes to the threatening face of nature, who can bite humans with frost.

The threatening background of the image is contrasted with a calming foreground that is decidedly Arcadian in style. The detailed picture of a well-lit tent resembles a winter cottage, except that the warming stove is replaced with electric light and insulation technology. The contrast between the stable light emitting from the cottage-tent and the lines of the moving stars suggests that the comfort of the tent is as permanent as if it was built out of stone and wood. A snow wall mimicking a garden fence and a grid that is laid over the snow and background, but not over the tent, further adds to the impression that wild nature is locked out and put behind bars in order to create a safe island of civilization. In this civilized and gentrified nature, harmony can be simulated, but only after all dangerous aspects of nature are locked out, and humans have separated themselves from nature through a combination of multiple technological, spatial, and symbolic boundaries.

**Discussion: Harmony found and lost**
In this research, I placed current representations of nature into a macro-systemic context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) that combines a more complex account of the organic framework of nature with insights of how variants within the organic view of nature have been represented throughout art history (Schroeder, 2006). This approach allows to uncover nuances in contemporary manifestations of the harmony myth. Previous research discussing consumers’ quest for harmony with nature (Arnould and Price, 1993; Belk and Costa, 1998; Thompson, 2004) suggests that harmony can be found relatively easy and instantly by embracing nature; however, these accounts neither problematize the impact of dangerous natural forces on humans, nor do they explore how harmony is portrayed in contemporary advertisements in differing ways. Given that advertisements are a representational system that constitutes a discursive space in which meaning is negotiated (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004), I believe that this analysis carries implications for how consumers understand their quest for harmony with nature in a variety of realms including natural health (Thompson, 2004), tourism (Waitt and Cook, 2007), consumer fantasy enactments (Belk and Costa, 1998), ideologies of technology (Kozinets, 2008), and sustainable consumption (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001).

The uncovered themes demonstrate how harmony is discursively constructed in three different ways: humans are sure to find harmony in an Arcadian nature, have to engage in a struggle with a Dynamic nature in order to achieve harmony, or they simulate harmony with “nature” in a civilized and controlled nature. In all three themes, the quest for harmony is complicated through inherent paradoxes within the respective constructions of the harmony myth: harmony might just be a thinly veiled domination of nature (theme 1), it might never be achieved despite all struggles
While harmony is easily found in an Arcadian nature, the real problem is how harmony can be kept. The harmony between humans and nature that is discursively created by the first and third themes is one of an idealized and romanticized past, of which little is left. To guard this harmony, it has to be enjoyed almost passively, because the wrong actions may easily unmask the dominating tendencies that are concealed in Arcadian conceptualizations of nature (theme 1; Merchant, 1990), or they could highlight how this harmony is based on a nature that is created to resemble Romantic clichés (theme 3). It is therefore no wonder that “leaving no trace” is an important ethos within the hiking community, as it establishes the duty to enjoy harmony with nature as passively as possible. However, “leaving no trace” is as utopian as the idealized Arcadian images of a pristine and untouched nature (Cronon, 1996), since human actions always have to leave a trace in form of hiking paths, erosion, local impact on wildlife, and even the global impact due to the ecological footprint of the hiking and travel industry. Thus, while the Arcadian image of nature promises harmony to be easily found, keeping harmony requires the dutiful and strict adherence to an ethical code of how to behave in nature. And given the impossibility of leaving no trace, companies and consumers who adopt this Arcadian conceptualization of harmony with nature are always at risk to fail, and always under suspicion of hypocrisy.

On the other hand, the whole notion of “leaving no trace” makes no sense from an understanding of harmony as a precarious and uncertain achievement won in a continuous struggle with a Dynamic nature. Harmony is created, not destroyed, through human action in this view. While there is no guarantee that harmony will ever be achieved, let alone kept (theme 2), the
only chance for harmony lies in the engagement with, and challenge of, nature. In the process, mistakes will be made and traces will be left, as humans have to sometimes “fend for themselves” (Gerber advertisement) in order to resist the dominating force of nature. At least as long as humans respect nature’s forces, the traces they leave do not ruin their chances of achieving harmony with nature. Thus, while flying to a far away destination to enjoy wild nature might seem hypocritical from an Arcadian understanding of nature, from the viewpoint of a Dynamic nature this is a necessary move to enable the struggle with nature through which harmony can be found.

In conclusion, the current research demonstrates that in order to understand what it means to live in harmony with nature, it is important to consider how nature is discursively constructed. A very tangible implication of this research is that marketers who use the harmony myth to position their products as sustainable alternatives might want to draw on Dynamic images of nature to insulate their claims, to a certain extent, from charges of hypocrisy that are more likely to arise when harmony is construed in relation to an Arcadian nature. On a more cultural level, this research highlights that living in harmony with nature is not as harmonic as it sounds. Romantic hopes for harmony with nature as a savior from the environmental crisis and as a guiding paradigm for a new understanding of the relationship between humans and nature may thus be unwarranted, and future research is needed to expand our understanding of how marketers, consumers, and researchers conceptualize the relationship between humans and nature.
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References


