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## Advertising Is Magic

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It's been said that advertising is a form of sorcery. For example, the late cultural critic Raymond Williams once wrote in an essay titled "Advertising: The Magic System": "The short description of the pattern we have is magic: a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies..."

Consider the use of brand logos. These are words or symbols with little inherent meaning that have come to signify expansive and often emotion-laden concepts. Just as a witch might summon spiritual interference via pentagrams, a marketer can call forth thoughts and behaviors by wielding the visual mark of a product or corporation. Symbols bring reality into being.

Erik Davis writes in his book *TechGnosis*:

Our collective symbols are forged in the multiplex, our archetypes trademarked, licensed, and sold. ... A baroque arcana of logos, brand names, and corporate sigils now pepper landscapes, goods, and our costumed bodies. ... our mnemonic icons no longer mediate the animist powers of nature or the social magic of kings, but the power of corporate identity and the commodity fetish.

In the June issue of *Psychology Today*, we covered a paper from the *Journal of Consumer Research* demonstrating how the display of brands automatically affects our behavior. In the studies, exposure to the Apple logo made people more creative than exposure to an IBM logo, and the Disney logo made people more honest than the E! Entertainment logo.

In the sidebar to that story I joked about other ways to use logos in your life, including this one for increasing motivation: "Ugh, you're slogging up to your fifth-floor walk-up after a long day. Just glance down at the North Face logo on your sleeve. To the summit!" Turns out, my quip was more accurate than I knew. In the August issue of *PT*, I cover a paper to be published in

*Psychology of Sport and Exercise* showing the effect of product placement on physical endurance. Only instead of North Face, it was Gatorade. When viewing the sports drink bottle (versus a water bottle), subjects construed their task as a positive challenge and held their leg in the air longer.



A study in the August issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Tanya Chartrand et al. show further subconscious branding effects: fancy-pants brands induce big spending. Subjects saw the words "Tiffany", "Neiman Marcus," "Nordstrom," "Wall-Mart," "Kmart," or "Dollar Store" flashed on a screen for 60 milliseconds. Those who saw the first three were more likely than those who saw the second three to prefer a \$6 pair of Nike socks over a \$5.25 double pack of Hanes socks and a \$99 Sharp microwave over a \$69 Haier microwave. So carrying a bag coated with that God-awful LV pattern will endow you with an aura of prestige independent of any logical deduction process in those who look at you.

Logos can also work through channels of social cognition. As Davis writes, "Many consumers, especially young people, cling to logos like Timberland and Stussy as if they were clan totems..." And Williams writes:

When a magical pattern has become established in a society, it is capable of some real if limited success. Many people will indeed look twice at you, upgrade you, upmarket you, respond to your displayed signals, if you have made the right purchases within a system of meanings to which you are all trained. Thus the fantasy seems to be validated...

So to some degree, there is no magical thinking in believing brands have real influence. It's completely logical to recognize that brands accumulate collective associations. Still, consider two artists' absurdist take on the ultimate power of labels, as documented by Rob Walker in his new book *Buying In*. A fashion label produced by a pair of guys known as Andrew Andrew was just that: a label. They set up a sewing machine in a storefront in SoHo and, according to one of the Andrews, "we would sew this oversized label onto your sweater, making your shirt part of our line." The product is the same, before and after. The only difference is what it now signifies via its label and associations--a purely informational/metaphysical transformation. Walker summarizes: "People do not buy objects. They buy ideas about products." To believe that your sweater is fundamentally different, an object changed by an idea about the object: Doesn't that smack of magical thinking?



In [my article about magical thinking](#) in the April issue of *PT*, I mention Piaget's idea of nominal realism, the tendency to believe that names affect reality. As he wrote in his 1929 book *The Child's Conception of the World*, "The name is therefore in the object, not as a label attached to it but as an invisible quality of the object." And as psychologist Carl Johnson wrote in a 2000 book chapter subtitled "The Development of Metaphysical Thinking," "In the absence of any obvious, overt connection between the word and the thing, the tendency is to assume that there must be some deeper, hidden connection." The label is arbitrary. Its power is in its psychological, ethereal connections, not in any physical force. And yet it's treated as though it has real causal influence in the world.

The most famous example of a brand's influence may be the Pepsi Challenge. In taste tests, people prefer Pepsi over Coke, yet they still buy Coke more. And in a seminal neuromarketing study reported in *Neuron* in 2004 ([pdf](#)), neuroscientist Read Montague showed that when you tell people which brand of soft drink they're sipping, their [brain](#) activation changes significantly. But that's just the [placebo](#) effect, that's not magical thinking, right? Well... As mentioned in my MT article, psychologist Paul Rozin has demonstrated nominal realism in adults by asking subjects to take two bottles of sugar water and label one "sucrose" and one "poison." They weren't so hot to drink the one labeled "poison," despite realizing their irrationality, and I wouldn't be surprised if Coke fans would be down on drinking their favorite soda from a Pepsi bottle, even in private.

Magical thinking is all about blurring the boundaries between mind and matter, treating internal associations as if they exist out there in the world. So if you have the mental link between the red and white label and pure yumminess, and you expect, even a little bit, beyond your best reasoning, for the link to translate so that a bottle label actually makes the contents yummy, you've got some magical beliefs going on there.



In his upcoming book [Buyology](#), marketing expert Martin Lindstrom describes how strong brands exhibit 10 pillars of [religion](#): Let's take Apple as an example. [Disclosure: I'm an Apple shareholder.] A sense of belonging: I grew up geeking out at Mac user groups (MUGs.) A clear vision: "Think different." Power over enemies: "[The power to crush the other kids.](#)" Sensory appeal: witness those elegant iPhones. Storytelling: Steve and Steve in a garage in Cali. Grandeur: visit their flagship retail store on Fifth Avenue. Evangelism: Mac fans are super fanatical. Symbols: the apple logo, see above. Mystery: Apple crucifies those responsible for leaks. Rituals: "[One more thing...](#)". I should add that they also have a high priest (see "[His Holiness, Steve Jobs.](#)")

Lindstrom's formula seems a bit superficial to me, though, and doesn't get to the heart of religion. Magical thought is really about the sacred--objects and symbols and actions distinct from others, by virtue of an essence that taps into unseen forces along the guidelines of human imagination and that can bring to bear psychic elements on physical situations. So if you believe, even subconsciously, that soda can take you to "The Coke Side of Life, or that wearing cologne from a bottle labeled Polo Sport will make you any sportier, or that an [Apple tattoo](#), even when out of sight, can summon the creative inspiration of Jobs et al., you are under the spell of advertising.

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