

Mystify me: Coke, terror and the symbolic immortality boost

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‘Reasons to Believe’:

“There was a study conducted in 2010 about the real situation of the world.

For every tank built... 131.000 stuffed animals are made.

For every stock market crash... There are 10 versions of “What a Wonderful World”.

For every corrupt person... 8.000 people are donating blood.

For every wall that is put up... 20.000 “Welcome” mats are put down.

While one scientist is creating a new weapon... 1 million moms are baking chocolate cakes.

Worldwide, more Monopoly money is printed than dollars.

There are more funny videos on the internet... Than bad news in the world.

LOVE has more [internet search] results than FEAR.

For every person that says things are going to get worse...

100 couples are trying to have a baby.

For every weapon sold in the world... 20.000 people share a Coke.

There are reasons to believe in a better world.

Coca-Cola – open happiness – 125 years of sharing happiness.”

The above quote contains the onscreen text of [the Coca-Cola Company](#)’s 90-second ‘Reasons to Believe’ commercial, which aired internationally in 2011 (Various 2011). Scary or upsetting aspects of military, political and financial reality are paired with light-hearted (but irrelevant) ideas. The sequence appears as schoolchildren sing with increasing passion

while an adult plays the Oasis song ‘Whatever’ on an acoustic guitar. The ad culminates with clips from a 1971 commercial ‘Coke – It’s the Real Thing’ that introduced the song ‘I’d like to teach the world to sing’, and ends with a cartoon of the lid blowing off a spinning red Coke bottle in a shower of bubbles.

‘Reasons to Believe’ is presented as fact-based, with a veneer of quantitative authority. It challenges the importance of some global problems that are hard for individuals to influence. The ad thus makes Coke fans feel empowered, and allays their sense of anxiety in the face of global change. It gives the impression that the good things in life outweigh the bad ones, and that we therefore need not be concerned about the future.

Clearly, [the Coca-Cola Company](#)’s ‘reasons’ to believe in a better world are not based on logical reasoning. The positive factoids that are juxtaposed to real world problems are non-sequiturs, portrayed in a way that discourages viewers from evaluating their relevance. For example, [the Coca-Cola Company](#) sells 1.6 billion servings of Coke every day (Coca-Cola Company 2011). Thus, if for every 20,000 people sharing a Coke one weapon is sold, then approximately 80,000 weapons are sold worldwide per day – a figure that does not suggest a better or more peaceful world lies ahead of us. The accuracy of several couplets is dubious since it is difficult to estimate the numbers of corrupt people, scientists creating new weapons and bad news.

Despite the commercial’s logical inconsistencies, the majority of its audience reacts very positively, as the following YouTube comment by hope36600 demonstrates:

“Great video !! Love is the answer for everything!!” (Various 2011).

Some viewers even mimic the structure of the commercial, an example of which is Likethelegos wry observation on the same comment thread:

“As of right now: For every dislike there are 46 likes :)” (Various 2011).

Respondents proudly use the commercial as an opportunity for self-mystification. The widespread tendency to believe upbeat messages, regardless of their logical status, suggests that a fundamental function of cultural artefacts (e.g. heroes, ideologies, brands and religions) is to distract ourselves from real world problems and conflicts, such as individual mortality and ecological disruption.

Ernest Becker generously described this tendency for self-delusion and cultural mystification as being ‘necessary’ and ‘heroic’: “Cultural illusion is a necessary ideology of self-justification, a heroic dimension that is life itself to the symbolic animal” (1997: 189). But is belief in heroes and brands heroic if it prevents us from dealing with crucial and dangerous aspects of reality?

We present a model of how cultural mystification works, combining elements of Holt’s theory of cultural branding (2004) and Terror Management Theory (TMT), a branch of experimental psychology. The model shows how brand mystification is co-created by marketers creating powerful myths and audiences who actively desire to believe in them (and who actively desire to ignore difficult aspects of reality).

Holt identifies Coke as a member of an elite group of ‘iconic’ brands. For Holt (2006), brands become icons when marketers create myths with sufficient symbolic power and emotional resonance to help consumers come to terms with the most urgent cultural tensions of their time. ‘Reasons to Believe’ reinvents the Coke myth – that by sharing a Coke people can overcome social, ideological, or cultural tensions – in the context of contemporary anxieties about financial crises, corruption, and war.

According to Holt: "...identity myths are useful fabrications", "simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives". They are "an imaginative, rather than literal, expression of the audience's aspired identity" (2004: 8), ~~that~~-which help a nation "momentarily forget its real problems" (2004: 26).

Holt's theory of cultural branding tells us that brand myths offer symbolic resolutions of cultural tensions. But it does not explain why people choose to believe in myths in defiance of logical reasoning, why they desire to be mystified, why some myths possess deep emotional resonance. For this explanation we turn to TMT, which draws theoretically on the work of Ernest Becker.

Becker noted that human beings are unique among animals in that they are aware of their own existence and mortality (1971). Consequently, people develop a psychological antipathy towards the concept of death, and an unconscious (and sometimes conscious) desire for immortality. Humans realise that although they are powerless to avoid death in the physical realm, in the cultural-symbolic realm anything is possible, even immortality. For Becker, this dualism or split is not ontological, but emerges from unconscious existential struggle:

Each phenomenological realm is different. The inner self represents the freedom of thought, imagination, and the infinite reach of symbolism. The body represents determinism and boundness. (1997: 41-42).

Becker portrayed the spectrum of human culture as, *inter alia*, a kaleidoscopic expression of this fundamental emotional dialectic. He believed that all cultural forms, including brands, offer symbolic means of escape from the limitations of physical reality (1997: 5). Despite the fact that bodily immortality is impossible for individual humans,

cultural artefacts always contain some kind of denial of death or promise of immortality. Humans use cultural worldviews or ‘dominant immortality ideologies’ (Becker 1997: 188) to mystify themselves in order to overcome what could otherwise become a paralysing fear of death.

Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, explores how people are drawn to heroes because they defy and symbolically overcome death. This insight is echoed by Holt’s observation that for consumers, iconic brands possess a status equivalent to cultural icons such as Superman, Mohammed Ali, Oprah, and President Kennedy (Holt 2004: 1). There is an immense gulf, though, between real heroism, where an actual person selflessly risks all to challenge apparently overwhelming powers, and heroic fantasies, where people identify with dreamworlds and illusions of immortality.

Hundreds of TMT experiments confirm Becker’s thesis (e.g. Arndt et al. 2004). Rindfleisch et al. (2009) show that fear of death encourages materialistic individuals to form strong connections with brands. This is an example of the well-established TMT finding that increased ‘mortality salience’ (i.e. awareness of personal mortality) tends to cause increased strength of belief in one’s own cultural worldview, and increased rejection of alternative, apparently incompatible worldviews.

Humans often accept or reject information depending on whether it fits into their personal worldview, rather than on the merits of the information itself. Rutjens et al. (2009) found that the Western (Age of Enlightenment) belief in human progress acts as a buffer against existential anxiety in a secular world. Thus, by symbolically resolving financial crises and wars, Coca-Cola soothes the existential anxieties caused by these real threats to the human progress narrative, strengthening consumers’ emotional bond with the brand.

However, after the act of consuming the Coke ad (or the product itself), the consumer will inevitably realise, either consciously or unconsciously, that the ‘immortality boost’ they

experienced was ephemeral and unreal. This post-consumption mini-depression may lead the consumer to lose faith in the brand, or the consumer may return to the brand in order to enjoy the ideological uplift of consumption and (self-)mystification once again. Therefore this dynamic process of using cultural artefacts for immortality striving is potentially addictive. Becker describes the demystification experience thus:

When you get the person to emerge into life, away from [her or] his dependencies, his automatic safety in the cloak of someone else's power, what joy can you promise him with the burden of his aloneness? When you get a person to look at the sun as it bakes down on the daily carnage taking place on earth, the ridiculous accidents, the utter fragility of life, the powerlessness of those he thought most powerful – what comfort can you give him [...]? (1997: 59).

The above analysis helps to explain the emotional resonance of the Coca-Cola Company's Coke's 'Reasons to Believe' ad. The advertisement's rose-tinted narrative invites uncritical viewers to mystify themselves, to distract themselves from upsetting financial, political and military realities. But if this fleeting state of happiness makes the viewer less likely to engage with political, financial and military realities, then buying into Coke's dreamworld will actually make real world problems worse. This is a common result in TMT experiments – our use of cultural symbols to deny the reality of death often makes death a more likely real outcome.

The Coca-Cola Company's Coke's symbolic defiance of the seriousness of contemporary problems is welcomed by those who are looking for a distraction from such problems. The confident tone and obliviousness of Coca-Cola's the firm's defiance of logic makes the commercial an ideal medium for (self-)mystification because it claims factual authority and portrays Coke as a defiant hero who can brush reality aside.

The Coca-Cola eCompany's suggestion that by drinking Coke and thinking positive we will solve financial crises, corruption and militarism demonstrates a blatant disregard for reason. But the actual logic of 'Reasons to believe' is that we should simply turn away from the suffering of war and the reality of financial and political corruption. If the viewer feels that global problems have thereby been resolved, they will be less likely to support proposals to tackle these real world problems. So this form of brand mystification makes it harder to instigate positive financial, political and environmental change.

The model of brand mystification in Figure 1 presents a diagram of the way in which 'iconic' brands operate. The person is afraid of death and longs unconsciously for immortality and heroic powers. As Becker puts it: "The urge to immortality is not a simple reflex of the death-anxiety but a reaching out by one's whole being towards life" (1997: 152-153). In fact, the model may apply to cultural artefacts in general, not merely brands.

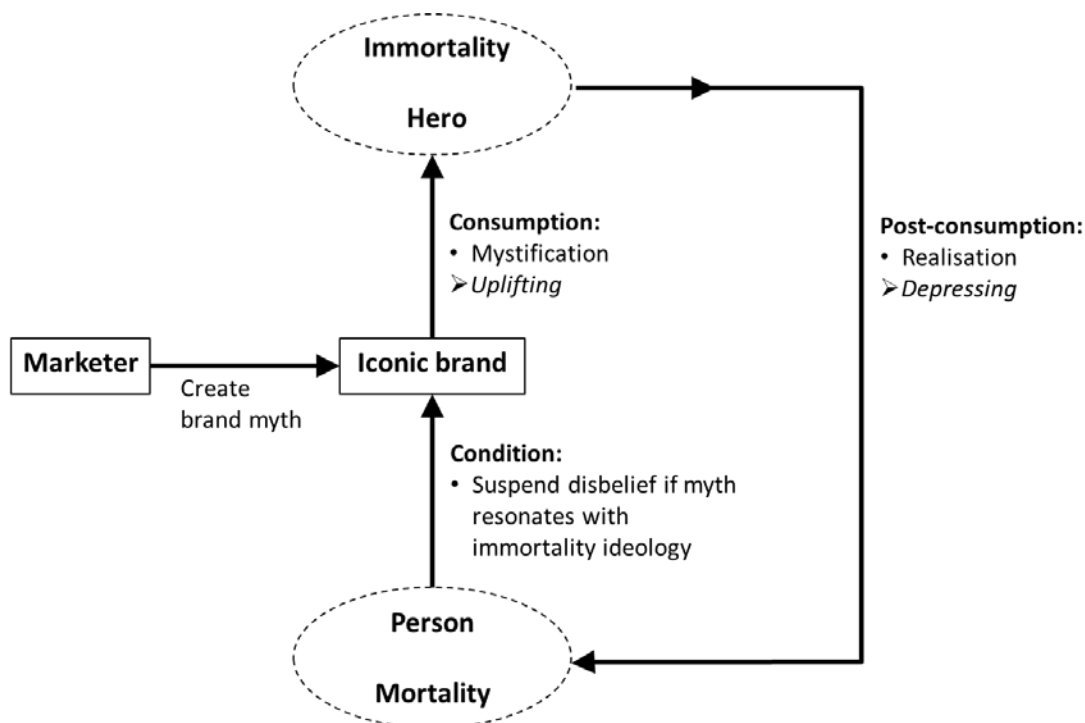


Figure 1: Brand Mystification

The brandscape is a planet-wide ideology and identity-shaping force. The impossible goal of infinite market growth taps into (and feeds) our existential urge to defy reality ([Freund & Jacobi 2013](#)). Nature (death) is framed as ‘not us’ – a mere resource and dumping ground for ‘our’ ever-expanding economy. A thousand brands daily target you, invite you to suspend your disbelief, to love them, to worship them. By consuming advertising fantasies and buying products, the person gets a temporary spiritual effervescence, a symbolic boost of immortal feeling (that evaporates). The more illogical the story, the more overtly the icon defies physical reality, the more it draws on and exacerbates the unfortunate human lust for super-natural power.

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