

Kikkerman Fish Magic Soap

Before we were about to eat, my parents would always tell me to wash my hands with soap and water, so that I wouldn't get sick. I have stuck to that principle in all of my 18 years alive, and I was decently sure that anything labelled as "soap" would not seem too foreign to me. After all, besides carving your bar soap into fun shapes, how much more different could it get? The Kikkerman Fish Magic Soap though, really surprised me. The idea behind it is a piece of soap in the shape of a fish, where you would rub your hands on it to make bad smells like onion, garlic, and fish from cooking all go away, which seemed pretty mundane at first.¹ However, no matter how much it is used, the manufacturer claimed, the fish would not get any smaller, and according to the 4.4 stars on Amazon and (most of) the reviews, it was everything it claimed to be.² I was boggled.

My first thought was, "No way, there's no chance that I stumbled across a real magical artifact on Amazon for only \$12.99." After giving it some more thought, I realized that it must be something about the material the fish is made of, as it was this shiny metallic silver color. Turns out, the fish is actually made of stainless-steel, and all stainless-steel objects (like pots or faucets) will remove odors like garlic and onion from hands after cooking, as the molecules in the stainless-steel will bind to with the foul-smelling sulfur molecules found in garlic and get rid of the smell.³ However, even though there was a perfectly reasonable scientific explanation for how

¹ "Kikkerland Magic Soap Odor Remover, Original," Amazon.com, <https://www.amazon.com/Kikkerland-MS003-Fish-Magic-Soap/dp/B001F1S7WG?th=1>.

² "Kikkerland Magic Soap Odor Remover, Original."

³ "Why Stainless Steel Erases Garlic's Aroma," *Huffpost*, July 19, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/eliminating-garlic-smell_n_1341413#:~:text=When%20you%20touch%20stainless%20steel,No%20more%20garlicky%20fingers

the “soap” worked, the way the manufacturers marketed the product made me think that it defied reason.

The main ploy that Kikkerman used to make their product seem magical is the branding. If they tried to sell the exact same product at the exact same price, but instead calling it “Stainless-steel Fish,” most people would immediately make the connection that it was the material rather than some strange technology Kikkerman imbued the product with. Naming it something like “Fish Artifact” would work better, but it would still lack the impact that calling it soap does. Classifying their product as “soap” works well because normal soap cannot get rid of the smell of sulfur containing compounds, and normal soap can only be used a certain number of times. These two qualities allow Kikkerman the ability to make their “soap” seem like something special.

Another reason for the effectiveness of Kikkerman’s name is illustrated by Simone Natale’s article “Amazon Can Read Your Mind”, where Natale shows that Amazon and Google’s search recommendations are commonly compared to mind-reading because of how accurate their suggestions usually are.⁴ In general, mind-reading is an incredibly flexible category open to a lot of interpretations; people can choose to believe that the mind-readers actually have extrasensory powers, or that they are very observant and able to tell mental states by looking at the seeker’s physical qualities, or, more importantly, these two interpretations can mix. Thus, by suggesting products or searches that their programs have predicted as fitting specific users, Amazon and Google both seem to be able to read minds, and they both therefore inherit all the mystical connotations associated with that phrase.⁵ Similarly,

⁴ Simone Natale, *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2019), 29.

⁵ Natale, *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*, 24.

by naming their product Fish Magic Soap, Kikkerman allows consumers to choose between the mundane interpretation, that it is just a regular bar of soap/piece of steel, or that there is something truly supernatural about their product, or anything in between.

Despite only being a handheld stainless-steel sculpture of a fish, the Kikkerman Fish Magic Soap shows how technologies can become enchanted. It causes a moment of hesitation where consumers wonder just how the “soap” works. And even when/if we realize that the “magic” is just a property of the material it is made of, the Fish Magic Soap leans into the flexibility that interpretations have, allowing us to believe that it is both a scientific technology and an enchanted artifact at the same time.

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