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The Value of Subliminal Advertising
to the Modern Marketer

Prepared by Bruce Peckover
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Introduction

This honors paper provides an evaluation of the arguments and evidence advanced supporting and denying the effectiveness of various subliminal techniques used in advertising. These practices supposedly influence consumer behavior by subconsciously altering attitudes or preferences toward products. While researchers offer some marginal evidence of subliminal stimuli influencing like/dislike reactions, the marketing relevance of the evidence remains to be documented.

This investigation examines the history, the use, the legality, and the value of subliminal advertising to the marketer. A thorough discussion of each of these points is made with references to documented sources. The intent of this paper is not to deny the existence of motives of which one may be unaware. The thesis is simply that subliminal directives have not been shown to have the power ascribed to them by subliminal advertising advocates.

An understanding of the history and boundaries of subliminal advertising is necessary before arguments for or against it can effectively be explored. Equally important is an analysis of the possibility of using subliminal advertising to manipulate the consumer. If this technique is used, the likelihood of using it successfully must be explored too.

A Definition of Subliminal Perception

Subliminal means below the threshold of consciousness. Anything perceived below the threshold of conscious awareness is subliminal perception.

Subliminal perception refers to our ability to perceive and respond to stimuli that are just below the limen, or threshold of consciousness. The concept of a sensory limen or threshold is technically complex. Normally, it is that level of stimulus intensity at which a subject, over a number of trials, reports being conscious of the stimulus one-half of the time. What is well above the stimulus threshold for one person will be slightly below the stimulus threshold for a second, and far below the stimulus threshold for a third.¹

Subliminal perception is the level of stimulus intensity at which a test subject professes unawareness of the existence of stimuli, yet at which we can demonstrate a behavioral response to the stimulus in question. Since sample contamination is difficult to control because the stimulus threshold varies from one test subject to another, if subliminal manipulation is used, the effectiveness of it is highly questionable. When studies make

little or no effort to determine a threshold for individual subjects, they are at risk because the stimuli may be supraliminal (above threshold of consciousness) for some subjects in some trials. The results may then be due to the effects of weak (but not subliminal) stimulation.

The Start of the Subliminal Controversy

In New Jersey some unwitting theater audiences were invited to drink Coca-Cola and eat popcorn in brief superimposed messages on the movie in progress during September of 1957. Viewers were consciously unaware of any message transmitted to them because exposure times of the message were very short. Research executive James Vicary used a tachistoscope, an extremely fast shutter device, to flash the messages lasting only 1/3000th of a second on a movie screen every five seconds. According to Vicary, this process increased popcorn sales by 57% and Coke sales by 18%.

With these findings, the popular press sounded the alarm of the real possibility of influencing the consumer without his awareness:

...take this invention and everything connected with it and attach it to the center of the next nuclear explosive scheduled for testing.²

...the most alarming and outrageous discovery since Mr. Gatling invented his gun.³

Immediately critics questioned the ethics of psychologically manipulating innocent and unknowing consumers. According to the New Yorker, minds had been "broken into and entered."⁴ The furor resulted in an increased interest in Vicary's subliminal study by the scientific community. Vicary's findings are notable for several reasons:

- 1) The exposure rate of 1/3000th of a second is far briefer than any previously reported stimulation.
- 2) There were no reports of even the most rudimentary scientific controls that would lend credibility to the study.
- 3) Those who supposedly conducted the test - a firm, incidentally, that sold subliminal projectors - in a demonstration set up for the press, had "technical difficulties" that permitted viewers to be aware they were stimulated.
- 4) Further attempts to gather specific information on the details of the study were ignored.⁵

Not only does Vicary's entire report appear to have all the characteristics of fabrication, the proponents of subliminal advertising basing their arguments on his study have no basis from which to argue. Whether Vicary's study was a hoax or not was never proven; but under controlled, supervised conditions, he was not able to

duplicate his results. Vicary soon disappeared from the scene.

The History of Subliminal Advertising

Only a few attempts at subliminal manipulation have been recorded according to the American Association of Advertising Agencies representative, Charles F. Adams. He made this clear in his testimony before the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in reference to their proposed regulations for the advertising of alcoholic beverages, with specific reference to subliminal advertising. According to Adams only a few attempts at subliminal manipulation have been recorded:

- 1) A television station in Los Angeles experimented with subliminal messages by flashing "Drive Safely" on the screen during news shows. The accident rate in Los Angeles continued without any noticeable let up. And in Witchita, Kansas, a local television station attempted to convince, with subliminal messages, a killer who was at large that he should give himself up. The campaign was not successful.
- 2) In England, a BBC science panel show flashed a subliminal four word news item during a show and asked viewers to identify it. Of 430 replies, 150 claimed to have perceived it, but only 20 got it right.

- 3) A motion picture producer proudly proclaimed he was using subliminal projection in his movie "My World Dies Screaming", flashing the word "Blood" on the screen to heighten emotion. The film was little noted nor long remembered.
- 4) A Seattle radio station began broadcasting "sub-audible" messages such as "TV's a bore". The station's ratings did not show a marked improvement and local TV ratings remained constant.
- 5) The Premium Corporation of America inserted the subliminal words "Get it" in a television commercial for the game Husker-Du. The company claimed the words were inserted by an exuberant (but misguided) young man from a production house in Minneapolis. The commercial was removed from the air and history records the marketplace was not kind to Husker-Du.⁶

Most of the existing fear of subliminal advertising is due to Wilson Key's book Subliminal Seduction. The University of Western Ontario professor's book became vogueish and is required reading in many college courses in psychology and marketing. Subliminal Seduction and Key's next book Media Sexploitation created concern about mind manipulation. The books also inspired considerable paranoia about subliminal advertising.

Key sees sex in everything. A wine bottle is a phallic symbol. A glass of ice turns into a sexual fantasy. He claims a Howard Johnson restaurant placemat

has human bodies engaged in a wanton sex orgy on it. An ice cube in a liquor ad reveals the letters S-E-X in the shadows, an incredible photographic achievement since a professional examination of the original photograph and the engraving plates revealed no retouching.

Key's arguments will be examined in depth later. His books were mentioned here only because of the fear and suspicion they aroused in consumer's minds about marketing practices.

Types of Subliminal Stimulation

Briefly presented visual stimuli are the first of three identifiable means of subliminal stimulation. Messages are flashed so quickly, usually with a tachistoscope, the viewer is unaware of their presence. Visual stimulation purportedly registers subconsciously and allegedly affects subsequent behavior.

Behavior control is also attempted by using low volume auditory messages and accelerated speech. While the message may be unintelligible and unnoticed at a conscious level, the claim is that these messages are never-the-less processed subconsciously and they then influence behavior.

Another procedure consists of embedding or hiding sexual imagery or words in advertising pictures. These images supposedly are concealed so that they are not apparent to conscious observation. Allegedly the images have a subconscious effect on behavior.

Documented Studies

Given its covert nature and the ethical considerations involved, the prevalence of subliminal advertising is very likely underestimated by reliance upon published reports. At any rate, such techniques are believed to be widespread by a great many people who can hardly be faulted for vigorously protesting against their use. John Q. Public has his hands full trying to cope with forms of exploitation of which he is fully aware. Should he also be worried that Madison Avenue is sneaking directives into his subconscious through the back door? Such a possibility has pervasive ramifications. The potential importance of the topic has not escaped those in marketing.⁷

Marketers recognize subliminal perception as a phenomenon. Studies by scholars such as Beven, Green and Swets, Kunst-Wilson, and Zajonc show truly subliminal effects of like/dislike reactions to stimuli can be achieved.⁸ The important question is not whether these effects exist, but whether the subliminal effects obtained justify the claims made for subliminal advertising.

This question is critical because what must be posited in order to support such a proposition is not merely an effect, but specific, (relatively) powerful and enduring effects on the buying preferences of the public.⁹

For a subliminal influence to be effective for a marketer, he will first, at a minimum have to show the subliminal message will produce some positive like/dislike reaction to his message. Even if a marketer could produce a like/dislike reaction to a subliminal message, to prove his argument, he also must show a direct connection between the like/dislike reaction and

consequent behavior change. Since only a like/dislike reaction does not necessarily have direct marketing implications, and direct behavior does, these two reactions will be referred to as weak and strong claims respectively.

Proponents of subliminal advertising claim the process of superimposing subliminal messages on top of, or along with, supraliminal messages is effective. N.F. Dixon, in his study of subliminal perception, said that the process of superimposing messages is not a "good bet" for use in advertisements:

...Ongoing supraliminal stimulation to which attention may be directed almost certainly will swamp any effect by a simultaneous stimulus below the awareness threshold...at a peripheral level, lateral inhibition and contour suppressing mechanisms could well block any neural transmission from the weaker of two stimulus arrays... a similar effect of restricted channel capacity would almost certainly operate centrally as well. The potential effects of one stimulus may be completely negated by the presence of another.¹⁰

Integrating or splicing subliminal stimulus into supraliminal material is not practical for the marketer either. Unless a sufficient blank interval is included before and after the inserted subliminal message, supraliminal material will mask the subliminal stimulus.¹¹ In commercials, if a blank or gap was included before and after a subliminal message so it wouldn't be masked, the gaps would draw attention to the message. If this is true, the viewer of the advertisement would be looking for a message where ever gaps in the ad existed.

Not only would the viewer know subliminal techniques were being used, he may be alerted to the message to the point where the message may break the threshold of consciousness to supraliminal levels. This study shows how difficult it would be for consumers to be manipulated by marketers without knowledge of the manipulation first.

If complete unobtrusiveness is a priority to someone using subliminal techniques, they may attempt to integrate the message into natural cuts or breaks in a commercial. Even then, completely disguising the stimulation may not be possible. Kahneman's study showed at least 100 milliseconds of "clean" background is necessary to prevent a masking effect. This means a totally clean background is needed, even for a very short time, to show a non-masked subliminal message. Any break would be apparent.

Evidence Involving Weak Claim

A study investigating the weak (like/dislike only) claim was done in 1959. D. Byrne flashed the word "beef" for successive five millisecond intervals during a sixteen-minute movie. Control and experimental subjects showed no difference in their verbal references to beef, as measured by word association tests. The experimental subjects didn't even show a higher preference for beef sandwiches when given a list of five alternatives. Experimental subjects did rate themselves as hungrier than control subjects. This difference was true even when comparing how long each subject was without food with

increase in hunger between control and experimental groups.¹² Byrne presented his stimulus through superimposed messages. For reasons discussed earlier, this method likely interfered with potential subliminal effects.

In another study, Hawkins flashed the word "coke" for 2.7 millisecond intervals during the presentation of other supraliminal material. Thirst ratings increased for the "coke" group while the other group, who received a subliminal nonsense syllable, showed no change. Hawkins concluded "a simple subliminal stimulus can serve to arouse a basic drive such as thirst."¹³ Moore points to another study showing how Hawkins' claims may be in error.

As Saegert has pointed out, Hawkins' results may simply be Type I error [a decision to reject the null hypothesis when, in fact, the null hypothesis is true], especially in view of the fact that Hawkins performed five independent 1-tail statistical tests where one analysis would have sufficed lends support to Saegert's position. There are methodological short-comings in both of these studies. Even if the results are taken at face value, their relevance to advertising is minimal.¹⁴

Weak Claim Summary

While the preceding researchers show subliminal messages, under appropriate conditions, can produce a like/dislike response of our basic drives, they do not show a direct link between this and behavior change. Even the change in like/dislike response was shown as flawed

because of possible Type I error. The researchers, while possibly successful in producing a like/dislike change to basic drives, were not successful in producing even a like/dislike change toward a specific product. If even a like/dislike change in response to a product can't be recorded, the possibility of an advertiser manipulating the consumer to change his actual behavior is even more remote. For an advertiser to accomplish this feat, he would have to be able to change a consumer's behavior without changing the way a consumer likes or dislikes a product. If the consumer dislikes a product he certainly would not be motivated to buy it.

Evidence Involving the Strong Claim

In review, the strong claim for subliminal advertising shows specific behavioral consequences resulting from subliminal directives. A study by Zuckerman requiring student nurses to write stories describing the contents of a picture series projected on a screen in front of them is relevant to the strong claim. Instructions to "write more" and "don't write" were superimposed on the pictures at successive points during the presentations to the nurses. Instructions were unknown to the subjects. A control group received blank slides in place of those containing subliminal directives. Zuckerman's study had three sections:

- 1) Baseline, during which no subliminal messages were presented.

- 2) "Write more," during which subjects in the experimental group received a "write more" message for .02 seconds superimposed on the picture they were to describe.
- 3) "Don't write," during which the experimental subjects received a "don't write" message in the same manner of the "write more" messages.

During each of these sections, Zuckerman presented pictures for ten trials each. After each trial, the nurses wrote a description of what they had seen. Zuckerman found that nurses in the experimental group wrote more when the subliminal message to "write more" was flashed in the second section of his experiment. He also noted a slight drop in output of the nurses writing in the third section of his experiment during which the "don't write" message was flashed.¹⁵

The drop in output in the third section of Zuckerman's research may only be because the nurses were experiencing task fatigue. Or the nurses may only have developed writers cramp. Because of time-order manipulation, this study's results may be due to a leveling off of performance rather than an actual decrease in performance because of the superimposed "don't write" messages in the third section of his experiment.

This explanation holds true when comparing control and experimental groups. The students in the experimental group wrote more than the control group in both the

baseline and "write more" sections of the experiment. By the time the experimental group reached the third section they could possibly have hit what psychologists call a "ceiling effect."

Since the variability of the amount of writing over time can only go down, a decrease in performance of the nurses is predictable. Zuckerman was not successful in showing that subliminal messages directly caused a change in behavior.

While Zuckerman's study has been described in detail in this paper because it was the first carefully documented case for the strong claim, further references to studies involving this claim will be brief. The conclusions of studies are more pertinent to the issue at hand than specific procedures.

In the book Subliminal Perception: The Nature of a Controversy, the author (Dixon) examines Zuckerman's study as well as many other studies involving strong claims of subliminal effects. In his review of studies using words as stimuli for test subjects Dixon found "the stimulus tends to elicit responses from the same sphere of meaning."¹⁶ According to Dixon there are no published studies demonstrating that people can understand the full meaning of a subliminal word stimulus. There are at least two studies to back Dixon's claim. They are Heilbrun,¹⁷ and Severance and Dyer.¹⁸

Since competitors' products may be recognized by people as classified in the same "sphere of meaning", it

would be essential for people to identify the full meaning of the stimulus words in a subliminal message. If the people subjected to subliminal stimuli only grasped mere semantic associates, no advantage could be gained by competing companies. The use of subliminal messages by marketers are of little value.

Strong Claim Summary

Scholars have had ample opportunity to conduct new and replicated subliminal studies. But not many scholars have pursued this opportunity. On the basis of the small number of studies completed, one might conclude the existence of subliminal stimuli is possible. Even if possible, the practical difficulties of achieving a real-world application for marketing or advertising messages would be very complicated. Finding empirical documentation of subliminal studies is difficult. The recorded attempts to manipulate consumer's minds secretly have yielded results as subliminal as the stimuli used.

The influences of subliminal stimulation upon preference and choice, if they occur at all, are highly subtle, and the possibility that they could constitute an effective means of controlling consumer behavior or political opinion is highly unlikely.¹⁹

Audible Message Claim

Most studies of subliminal perception have involved visual rather than audio stimulation because the eye is

capable of receiving far more information in a short time. Studies examining auditory reception are concerned primarily with signal detection. Test subjects attempt to determine the presence versus the absence of a weak signal. Published studies investigating possible effects of sub-audible messages are totally absent.

While the eye is sensitive primarily to spatial information, the ear is basically a processor of temporal information, especially in the case of speech perception. The difference is an important one. A great deal of information can be presented simultaneously in a visual display. An auditory stimulus is more extended in time; information arrives in consecutive bits.²⁰

Because an auditory stimulus is extended over a period of time, a tachistoscopic-like procedure of quick auditory stimuli is not achievable. If speech is compressed or telescoped over time, the signal is altered. Sound signals can be distorted considerably before the meaning of the signal is lost. Information is transmitted at 150 words a minute. Comprehension of speech declines rapidly at rates faster than 300 words per minute. Comprehension of the signal declines because when the speed of a message is increased, or decreased, both the frequency and pitch of it is altered. A simple example of this is playing a 33 RPM record at a 78 RPM speed or vice-versa.

Speech comprehension requires the continuous registration, encoding and storage of information. This process takes time. Reducing the volume of accelerated speech compounds the difficulty of losing information from

transmitted messages. Presenting speech or signals at normal speeds but at subthreshold levels is not practical either. The signal is subject to auditory masking. The assumption that behavior can be automatically manipulated by the presentation of a stimulus is as undocumented and unwarranted for auditory messages as it is for visual ones. Since no evidence of auditory subliminal messages exists, claiming these messages change or even influence behavior is completely unattributable.

Embedded Stimuli Claim

Although many scholars have studied the various forms of subliminal stimuli, only Wilson Key recognizes embedded stimuli as being "undeniably competent." Key claims erotic images or words are concealed in newspaper, magazine and television advertisements. He alleges that advertisers use high-speed photography and airbrushing techniques to manipulate consumers' subconscious sex drives. Since Key's best-selling books, many consumers believe in the alleged manipulative intentions of advertisers. Because Key has caused such an uproar, his books and claims warrant serious discussion and elaboration.

Advertising According to Key

A number of Key's quotes are used to completely examine his subliminal argument. Due to the furor his books caused, this point-counterpoint discussion is necessary.

Key claims the use of embedded stimuli by advertisers is ubiquitous. Ritz crackers have the word "sex" baked into them; a Gilbey's Gin ad is full of microscopic erotica. None of these are visible to the naked eye. In fact, Key says weeks of analysis is required for many stimuli to be discovered, especially when embedded upside down.

Key should be applauded, not for revealing advertiser's deepest, darkest secrets, but for knowing how to turn a profit. Key exploits consumers deepest, darkest fears in the process. While his book specifically warns of commercial messages loaded with sexual content designed to influence our purchase decisions, Key uses blatant sexual messages to sell his own book. A glance at the cover reveals this.

Marshall McLuhan, director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, in his introduction of Key's Subliminal Seduction, apologizes up front for Key's lack of scientific evidence proving his claims:

The old journalism had aimed at objectivity by giving 'both sides at once,' as it were, the pro and con, the light and shade in full perspective. The 'new journalism,' on the other hand, eagerly seeks subjectivity and involvement in a resonant environment of events.²¹

Subjectivity is the key word in McLuhan's introduction. He tries to justify Key's totally one-sided view by saying objectivity and relating "both sides at once" is of the

"old" school. Key warns in his book to beware of advertisements and commercial material emulating a "youth oriented society," yet Key himself includes this "new" and quite possibly "youthful" view to sell his book.

Besides the overt use of sex to sell his books, Key uses an overwhelming amount of his and McLuhan's "new subjectivity." According to Key:

...humans can be assumed to have at least two sensory input systems, one encoding data at the conscious level and a second operating at a level below conscious awareness.²²

A concealed word or symbol, "...usually invisible to consciousness appears instantly perceivable at the unconscious level."²³ Key goes on to say visual or auditory stimulation whose speed and/or intensity are beyond the range for normal sensory reception can still be transmitted directly into the unconscious. After that, consumers' behavior is allegedly manipulated. Exactly how these implanted cues affect a product's desirability is not very clear, but Key assures us the cues are effective.

Key says Ritz crackers, in fact, are reported to taste better because they have the word "sex" stamped onto them. Key provides no documentation for the effects he attributes to embedded subliminal stimuli. His assertions can, at best, be regarded as hypothesis awaiting empirical investigation.

Special psychological mechanisms described by Key are what embedded stimuli purportedly operate through. Man's sensory apparatus has been studied by researchers

extensively for years. No evidence exists for more than one class of sensory input systems, as Key claims, nor is there evidence of unconscious perception of stimuli falling outside the functional range of our receptor organs. Key apparently invents whatever features of perception and memory necessary to achieve the results he finds to justify his embedded stimuli argument. Key's super-powerful sensory system serving exclusively the subconscious is not accommodated by any theory of perception, past or present. "Key's books have not been favorably reviewed by the scientific community."²⁴

Although the scientific community can not show prevalent use of subliminal advertising and the American Association of Advertising Agencies says "surely there are better and more profitable pursuits for concerned consumerists," Key insists the use of subliminals is widespread.

In the concept of subliminal phenomena are included all those techniques now known to the mass media by which tens of millions of humans are daily massaged and manipulated without their conscious awareness.²⁵

While Key says "tens of millions" of Americans are manipulated daily, American Association of Advertising Agencies' representative Adams, during testimony, reports quite the opposite:

As far as we know, it (subliminal advertising) has never been used by any of our 530 member agencies over the some thirty years since it became a publicized phenomenon.²⁶

Key attempts to single parts of advertisements out subjectively so far, he reaches a point of not even talking about the same thing. Taking the existentialist's view, one can't possibly know all there is to know about the interrelationships among all the "microscopic bits and pieces" contained in an interface between a human and an advertisement.

Key gives in Subliminal Seduction many impressive statistics, but the statistics do not relate to anything. The author does not present any scientific tests. Most importantly, he does not show any concomittant variation between a test and a cause. His arguments are purely speculative.

Furthermore, Key says subliminal languages are not taught in school and these languages are "uncharted mechanisms of the human unconscious." Apparently only Key knows of these "uncharted mechanisms" since he offers no documentation of them. Key justifies his lack of documentation:

Intuitive or insight logic appears based upon an implicit perception at a level that cannot be defended as conscious thought.²⁸

Key says Albert Einstein's theories and composer Richard Wagner's compositions began as intuitions. This is Key's feeble attempt to tie his intuitions with those of recognized professionals. While Einstein's theories and Wagner's compositions may not be hard fast truth - whatever that is - at least their studies are thoroughly documented.

Their studies began as intuitions and developed to theory after scientific documentation, which Key lacks completely.

Even if Key's arguments reached the level of theoretical discussions, he proceeds too far in his discussions of subliminal perceptions - exaggerating his context when he claims his theory is used in virtually every commercial marketing promotion:

In a recent survey of business and community leaders, more than 90 percent had heard of subliminal communication techniques..."²⁹

Audience reactions to tachistoscope-induced messages have been exhaustively studied.³⁰

Key does not give any rudimentary scientific controls in his examples of studies, and he contradicts all past scholarly studies. In his survey, Key fails to present experimental groups or proof that he reduced error when he conducted his survey.

In the survey of company leaders that Key conducted, he chose an in-depth method. This indicates that Key uses a very small sample to make subjective interpretations. Marketers frown on this method except when it is used for exploratory studies. Key's conclusions could, at best, be subjective imagery from subjective interpretation without descriptive studies to back them up.

In Key's Media Sexploitation, he says the purpose of media "sexploitation" is simple:

...to arouse and manipulate your basic sexual drives below the level of your consciousness - and for purposes that are not your own.³¹

He claims his book exposes all methods in which newspapers, magazines, television, movies, and popular music "mind-rape" the public.

Sex is not the only tool Key alleges that advertisers use to manipulate consumers. He also claims advertisers use people's bodily functions, references to human excrement, and a personal desire for cleanliness to manipulate the consumer desires.

Foreign visitors to America comment frequently upon the ingenious ways in which Americans disguise any reference to excrement. Euphemisms for bowel or urinary movements are elaborate, though apparently unnoticed at the conscious level. Like so many other cultural entities that involve various forms of perceptual defense, the techniques used to avoid dealing with body elimination processes (a euphemism, of course) become invisible to people within the culture. The industry creates its own market by inducing constipation through guilt and anxiety, then providing a simple and profitable solution for it.³²

Even worse than the blatant lack of empirical investigation, is Key's use of consumers' fears to sell his books through the same methods he warns against. Key recognizes the following:

- 1) We tend to reinforce positive attitudes and beliefs and reject negative attitudes and beliefs about ourselves. Through selective perception we defend ourselves by screening all the inputs coming to us. This way, only the inputs central

to us get through all the inputs reaching us.³³

Key uses this tendency to promote a book that offers a simplistic and convenient solution for behavior too complex to comprehend. Since we reject negative influences exerted on us and reinforce the offered positive influences, Key offers his positive solutions to reinforce our belief that when anything goes wrong, it is the fault of someone else.

- 2) A National Enquirer - approach sells. Key manipulates facts to make them appear in a sexual and consumer-threatening context. He claims that if an ad is studied enough, anyone can find sexual imagery in it. This may be true for more than advertisements. For example, if one studies cloud patterns in the sky long enough, sexual imagery can be found there too, if that is what one is looking for.

Key fails to recognize the following:

- 1) If advertisers were manipulating people with subliminal perception as widespread as the author claims, competitors could, if the methods work, use conflicting subliminal messages to combat each other. Marketers would need only to promote favorable messages for their own product, and unfavorable messages for their competitors' product to gain sales. So the

successful marketer, if manipulation is used, would need only to spend more money in his advertising campaign than his competitor to succeed. Customer oriented marketers know that an increase in advertising expenditures does not guarantee an increase in sales.

- 2) In spite of everything advertisers and their agencies attempt to do, using vast sums of money, research, assorted merchandising and marketing tactics and promotions, cents-off coupons, free samples, two-for-one sales, overt and hidden persuasion, eight out of ten new products fail to win consumer favor.

How does this jibe with the claim of social critics that advertising can overpower the public? The fact is that people's heads contain brains, not Jell-O. No matter how much pressure is applied by the weight of ad dollars and absurd and deceptive appeals, you try a product and decide that you like it or not. No brand has public loyalty nailed down - ever.

If advertising can force people to buy anything, why then are there so many special offers made today as desperation measures pleading for you to buy the product? A count showed nearly fifty bargain entreaties in ads in just three national magazines in one month - excluding all other magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, etc...³⁴

Recent Subliminal Proponents

Advertising Age, reported that New Woman magazine has created what general manager Roger Barnett and

associate publisher Wendy Danforth call "subliminal synergism." It is supposedly a technique whereby the dominant color or colors of a four color ad page are picked up on the page opposite as a color-coded tint block behind the headline. Barnett and Danforth say the harmonious colors cause readers eyes to move automatically from an article or editorial to the ad on the next page. Barnett believes the technique makes a one page ad work as well as a two page four-color spread. He said the four-color spreads "have more impact because they exert overt synergism." So even if this new technique works, Barnett still prefers the four-color spreads.³⁵

Barnett and Danforth fail to provide any evidence to indicate that their "technique" works. They do not explain how this "technique" is subliminal or how a direct link between a subject viewing this page leads to consequent direct behavior change. Barnett and Danforth only claim that readers will follow the color block onto the next page. Although they lack empiricle evidence to prove that this happens, it may well be true. But the tendency for a subject to follow a color to see where it leads on a page is entirely different from a subliminal reaction to a stimuli below the threshold of consciousness. Seeing a color block on a printed page is entirely a conscious reaction.

Another recent manipulative proponent was not treated cordially by Advertising Age. Fred Danzig, author of

"The Professor Prunes a Television Trifle," satirically ripped apart Professor Mark Crispin Miller's June 2, New Republic article, "How Sexual Perversity Sells Soap." Professor Miller, a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature, dissected, in the weekly opinion magazine, frame by frame, a 30-second television commercial for Lever's Shield deodorant soap. The professor claims to have discovered that the Shield commercial woos female viewers with a fantasy of dominance.

The commercial shows a towel-clad man at an open window, standing behind a flower box in which his wife, from outside, is reaching up to prune the flowers. The towel-clad husband is upset because his wife Gail has switched to Shield. He fears what effect even a whiff of body odor will have on his company's toughest customer, identified by Professor Miller as "J.J. Siss."³⁶

Miller says the wife Gail was snipping the flowers at the same level as her husband's groin. "Agencies don't select their tactics arbitrarily," Miller writes. "The commercial is a subtle and meticulous endorsement of castration, meant to play on certain widespread guilts and insecurities." He explains: "The flowers stand not for the husband's virility, but for its absence." Miller also finds role reversal rampant in the commercial. He claims the spot is a "sad fantasy" and Gail "can't help but loathe her husband" because of the painful, doomed existence his career has brought them.

If the Lever Company is trying to get women and men to use Shield soap, they certainly would not intentionally use a "castration" sell - what ever that is.

Advertising Age's Fred Danzig called Miller to find if the professor had any proof to back his claims. "He was most pleasant; and said he hadn't discussed his theories with either Lever or JWT because he had reason to believe they wouldn't cooperate with him."³⁷

Miller's claims are more than far-fetched; they are inaccurate. He identified the husband's client in the Shield commercial as "J.J. Siss" and made much of the name. He also made a big deal of the way agencies choose their tactics very carefully. The agencies would not just casually insert names for characters in the commercial. Miller writes that J.J. Siss is "a name whose oxymoronic character implies perversion: J.J. is a stereotypic nickname for the potent boss, while "Siss" is a term of endearment, short for 'sister'." Danzig noted the actual Shield television storyboard referred to the man as J.J. Sisk, not J.J. Siss.

The "subliminal scare" still occurs, as recent as February of 1983, the Arkansas legislature proposed a measure requiring warning labels on music that may have hidden messages recorded in reverse. The measure would have required a warning label on records and tapes with so-called "backward audio masking" - where sinister messages supposedly are audible when the recording is played backwards.

The proposal once "sailed through" the House on an 86-0 vote and "squeaked" out of the Senate. But the Senate amended the bill to say manufacturers producing "backward masked" records without a warning would be guilty of only a misdemeanor. After a 40-35 vote, the House refused to accept the amendment, therefore killing the bill.

The Grand Rapids Press said record manufacturers and performers such as Queen, the Beatles, and the Electric Light Orchestra, have denied all along that their productions have any hidden, backward messages. The bill, written by Reverend Don Hutchings of Hot Springs, was introduced January 20, 1983 by Representative Jack McCoy. Hutchings argued that some backward-masked rock 'n' roll recordings contain hidden messages deifying Satan and marijuana. Hutchings, who was involved in a 1981 public burning of about two thousand dollars worth of records, T-shirts, magazines and books, said Led Zeppelin's rock classic "Stairway to Heaven" contains a hidden message saying, "There is power in Satan."

Leading the movement to kill the bill, Representative Mike Wilson told representatives the bill was making a mockery of the legislative process. "It's our job...to kill or stop silly, nonsensical bills."³⁸

Unfortunately, the recent articles and scholars do not prove their arguments any better than Key did in the past. The same lack of scientific and empiricle investigation is still apparent. To date, no one has presented

any evidence supporting the effectiveness of subliminal advertising. Despite this, scared consumers still want protective laws shielding them from subliminal manipulation.

Legality of Subliminal Advertising

Subliminal advertising is certainly not ethical. The techniques are in strict violation of the voluntary advertising code of the National Association of Broadcasters. The FCC clearly states "the use of subliminal perception is inconsistent with the obligations of a licensee...and broadcasts employing such techniques are contrary to the public interest."³⁹ As far as specific legislation dealing with subliminals: "To my knowledge, no such legislation has been passed."⁴⁰

Certain sections of the Federal Communications Act and the T.V. Code referring to "public interest," "fraud," and "good taste," perhaps could be broadly interpreted as prohibiting subliminal broadcasting, although they do not specifically do so. Even if specific legislation existed dealing with subliminals, the legislation would be subject to judicial interpretation.

The fact is that legislation specifically dealing with subliminals is not now established. Should such legislation targeting on subliminals be enacted? This is not necessary. Creating this type of legislation could create the impression of advertising's "non-use

of this non-technique." Creating regulations in lieu of legislation against subliminals would be equally as useless. The American Association of Advertising Agencies representative, Adams, agrees in his testimony before the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms:

If this regulation (specifically referring to Subliminals) were put into effect by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, we hope that you will do so with full awareness that you are taking another gratuitous swipe at the 'straw man' of advertising - and that you are making illegal what is illogical - that you are ruling against what advertising has already ruled out - and that you are issuing your warning to the already unwilling.⁴¹

The Value of Subliminal Advertising to Marketers

For subliminal advertising to be of any value to marketing, the subliminal message not only must be communicated to a significant group of consumers, but it also must prompt the desired behavior. In an effort to determine whether subliminal advertising has persuasive powers, DeFleur and Petranoff designed a study to test the possibility of a direct link between a subliminal message and consequent behavior change. In their conviction:

There was absolutely no evidence whatever that the subliminal message broadcast in the present experiment had the slightest effect in persuading the mass audience.⁴²

This was true even though the subliminal messages suggested acts of a simple nature, of a type carried out normally by the mass audience as a matter of routine.

This last study specifically tests the relationship between a subliminal directive message and direct behavior change. Since DeFleur and Petranoff show no direct relationship between the two, the marketer has no reason to pursue subliminal advertising. No advertiser will spend money to get his message to the public in an ineffective way if a more effective way is possible.

Subliminal advertising has no value to the modern marketer for the following reasons:

- 1) The limited evidence available on the manipulative persuasiveness of subliminal stimulation shows that it has little or no persuasive power.
- 2) A great deal of evidence shows consumers distort or ignore blatant messages not congruent with their needs. Even greater distortions take place with subliminal messages. This could lead to misinterpretations of the message.
- 3) A number of studies show that the effectiveness of subliminal stimuli increases the nearer the stimuli is to the threshold of consciousness. Since thresholds vary so much from person to person and from day to day, an effective level of subliminal stimulation would be supraliminal (above the threshold of consciousness) for large segments of the population.
- 4) Consumer oriented marketers know the best way to sell a product is to give the customer what

he wants at an economical price. The consumer will not buy a product if he does not like it no matter how persuasive the marketers' promotion is.

Conclusion

Subliminal messages have not been shown to have the power ascribed to them by subliminal advertising advocates. While researchers do offer some marginal evidence of subliminal stimuli influencing like/dislike reactions, the marketing relevance of the evidence remains to be documented. Until then, subliminal messages are useless to the modern marketer.

Future Study

Since empirical support for subliminal influences of a practical marketing nature are neither plentiful nor compelling, more documentation is needed. On the basis of research evidence accumulated so far, the most one could hope for, in terms of marketing application, would be a potential positive like/dislike response to a subliminal message. Whether such an effect could actually be obtained in a realistic viewing situation, and whether the magnitude of the effect would make the exercise worthwhile, still awaits primary investigation. Studies showing direct behavior change due to subliminal stimulation should also be empirically documented.

A comprehensive and reputable primary study was not attempted at this point. To conduct a make-shift study would have compounded the mistakes of past researchers who failed to achieve satisfactory scientific experimental controls. Most of the studies, completed at considerable expense, show subliminal effects only in highly contrived and artificial situations.

Research, empirically documented under satisfactory scientific controls, needs to be completed showing how a subliminal message under normal circumstances could cause direct behavior change. Until this is accomplished, subliminal messages have no relevance to the goals of advertising.

ENDNOTES

- ¹K. Runyon, Consumer Behavior (Columbus, Bell & Howell Co., 1980), p. 332.
- ²"Diddling the Subconscious: Subliminal Advertising," Nation, 185 (Oct. 5, 1957), p. 206.
- ³N. Cousins, "Smudging the Subconscious," Saturday Review, (Oct. 5, 1957), p. 206.
- ⁴"Editorial," New Yorker, 33 (Sept. 21, 1957), p. 33.
- ⁵J. McConnell, L. Cutler and E. McNeil, "Subliminal Stimulation: An Overview," American Psychologist, (1958), pp. 229-242.
- ⁶Testimony from C.F. Adams, American Association of Advertising Agencies Representative, to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms with Specific Reference to Subliminal Advertising, Sept. 9, 1981.
- ⁷T. Moore, "Subliminal Advertising: What You See Is What You Get," Journal of Marketing, (Spring, 1982), pp. 38-47.
- ⁸Ibid., pp. 38-47.
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 38-47.
- ¹⁰N.F. Dixon, Subliminal Perception: The Nature of a controversy (London, McGraw Hill, 1971), pp. 4-7.
- ¹¹D. Kahnman, "Method, Findings and Theory in Studies of Visual Masking," Psychological Bulletin, 70 (1968), pp. 404-425.
- ¹²D. Byrne, "The Effect of Subliminal Food Stimulus on Verbal Responses," Journal of Applied Psychology, 43 (1959), pp. 249-251.
- ¹³D. Hawkins, "The Effects of Subliminal Stimulation on Drive Level and Brand Preference," Journal of Marketing Research, 8 (Aug., 1970), pp. 322-326.
- ¹⁴T. Moore, p. 42.
- ¹⁵M. Zuckerman, "The Effects of Subliminal and Supraliminal Suggestions on Verbal Productivity," Journal of Abnormal and Social Personality, 60 (1960), pp. 404-411.

- ¹⁶N.F. Dixon, pp. 4-7.
- ¹⁷K.S. Heilbrun, "Silverman's Subliminal Psychodynamic Activation: A Failure to Replicate," Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 89 (1980), pp. 560-566.
- ¹⁸L.J. Severance and F.N. Dyer, "Failure of Subliminal Word Presentations to Generate Interference to Colornaming," Journal of Experimental Psychology, 101 (1973), pp. 186-189.
- ¹⁹W. Bevan, "Subliminal Perception," Fields of Applied Psychology, (1964), p. 57.
- ²⁰T. Moore, p. 44.
- ²¹W.B. Key, Subliminal Seduction (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 1.
- ²²W.B. Key, Seduction, p. 35.
- ²³Ibid., p. 35.
- ²⁴M. Schulman, "The Great Conspiracy," Journal of Communications, 31 (1981), p. 209.
- ²⁵W.B. Key, Seduction, p. 11.
- ²⁶C.F. Adams, p. 6.
- ²⁷W.B. Key, Seduction, p. 10.
- ²⁸W.B. Key, Seduction, p. 11.
- ²⁹W.B. Key, Seduction, p. 22.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 22.
- ³¹W.B. Key, Media Sexploitation (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 1.
- ³²W.B. Key, Sexploitation, p. 69.
- ³³K. Runyon, p. 332.
- ³⁴S.S. Baker, The Permissible Lie: The Inside Truth About Advertising (Cleveland, World Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 57-59.
- ³⁵"Adbeat," Advertising Age, (June 14, 1982), p. 37.
- ³⁶F. Dazig, "The Professor Prunes a Television Trifle," Advertising Age, (June 7, 1982), p. 24.

³⁷Ibid., p. 24.

³⁸"Arkansas Drops Plan to Require Warning Tag on 'Satanic' Records," The Grand Rapids Press (Feb. 10, 1983), sec. C, p. 9.

³⁹C.F. Adams, p. 6.

⁴⁰K. Runyon, p. 332.

⁴¹C.F. Adams, p. 7.

⁴²M.L. DeFleur and R.M. Petranoff, "A Television Test of Subliminal Persuasion," Public Opinion Quarterly, 23 (1959), pp. 170-180.

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