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## Subliminal advertising: The commercial appropriation of the unconscious

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**SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING: THE COMMERCIAL  
APPROPRIATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS**

Brian D. Williams

Submitted in fulfillment of the  
requirement of University  
of Northern Iowa's  
'Presidential Scholar Thesis'

Approved:

**Steve B. Corbin**

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Date

A Presidential Scholar Thesis:

**Subliminal Advertising:  
The Commercial Appropriation  
of the Unconscious**

Brian D. Williams

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*“We are all at the mercy of influences over which we are unaware and over which we have virtually no conscious control.”*

-Robert Rosenthal, Pygmalion in the Classroom, 1933

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## **Subliminal: An Introduction**

Subliminal advertising refers to the use of subliminal techniques by mass media and what these media messages are doing to society. A secret technology has existed and been in widespread use for decades which modifies consumer's behavior invisibly, channels basic value systems, and manages to drive much bigger segments of the population into certain pathological behaviors.

The term **subliminal** technically means *below the threshold of perception*. This definition is not actually used in practice, because most experts in perceptual psychology and in cognitive science agree that information that is truly below the limen of perception (too soft, too faint, too distant) is simply not perceived reliably in any way. If the stimulus strength is too weak to become the focus of attention, theoretically it is also too weak to activate any unconscious processes of perception. The loophole in this idea is that we can perceive classes of stimuli which are above the basic

stimulus threshold for perception, but are not noticed for other reasons.

Maybe a better working definition of a subliminal influence that better defines the way the term is commonly used would be *information that influences our behavior without our being consciously aware*. The term is used to mean that we can "unconsciously" understand and act upon a message that we don't notice we have received.

## **Subliminal: A Definition**

The popular use of the term subliminal often implies that we can perceive but don't perceive. An example of this would be messages that we aren't directly attending, such as in the experimental model of dichotic listening, where we hear different messages in each ear and try to listen to only one of them. In theory, the message that we are not directly attending is heard "subliminally." Another example would be a visible message

hidden within a larger pattern. There were several claims made in the 70's by various authors that advertisers were hiding sexual images in mundane pictures in order to secretly excite the viewer and thus influence their state of mind toward the product. Most of the practices used in neurolinguistic programming and in hypnosis either provide messages that we are fully conscious of perceiving, or provide messages that we could perceive, but are not directly attending.

The term subliminal can also imply a message that we cannot consciously perceive at all. A good example being the tachistopic images which are flashed too rapidly to be recognized consciously. If the claims of audio self-help "subliminal" tape manufacturers are accurate, then there are also audio methods of encoding messages that are not consciously perceived, such as by modulating music patterns by the frequency or amplitude of vocal patterns.

Subliminal perception refers to apparent perception that occurs according to some sort of test of subliminal threshold levels or unconscious types of sensory stimuli. The sensory threshold may be experimentally defined in either of two ways, subjectively (the intensity or stimulus type below which someone does not report the presence of the stimuli, or reports it less than half the time) or objectively (below which they cannot detect the presence of the stimuli, or they detect it less than half the time.)

What is the difference between reporting and detecting? In the subjective measure of threshold, reporting, the subject is asked whether they are aware of a stimulus. In the objective measure of threshold, detection, the observer is asked to distinguish between multiple stimuli presented successively. This objective method defines awareness as the ability to discriminate between alternatives in a forced-choice test. Subthreshold stimuli are reported or detected less than half the time (or not at all.)

Recent studies indicate that subliminal perception is probably best viewed as perception in the absence of concurrent phenomenal experience. This is as opposed to the mistaken notion of perception in the absence of a detectable signal. The former is directly applicable to hypnosis, while the latter is more applicable to the questionable business of subliminal persuasion technologies.

The typical test of subliminal perception involves a picture or word flashed for a very brief period by means of a tachistoscope. The stimuli are considered subthreshold or subliminal because the subject generally cannot report with accuracy (above chance levels) whether a message is being flashed or a blank screen is being shown. The effects of subliminal perception are tested by means of having the subject perform a task that can be influenced by the subthreshold stimulus. If this influence occurs reliably, then there is evidence that information can be processed without conscious awareness. The two important questions about this are then (1) under what conditions and with what kind of information

and processing this occurs, if it occurs at all, and (2) how the information perceived compares with information received under other conditions. Specifically, does information being received subliminally have any special significance?

### **Effectiveness of Subliminal Stimuli**

In order for a subliminal influence to be interesting, it must have an effect upon us that we don't find from more straightforward influences. If it were simply an information transfer that we were talking about, which we later processed consciously without knowing where it came from, it would not be as interesting. It would simply be neutral information from a source we did not remember. The theoretical position that makes subliminal influence worth considering is that messages received outside of awareness are received and understood but processed very differently than usual.

Various forms of subliminal influences are often claimed to be ways of bypassing our critical intelligence in order to reprogram our mind without realizing what is happening. Several widespread fallacies have made this idea seem more plausible than it should, even among the knowledgeable, but it is based on a very weak foundation scientifically. This in itself of course does not mean that it doesn't happen, only that dramatic claims about this process should be viewed skeptically, particularly if they claim to be substantiated by scientific research.

Most people today are unaware of the strategies utilized to direct their destinies. The illusion is still there- that individuals are in total control of their own thoughts, values, and behaviors. We believe that we think entirely for and by ourselves. This is obviously false.

Possibly one of the greatest enigmas throughout history continues to be the nature of the human mind. Evidence on how the brain receives, stores, processes, and communicates to other

brains is incomplete and inconclusive. Much research by many scientists has attempted to construct order from the complexity of the brain. Unfortunately there are more questions about the brain and how it functions than there are answers.

Consider the theory that the brain contains two major systems or levels of operation that respond to perceptual inputs. These are the conscious and the unconscious. Subliminal advertising stimuli deal with the portion of the brain which retains information and operates without our conscious awareness. To some extent, we all enjoy magic and being tricked- being made victims of our own illusions and fantasies. We become angry only when we discover the deceiver has taken advantage of us. Of course, we are usually unwilling to admit that we have been tricked.

The elements within an individual's environment, with which he or she interacts consciously and unconsciously, make up one's "environmental surround." There are always so many perceptual particles within this surround that no individual could conceivably

concentrate consciously upon everything at the same time.

Therefore conscious awareness is always fragmented. Because visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory perceptions are innumerable, continuous, and overlapping, the conscious mind cannot deal simultaneously with all of them. The perception process appears to be a concentration upon a small portion of perceptions. Consciously perceived reality is usually a vast oversimplification, an abstraction, of actual perceivable reality.

The myriad of perceptions that conscious awareness has deemphasized, set aside, and/or repressed, remain in the brain's unconscious storage for varying periods of time. Some are perhaps stored permanently. This has yet to be determined.

Perception is total and instantaneous at the nonconscious level but extremely limited at a conscious level. It will become vital to survival that humans learn to overcome their vulnerability to manipulation. The common sense we base everyday decisions on

may be the world's most dangerous perceptual illusion. Common sense is often uncommonly deceptive.

## **Subliminal Usage: A History**

How can we account for the widespread belief in subliminal persuasion? There are several reasons why people find this rather peculiar idea to have some validity. For starters, most people believe that some scientific experiment was conducted years ago that used subliminal messages to boost the sales of theater concessions in a New Jersey cinema-house.

There was a report in the media of a six-week study of consumers at a movie theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1956, where marketing specialist James Vicary had secretly used the tachistoscope along with the movie projectors to flash suggestions to buy popcorn and Coke.

The tachistoscope was an invention Vicary came across in his dealings. The tachistoscope is a machine, not unlike a film

projector, with one major difference. The tachistoscope could flash beams of light so rapidly that the human eye could not perceive the transmission. It projected its information by way of a beam of light at 1/60,000th of a second. Vicary tried to sell his idea to the large advertising agencies and corporations. His persuasive sales pitch was that consumers would comprehend information that they could not literally see. He sent a news release to the major media announcing his discovery without any scientific validation whatsoever.

The reports of this fed the public fears and imagination in a powerful way which turned out to be much more potent than the method in Vicary's study. His study in fact turned out to be a hoax, as admitted by Vicary's colleagues and demonstrated by repeated failures to replicate the supposed effect. There still have been no successful replications to this date, or any clear evidence that subliminal messages produced by the tachistoscope can significantly influence behavior. What passes for evidence of

subliminal persuasion is simply reliable evidence that subjects detect some stimuli that they are not aware of detecting, and that such perception can influence simple lexical priming tasks, not attitudes or behaviors.

This subthreshold detection effect occurs in laboratory situations when subjects are already highly motivated to guess correctly and when they are forced to guess in multiple choice situations. So far, it has never been demonstrated in more natural settings. This is a far cry from the claims of manufacturers that their subliminal products can plant suggestions into people's minds that they are then compelled to follow. Numerous tests on modern subliminal technologies have turned up no evidence of a subliminal persuasion effect. The closest thing found has been a placebo-type effect that is not related to the content of the messages, but to the expectations of the user, and even that seems to result in a mostly illusory benefit. They perceive a benefit in accordance with their expectations of a benefit, but more objective

measures failed to validate any such benefit as an outcome of the experiment.

Given that the majority of evidence contradicts the popular notion that our subconscious mind can be programmed with invisible or unheard commands, at least in any straightforward sense we still have some interesting evidence that much more is processed by our brains than we are aware of being processed. In addition to the recent lexical priming experiments, previous research had seemingly shown that tachistoscopically presented pictures of people engaged in various behaviors could influence subject's evaluation of the personality of the people in the pictures. Even though subjects reported not seeing the behavior picture being flashed. Interest in this subject decreased after later experiments failed to replicate previous results. It became obvious that it would be difficult or impossible to determine the degree to which subjects were perceiving and ignoring the subthreshold stimuli.

Current research has shown that subtle stimuli which are perceived without awareness are not processed any differently from other types of stimuli.

Another reason why otherwise knowledgeable people find this idea of hidden messages to be credible is that they have come to believe that there is some science behind the popular notion of the "unconscious mind" which supposedly operates like a computer with a hidden valve in the back which can be fed information without realizing it. Some populists of neuroscience have at times unknowingly passed on wild interpretations of poorly understood research about the hemispheres of the brain.

The idea was that messages could somehow be stuffed into the right hemisphere, which would not critique the message, while the left hemisphere was asleep or otherwise occupied. This was for a while theorized by some to also be the mechanism by which hypnotic suggestion operated. This has since shown to be

incorrect, or at least so highly oversimplified to be meaningless for any practical purposes.

The science behind this is that neuroscientists have discovered that the brain hemispheres are functionally specialized and process language differently. However, both hemispheres are used in understanding verbal messages. The left hemisphere seems dominant for producing overt speech, phonetic decoding, using syntax and some but not all semantic processes. The right hemisphere also has a language faculty, dominant for using the pragmatic aspects of language, integrating information across sentences and using context. Clearly, reasoning requires functions for which both hemispheres are dominant.

Most of what goes on in the mind is "unconscious." We are generally unaware of most of the regulatory processes that keep us alive and the details of the learned skills that we perform. Distinct conscious awareness is mostly useful to us when we are responding to novelty or when we are first learning a new skill or

initiating a new thought, plan, or action. The more familiar we are with a task, the less of it is in our awareness. Awareness is also useful for linguistic communication, for performing modeling of the world internally in order to test alternatives safely, and for reorganizing memories and plans. Still, a lot of brain function is not conscious and would probably cause problems if it were made conscious.

### **What can be done about these Subliminals?**

To eliminate all advertising that is suspected of using this technique would have disastrous effects on the American economy. It would solve nothing to impose a “clean up” of all advertising. Even if the use of subliminal advertising were made illegal, it would be impossible to enforce.

What the consumers must do is learn to look at ads in a more critical manner. “Talk back” to ads that you see and hear and question their intent. Analyze the techniques being used to

persuade you. Consider your own personal needs and possible weaknesses and decide whether or not the ads are exploiting your fears and anxieties.

## **Looking forward to the “Age of Manipulation”**

Advertising is big business. The purpose of advertising is to persuade, to sell products, services, or ideas, to heighten expectations, and to manipulate the mind. The age of manipulation will find subliminal advertising being used by television, radio, newspaper, movies, magazines, cassette tapes, and billboards. With the nearly 37 differentiated sensory inputs to the brain, there are myriad possibilities for using subliminal stimuli to solicit, manipulate, modify, and manage human behavior.

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