



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

2013

How to Make Money From Subliminal Advertising and Motivation Research

Paul Messaris

University of Pennsylvania, pmessaris@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

 Part of the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Messaris, P. (2013). How to Make Money From Subliminal Advertising and Motivation Research. *International Journal of Communication*, 7 626-641. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/454

Books reviewed in this article:

Charles R. Acland, *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 307 pp.

Lawrence R. Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 218 pp.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/454

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

How to Make Money From Subliminal Advertising and Motivation Research

Abstract

The news media began to report and editorialize about subliminal advertising in 1957, in response to events that are recounted in detail in *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Viewing*, Charles Acland's (2012) excellent history of the idea of subliminal influence (p. 91ff). Those events have been described by several previous writers, but one of the many virtues of Acland's book is that he gives us the most carefully documented account to date.

Disciplines

Communication | Public Relations and Advertising | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments

Books reviewed in this article:

Charles R. Acland, *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 307 pp.

Lawrence R. Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 218 pp.

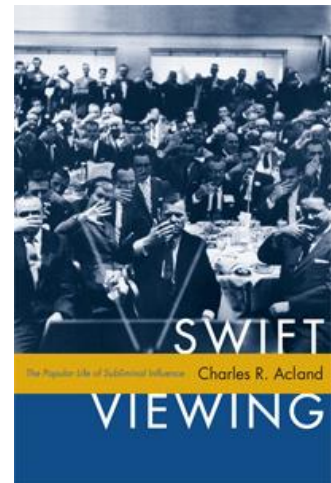
How to Make Money from Subliminal Advertising and Motivation Research

Charles R. Acland, **Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 307 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Lawrence R. Samuel, **Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America**, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 218 pp., \$22.76 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Paul Messaris
University of Pennsylvania

The news media began to report and editorialize about subliminal advertising in 1957, in response to events that are recounted in detail in *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Viewing*, Charles Acland's (2012) excellent history of the idea of subliminal influence (p. 91ff). Those events have been described by several previous writers, but one of the many virtues of Acland's book is that he gives us the most carefully documented account to date. On September 12, 1957, a market researcher named James Vicary gave a press conference in which he made a dramatic announcement. He said that he had recently completed a successful test of a powerful new advertising technique that made use of a device called a *tachistoscope*, which was capable of projecting images of such short duration that viewers were not aware of having seen them. Vicary had installed the tachistoscope in a movie theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey, and programmed it to project two messages on the movie screen, one after the other, over and over again, during the movie. The messages, which were shown for 1/3000th of a second each, at 5-second intervals, were: "eat popcorn" and "drink Coca-Cola." Vicary's test ran in the theater for six weeks. By the end of that period, the theater's sales of Coca-Cola had gone up by 18.1%, and its sales of popcorn had risen by 57.5%. Acland points out that "it was the release of these unbelievable results that sparked the wave of public interest and anxiety about subliminal methods of influence" (p. 92).



The public interest and anxiety that Acland refers to began with angry commentary by the news media. For example, an editorial in the *Nation* fulminated that "subliminal advertising is the most alarming and outrageous discovery since Mr. Gatling invented his gun" (as quoted in Acland, p. 115). Similarly, the *Christian Century* labeled subliminal advertising "The Invisible Monster" and advised its readers to "Buy no brands that do not display a 'No Subliminal Projection Advertising' affidavit" (ibid.). Predictably, these expressions of concern were taken up by politicians, such as Senator Charles Potter of Michigan, a member of the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee. Displaying an expansive interpretation of his mandate that is characteristic of the Federal government's attitude toward "interstate commerce," Potter warned his constituents about the following possible outcome of subliminal advertising: "Soon many of the

Copyright © 2013 (Paul Messaris, pmessaris@asc.upenn.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

viewers may find themselves wanting a drink of Glugg beer, strange, for some are teetotalers, others have a longstanding preference for Glotz ale" (as quoted in Acland, p. 125). Subliminal advertising was also investigated by regulatory agencies and by the media industry's own self-policing bodies. Moreover, at the same time that this more serious-minded scrutiny was going on, the topic of subliminal influence was being enthusiastically explored by the entertainment media, where it has remained a reliable attention getter ever since. Having surveyed a substantial number of movies and TV shows that have referred to subliminal effects, Acland concludes that "the subliminal has folkloric status. It has occupied a prominent and lasting place in popular culture for the last five decades, with no sign of that run abating" (p. 27).

According to James Vicary, 45,699 theater patrons were exposed to the subliminal ads in his test. Acland thinks that number may have been just a "wild estimate" (p. 228), and it's clear that he is skeptical about the accuracy of at least some of the other details in Vicary's story. However, let us assume that everything Vicary claimed really did occur and that his successful first test of subliminal advertising had an audience of 45,699 people. More than 50 years have gone by since his theater experiment. If we had to estimate the number of additional people who were prompted by subliminal advertising to buy products in those five or so decades, a good guess would be zero. In fact, if we had to estimate the number of people who have even been exposed to subliminal advertising in that time span, our best guess would still have to be zero. The reason for these null estimates is ultimately technical. Vicary had hoped to use his Fort Lee theater test as a springboard for the development of some kind of advertising business based on tachistoscopic projection. However, that plan failed, and other attempts to adapt tachistoscopic technology for advertising purposes were also unsuccessful. Consequently, further exploration of subliminal advertising had to operate within the existing technical confines of cinema and television. Without a tachistoscope, movies and video can't achieve the short projection durations that subliminal advertising requires. The shortest frame rate in regular movies is $1/24^{\text{th}}$ of a second—although film makers are now experimenting with $1/48^{\text{th}}$ of a second—and U.S. television operates at a frame rate of $1/30^{\text{th}}$ of second. At those rates, a single-frame advertising image or slogan inserted in a movie or TV broadcast bumps up against the limits of human perception. We may not have time to read the word or identify the image, but we notice that something is there, so the experience is not truly subliminal.

To illustrate this point, I have inserted Vicary's two advertising messages into a short video clip from *Picnic*, which was identified (after the fact) as the movie that had been showing in the Fort Lee theater during the tachistoscopic test. As in Vicary's test, the advertising messages were superimposed on top of the movie's images, and I have spaced them out in 5-second intervals. In contrast to Vicary's test, however, the messages in my video illustration (Video Clip 1) last a full 30^{th} of a second as opposed to $1/3000^{\text{th}}$ of a second. As can be verified through viewing the clip, the flashes may not always be readable, but they are by no means so fast as to completely elude detection. Hence, the likelihood that U.S. audiences have not been exposed to true subliminal advertising since Vicary's day, let alone been persuaded by it to buy anything.



Video Clip 1. Single-Frame Advertising Messages from the movie Picnic.

At first blush, then, it may seem that subliminal advertising is a largely imaginary menace and that being concerned about it is somewhat similar to worrying about UFOs. Acland himself makes that connection in his book's opening chapter, a re-examination of the famous 1938 radio broadcast in which Orson Welles narrated a documentary-style tale of an invasion from Mars based on the science fiction classic, *The War of the Worlds*. The radio audience's reaction to Welles's broadcast has come to be seen as an example of media-induced mass hysteria: Listeners believed that a Martian spaceship had actually landed in New Jersey, and panic ensued. By analogy, the fear and anger that greeted Vicary's demonstration of subliminal persuasion could also be viewed as delusional. But that is not the point that Acland wants to make. Instead, he reminds us that people living in the world of 1938 had every reason to worry about new sources of danger and new technologies of destruction. "Soon enough, global war was to begin and killing machines were about to be released that at this point were just the province of the imagination" (p. 5). Similarly, Acland argues that persistent anxieties about the specific threat of subliminal advertising are manifestations of a more diffuse unease concerning the power, ubiquity, and complexity of new media. Surrounded by sights and sounds whose appeal they may not always have understood and whose sophistication they may sometimes have overestimated, media consumers of the 1950s and subsequent decades embraced the term "subliminal" as an encompassing label for the

mysterious workings of mass culture. As Acland puts it, the concept of subliminal influence may have provided “a way to recognize and pose questions about the bewildering pace of cultural upheaval” (p. 42). He sees the media critique that is encapsulated in that concept as “part of a historically specific language that captures the mystery, skepticism, and wonder of the new media age, an age that we continue to imagine we inhabit and hope to understand in full eventually” (p. 42).

Acland’s interpretation of the cultural significance of subliminal influence is supported by the fact that so many different kinds of media effects are now routinely called “subliminal.” Just about any subtlety, any complexity, any meaning that seems less than fully explicit can be branded, through the use of that label, as an instance of media elusiveness or chicanery. Indeed, it has been argued that, from the perspective of experimental psychology, a stimulus counts as subliminal regardless of whether we fail to attend to it because our mind is on something else, or we cannot attend to it because it was produced by a tachistoscope or other such device (Erdelyi & Zizak, 2004; see also Heath, 2012). As far as advertising is concerned, this broader view of subliminal persuasion includes a pair of especially interesting examples, namely, camouflaged images and product placement.

The alleged presence of camouflaged images in ads became a topic of enduring public fascination thanks to the many writings of Wilson Bryan Key. Anyone who knows Key’s work will not be surprised to hear that Acland (2012) considers it “kooky” (p. 35), but Acland does acknowledge the central role that Key has played in introducing successive generations of young readers to the concept of subliminal persuasion. It seems fair to say that when people today think of subliminal advertising, what they have in mind above all is what Key wrote about—exemplified clearly in the very first illustration (see Figure 1) from Key’s (1973) first book, *Subliminal Seduction* (facing p. 102). In a print ad for Gilbey’s Gin, we see a tall glass filled with liquid, a slice of lime, and four ice cubes stacked one above the other. If one traces the reflections on the bottom three ice cubes, one realizes that they form the letters S-E-X. However, hardly anyone notices that fact until it has been pointed out. As Acland concedes, the entertainment value of this kind of detective work is obvious, and its continuing appeal can be assessed quite readily, if one does an online image search on the word “subliminal.” Another example that has shown up in such a search is a 2003 ad for Chivas Regal whisky, featuring three ice cubes in a near-empty glass. The ad’s text refers to a naked woman in the ice cubes, and viewers who may “need a hint” are directed to a website, where it is revealed that the women’s reclining body is hidden in the top-left part of the right-most ice cube (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. 1971 Camouflaged message in ice cubes?

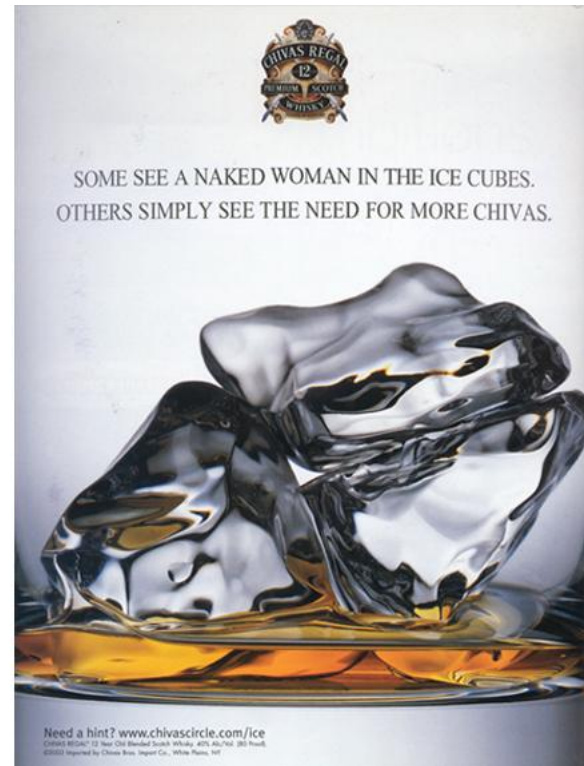


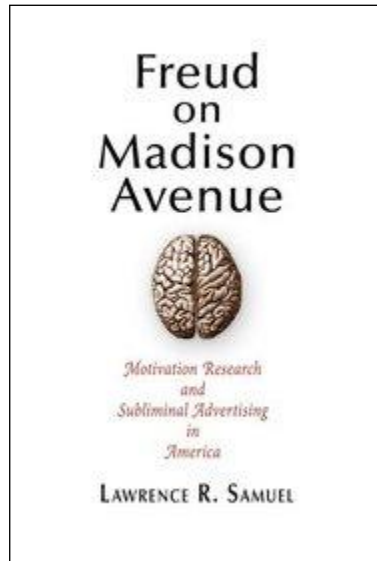
Figure 2. 2003 Camouflaged message in ice cubes?

In contrast to camouflaged imagery, product placement is indisputably real, and it is becoming increasingly common due to the growing ability of TV viewers to block or skip traditional commercials. Although the topic appears only fleetingly in Acland's book, product placement is worth considering in more detail here in connection with the crucial question of whether subliminal advertising actually has any effect. Some forms of product placement are very obvious. Cars (and other products) make lengthy on-screen appearances, are well-integrated into storylines, and are paired with the movies' stars in concurrent advertising in other media. However, other forms of product placement are much more transient and subtle. For example, in the opening scene of the 2004 movie *2046*, an LG Electronics digital billboard is glimpsed in the background as the camera pans across a futuristic cityscape. The logo occupies a minuscule amount of screen time in a short scene in which the viewer is trying to figure out what this movie is going to be about (see Video Clip 2). On both technical and contextual grounds, it can be argued that this is just about as close as movies are likely to come to true subliminal imagery. That observation, in turn, leads to an important question: Is there any evidence that such subtlety in advertising is more effective than obviousness?



Video Clip 2. LG Logo from the Movie 2046.

Acland is skeptical about the effectiveness of subliminal advertising, but he notes that there is a small body of academic research that has tested both tachistoscopic and camouflaged persuasion and found weak support for each (see Messaris, 1997, pp. 68–69, for a review): Specifically, the ads featuring subliminal messages were more effective than were the same ads without those messages. That two-way comparison may seem like the obvious method for testing effectiveness. However, it fails to address an important question: Granted, subliminal messages may be more effective than no messages, but what happens when we pit subliminal messages against equivalent nonsubliminal messages? Is the word "SEX" in a gin ad more effective when it's camouflaged, or when it's spelled out clearly? In the research literature that has dealt directly with subliminal advertising, this question has gone unanswered. However, the contrast between subtle and obvious messages is a standard concern in studies of product placement. Advertisers have always been wary of too-obvious product placement because of the fear that it might trigger resistance. Yet, that is not what the evidence shows. The most direct experimental investigation of this topic—performed with a videogame designed specifically for the experiment—found that obvious product placement enhanced the memorability of a product and had no adverse impact on its appeal (Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010).



In other words, even when we look beyond the strictly subliminal, we don't find much evidence that advertisers have profited by being covert. Although Acland may be completely correct in assuming that the public sees subliminal advertising as a stand-in for the dizzying complexity of media as a whole, it is still worth asking whether there is any other, more specific basis for public fears about covert media influence. A plausible answer to this question comes from Lawrence Samuel's (2010) lively and informative book about Freudian ideas in U.S. advertising—*Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America*.

Acland and Samuel cover overlapping territories in distinctly different ways. With his focus on the idea of subliminal influence, Acland's main concern is to trace the idea's evolution through time and its ramifications across various areas of mass culture, including not only advertising but also entertainment and education (a topic to which we will return later). Samuel's (2010) main interest is in the way in which scholarly or scientific ideas about the unconscious mind were applied to advertising. As his book's subtitle makes clear, he includes subliminal advertising in his purview, but the bulk of the book is devoted to the topic of "motivation research."

If James Vicary's account of his tachistoscopic experiment is the founding narrative of subliminal advertising, the equivalent position in the chronology of motivation research—as recounted by Samuel—is occupied by a story about Paul Lazarsfeld. Although Lazarsfeld is best-known today for his contributions to the sociology of mass communication, he had a parallel and complementary career in market research. As Samuel (2010) describes it, a crucial experience in this part of Lazarsfeld's life occurred in 1930 when he was still living in Vienna. As an expert in quantitative survey research, he was hired by the owners of a new laundry to explore methods of attracting new customers. On the basis of interviews with existing customers, Lazarsfeld found that they had initially been reluctant to send their wash out because of cultural norms about the proper responsibilities of an Austrian housewife. However, that reluctance had often been overcome when family emergencies had forced them to look outside the household for help. Accordingly, Lazarsfeld advised the laundry's owners to send a letter describing their services to every household in their market in which there had recently been a death. His advice was accepted, and "business instantly picked up, lighting a spark under a new kind of research that over the next few decades would revolutionize global consumer culture" (p. 21).

A footnote reveals that Lazarsfeld told this story to an interviewer from a business journal in 1959. Presumably, he saw it as a colorful preview of the power of systematic research as a tool for uncovering the underlying motives of consumer behavior. However, the story doesn't fully convey what was to become the distinctive ingredient of the "motivation research" that it foreshadowed.



Figure 3. 1939 Chrysler advertisement

In the mid-1930s, after Lazarsfeld had moved to the United States, he and other market researchers became increasingly interested in the notion that consumers are not always aware of their own motivations. This notion drove motivation research in an explicitly psychoanalytic direction, and that concern with "depth psychology" became its defining characteristic. Samuel notes that the "official beginning" of motivation research is considered to be an article that Lazarsfeld wrote for a publication of the American Marketing Association, in which depth psychology was mentioned several times (p. 23). Commenting on the European roots of psychoanalytic scholarship, Anthony Heilbut, a historian of the period, described Lazarsfeld as "a product of refined European learning who hustled himself a position in the marketplace" (as quoted in Samuel, p. 23).

The connection between motivation research and European psychoanalytic thinking was strengthened by Ernest Dichter, a former student of Lazarsfeld's who likewise emigrated from Vienna to New York in the 1930s and found employment in market research. Dichter is the central character in Samuel's account of motivation research, and his description of Dichter's work includes many details about his personality in addition to information about his research practices. Dichter appears to have been a cheerful, unapologetic self-promoter; one of the major contributions of Samuel's book is its emphasis on the extent to which people in the advertising industry have to sell themselves before they can sell any product. In particular, market researchers and consultants have to be able to convince advertisers and agencies to buy the particular type of research approach or expertise that each of them has to offer. What Dichter had to offer was a PhD in psychology from the University of Vienna and a background in psychoanalysis, including experience as a practicing psychoanalyst. With help from Lazarsfeld, he was able to convince agencies that he could use interviews with consumers to uncover the hidden, previously unspoken meanings of products—knowledge that could then be used to shape the way products were advertised. As Dichter's wife, Hedy, put it many years later, "So he saw that soap was more than soap, and a bath was more than a bath" (as quoted in Samuel, p. 34).

Hedy Dichter's comment referred to the first campaign that her husband worked on, for Ivory soap. On the basis of interviews with a hundred people, Dichter advised Ivory's agency, Compton Advertising, that bathing was an erotic experience, "one of the few occasions when the puritanical American was allowed to caress himself or herself" (as quoted in Samuel, p. 33). Samuel doesn't say how this psychoanalytic revelation about the sexual implications of bathing influenced the advertising of Ivory soap, but he calls Dichter's interviews for Ivory "the first motivation research study in the United States" (p. 34). This work was followed by research for Chrysler, whom Dichter informed that "an automobile was perceived by American men as either a kind of wife or a kind of mistress" (as quoted in Samuel, p. 34). He also advised Chrysler to use sexual double entendre in the verbal copy of its ads and suggested such possibilities as "It fits me like a glove" or "You just slip it in" (ibid.). In retrospect, it isn't clear exactly which Chrysler ads (if any) were directly affected by Dichter's research, but his influence may be at work in a number of ads from the late 1930s, including the one pictured in Figure 3. The lengthy copy, in the form of a letter from a woman to a man, seems to imply that the woman is getting sexually aroused by the car. After saying that "My heart is set on that gorgeous new Chrysler," the woman gives glowing descriptions of the car's various features, and finally gets so excited that she has to pause to catch her breath: "the driving vision . . . the ease of handling . . . the concealed trunk . . . the . . . I'm out of breath, darling." It may also be significant that the woman is conspicuously displaying her left hand, which doesn't feature a wedding band.

Dichter's work for Chrysler brought him national fame, including a story in *TIME* magazine. However, in assessing the impact of his ideas on advertising, it is useful to remember Samuel's point about self-promotion: What we know about Dichter and about motivation research as a whole must ultimately have originated from Dichter himself or from other people in advertising. Samuel calls Dichter's work for Ivory "groundbreaking" and his work for Chrysler "positively radical" (p. 34), but that may simply mean that Dichter-style research—and the terminology associated with it—became a valuable new promotional tool for advertising agencies, which were able to convince clients that their proposed campaign strategies were backed up by esoteric European scholarship. The acclaim that Dichter achieved should not be taken to mean that the actual look of ads was radically transformed by his ideas. Recall his pronouncement about Americans being able to caress themselves while bathing. Maybe Dichter's clients at Ivory hadn't heard that idea expressed as a theoretical proposition before, but long before Dichter appeared on the scene, some of the images and words in Ivory advertising seem to have conveyed a very similar message. In an Ivory ad from the period following World War I, an ex-soldier's letter describes the following memory: "It certainly seemed like home to rub in the mild Ivory lather from head to foot and then feel the delightful exhilaration following a brisk rubdown" (Figure 4). Another Ivory ad, from 1931, shows a man in a tub scrubbing himself vigorously (Figure 5). As for Dichter's advice to Chrysler about men's conflation of cars and women, anyone who is familiar with the history of automobile advertising will know that the association between glamorous women and cars predates Dichter's work by at least two decades, although it is true that early European advertising tended to be more explicit than that of its American counterparts in that respect (Figures 6, 7).

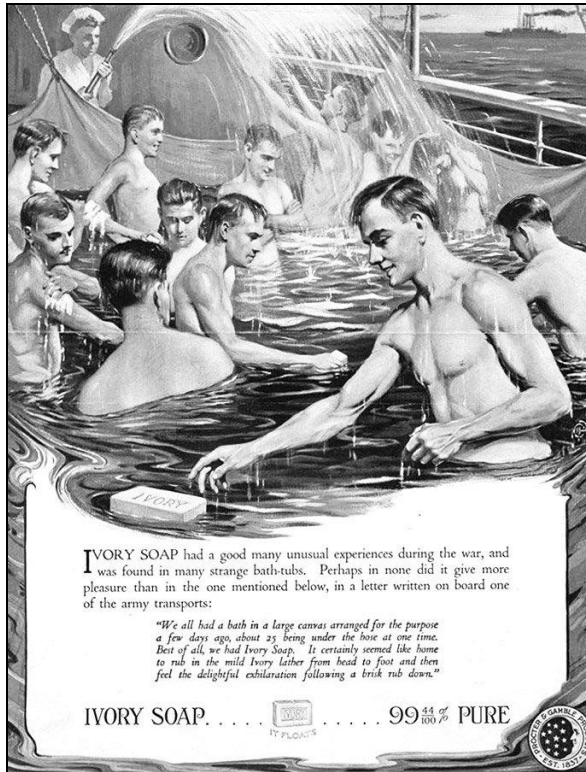


Figure 4. Post-World War I Ivory Soap advertisement.



Figure 5. 1931 Ivory Soap advertisement.

Regardless of the extent to which Dichter may have transformed the actual look of advertising, Samuel's characterization of his work as "groundbreaking" and "radical" seems fully justified by his impact on the process through which advertising came to be created. As Samuel shows, Dichter's ideas and methods were adopted widely and eagerly by the advertising industry, and in the decade following the Second World War, motivation research became a staple ingredient in the development of marketing campaigns. Samuel points out that by the mid-1950s there were dozens of research firms and consultants engaged in motivation research, and the field had settled into three distinct schools. In addition to the Freudians, such as Dichter, there was a "psychosocial" school that was more interested in group behavior, as well as a school associated with Herta Herzog (another expatriate from Austria) whose approach to motivation research had been influenced by Alfred Adler's version of psychoanalysis. Samuel notes that it was Herzog who developed the type of group discussion that evolved into today's focus groups (p. 64-65).

It is clear that the advertising industry was willing to pay good money for motivation research. Samuel notes that, by 1956, Dichter's company was making \$750,000 a year from some 30 clients (p.

67). In today's dollars, that amounts to more than \$6 million. It is not so clear, though, what effect motivation research was having on sales of products to consumers—as opposed to sales of advertising services to advertisers. One person who attempted to tackle this issue at the time was Vance Packard (1957), author of *The Hidden Persuaders*, the first book-length critique of motivation research. In the book's penultimate chapter, titled "The Question of Validity," Packard conducted a detailed review of the advertising industry's internal debates about the usefulness of motivational research, and he provided a number of examples of advertisers' skepticism about motivation researchers' claims. One of the skeptics was the director of marketing for the Pabst Brewing Company, who is quoted by Packard as saying that:

the psychologists have become the oracles of the business. Double-domed professors and crystal gazers are probing the minds of buyers. They are attempting to prove that sales are caused by the libido or that people buy merchandise because subconsciously they hate their fathers. (Packard, 1957, p. 221)



Figure 6. 1929 Buick advertisement.



Figure 7. 1920s Benz advertisement.

Although Packard appears to have tried hard to get a definitive answer to his question about validity, his review of the arguments for and against motivation research ends inconclusively by conceding that marketers would not be using motivation research if they had a better tool at their disposal. However, in the course of arriving at that final statement, Packard (1957) makes the following observation: “[I]t is charged that the findings of the depth probes sometimes are not subjected to objective confirmation by conventional testing methods” (p. 227). This simple point will be revisited shortly.

Vance Packard is an important figure in Samuel’s book, and he is discussed at some length by Acland as well. As Samuel says, *The Hidden Persuaders* was a number-one bestseller and “became a phenomenon, striking a very loud chord with the American public” (p. 75). In contrast to some of his acolytes and epigones, Packard was notably even-handed in his criticism of motivation research, but his overall attitude was clearly negative. Samuel describes him as “a Methodist farm boy who grew up during the Depression” and was consequently inclined to take a dim view of business (p. 73). His objection to motivation research is encapsulated very succinctly in a single statement on the final page of *The Hidden Persuaders*: “The most serious offense many of the depth manipulators commit, it seems to me, is that they try to invade the privacy of our minds” (Packard, 1957, p. 240).



Figure 8. Advertisement incorrectly labeled "subliminal."

This accusation brings us back to the topic of subliminal advertising. *The Hidden Persuaders* was published on April 29, 1957. James Vicary’s announcement of his tachistoscopic test occurred in September of that year. It’s more than likely that Packard’s critique of mind manipulation provided some of the basis for the fears of covert influence that were triggered by Vicary’s announcement. Even if subliminal advertising in its strict, technical sense was a rarity both then and now, motivation research was anything but rare, and to this day the use of “primal” symbolism in advertising is routinely referred to as “subliminal,” even when the images in question are perfectly visible, not to say blatant. For example, the Burger King advertisement in Figure 8 shows up in online searches for subliminal images, even though

there is nothing subliminal about the implied sexual connotation. This merging of motivation research and subliminal advertising is discussed at some length by Acland (2012), who says that Packard himself tried (misleadingly) to take credit for having sounded the alarm about the advent of subliminal communication (p. 108). Acland also quotes an advertising executive's lament that "now this subliminal idea adds credence to all this nonsense about 'hidden persuaders'" (p. 114), and he points out that Dichter was very anxious to distance himself from the direction that Vicary had taken (p. 115).

It must be stressed, though, that Packard's book had next to nothing to say about subliminal advertising. The wave of criticism that it stirred up was aimed entirely at motivation research. And yet motivation research does not seem to have sustained any substantial damage from his attack or from the ones that followed. If anything, *The Hidden Persuaders* seems to have given a boost to the fame and fortunes of the researchers whose methods it described. According to Samuel, it made Dichter a celebrity, and it eventually elicited a letter from Dichter to Packard, thanking him for all the work the book had brought his way (p. 78). Thirty years later, in 1989, when Dichter was 82, he was invited to do a research project in the moribund Soviet Union. In an interview with a reporter right before his departure from the United States, he described the situation he expected to face: For 50 years, the Soviet citizens had been taught to mistrust the capitalist hidden persuaders. And then, according to Samuel, just before he left, Dichter added: "I'm the hidden persuader!" (p. 182).

There is an interesting contrast here. Both Dichter and Vicary tried to develop marketable services based on the importation of ideas from psychology to the world of advertising. Both were accused of exploiting consumers' unconscious thought processes. And yet Dichter's business was a great success, despite the accusations, whereas Vicary's attempt to build a business based on tachistoscopic advertising failed. What accounts for this difference in outcomes? As Acland notes, some people in the advertising industry tried to drive a wedge between motivation research and subliminal advertising to protect the former by deflecting criticism toward the latter. That effort may be one reason for the fact that subliminal advertising faced a level of political and regulatory intervention that motivation research does not appear to have encountered. As a whole, the advertising industry was already heavily invested in motivation research by the time Vance Packard appeared on the scene; it had no such investment in subliminal advertising, and therefore much less to lose by allowing Vicary's tachistoscope to bear the brunt of the politicians' reactions to Packard's accusations. Then again, the personalities of the principal players in this drama may have had something to do with its denouement. Although Dichter, as described by Samuel, comes across as a flamboyant showman, while Acland says that Vicary was "No simple Madison Avenue huckster" (p. 97), Dichter's theatricality may simply have been a more effective tool for disarming the opposition. All of this may be true, but I think we should not discount the possible implications of one other difference between motivation research and subliminal advertising.

As noted earlier, Packard's (1957) assessment of the validity of motivation research included the observation that its findings were not always subjected to objective confirmation. But the opposite of this observation is more crucial. The kinds of claims that emerge from motivation research are typically not subjected to objective *disconfirmation*. In fact, it's hard to imagine how they could be. What kind of evidence would be sufficient to disconfirm the assertion that men see cars as either wives or "mistresses"? In an intellectual framework influenced by psychoanalysis, the very idea of disconfirmation becomes

elusive. In short, motivation research is not easily falsifiable. In sharp contrast, the types of experimental results that Vicary said he had achieved with his tachistoscope are much more vulnerable to disconfirmation, as became evident in a number of follow-up tests of his claims. If no one can identify a word that was displayed subliminally, it follows by definition that subliminal perception did not occur. From the perspective of the advertising industry, it soon became apparent that subliminal advertising suffered from a surfeit of precision that motivation research did not have to deal with. There is an obvious lesson here for aspiring researchers looking to make money on the basis of their technical skills. To put it bluntly, Vicary placed his bet on the wrong horse.

In the end, who did make money from subliminal advertising and motivation research? The two authors who wrote the major critiques of these advertising practices both appear to have been rewarded fairly well for their labors. Samuel mentions that Vance Packard made a total of \$350,000 from *The Hidden Persuaders*, which would amount to over \$2.5 million today. Wilson Bryan Key, author of *Subliminal Seduction* and several sequels, was able to sustain himself from his writing after leaving full-time academic employment. The idea of subliminal communication also seems to have generated some profits in the education industry. In a fascinating discussion of the applications of tachistoscopic technology outside of the world of advertising, Acland describes the use of speed-reading tachistoscopes in schools and reproduces a 1966 ad for the "Keystone Tachistoscope," claiming that "Thousands of Schools are Teaching MORE with LESS effort" by using the device (p. 85). Finally, as we have already seen, the one other business enterprise that demonstrably benefited from ideas about unconscious mental processes was market research. Beyond that fact, though, things are much less clear. As Packard found out in his encounters with marketing practitioners, it wasn't easy to determine what contribution motivation research was making to actual product sales. Ironically, it seems possible that subliminal advertising and motivation research may have produced clearer benefits for critics and researchers and ancillary businesses than they did for the advertisers themselves.

The main events in the stories told by Acland and Samuel happened many years ago and in a culture that has changed considerably since then. However, some parts of those stories continue to unfold. Although subliminal advertising's role in contemporary culture is now primarily that of a source of humor, motivation research is still very much with us. Samuel's book begins with a description of the "velvet-suited, Rolls Royce-driving Frenchman" Clotaire Rapaille, who appears to be recapitulating the *modus operandi* of Dichter (p. 1). With a background in Jungian psychology, Dr. Rapaille has formed a highly successful market research firm that uses intensive interviewing to probe the so-called "reptilian" part of subjects' brains. Perhaps more important, he has mastered the art of making profound-sounding but essentially unfalsifiable pronouncements about culture. He can be viewed in action in the PBS documentary *The Persuaders*, explaining his theories to Douglas Rushkoff (who appears politely bemused) and elucidating such matters as the differences between French and American views toward cheese. (In France, cheese is alive, in America, cheese is dead.)

Another figure from the past making a reappearance in a new guise is Packard. A market researcher named Martin Lindstrom (2011) has recently written a book in which he claims to have experienced inner revulsion against marketers' manipulation of consumers. He has therefore decided "to pick up where Vance Packard's 1957 classic, *The Hidden Persuaders*, left off and expose the best-kept

secrets of how today's companies and their marketers are manipulating us" (p. 2). Lindstrom's book includes entertainingly hyperbolic accounts of the use of new methods (such as fMRI) in the service of not-so-new assumptions, for example, that middle-aged men associate their dream cars "with one thing, and one thing only. Sex" (p. 81). The book is titled *Brandwashed*, and its insistent invocation of Packard can perhaps be taken as evidence of Lindstrom's own expertise in branding.

Readers interested in these aspects of advertising and marketing will find that both Acland and Samuel provide excellent frameworks for making sense of them. Acland's *Swift Viewing* is an outstanding work of cultural history. He seems to have dug up every available bit of information about the culture that gave birth to—and then almost immediately killed off—subliminal advertising. He has done a masterful job of synthesizing this information into a coherent and logical narrative. His book will serve as the authoritative guide to its topic for communication scholars, as well as students of advertising. Samuel's book on motivation research, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, is a fast-paced, jaunty, highly readable account of an enduringly fascinating story. People engaged in media effects research would do well to read it, even if they have no specific interest in marketing or advertising as such. One of Samuel's great strengths is his consistent attention to the business side of the story he tells. If we want to understand the world of advertising, it surely is instructive to try to follow the money.

References

- Acland, C. R. (2012). *Swift viewing: The popular life of subliminal influence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cauberghe, V., & De Pelsmacker, P. (2010). Advergaming. *Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 5–18.
- Erdelyi, M. H., & Zizak, D. M. (2004). Beyond gizmo subliminality. In L.J. Shrum (Ed.), *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion* (pp. 13–44). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Heath, R. (2012). *Seducing the subconscious: The psychology of emotional influence in advertising*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Key, W. N. (1973). *Subliminal seduction: Ad media's manipulation of a not so innocent America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Signet.
- Lindstrom, M. (2011). *Brandwashed: Tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*. New York, NY: Crown Business.
- Messaris, P. (1997). *Visual persuasion: The role of images in advertising*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Packard, V. (2007). *The hidden persuaders*. Reissued Edition. Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing. (Original work published 1957)
- Lawrence R. Samuel, L. R. (2010). *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation research and subliminal advertising in America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.