

## Exercise 46: The Absolute Threshold Level and Subliminal Messages (A, W, I)

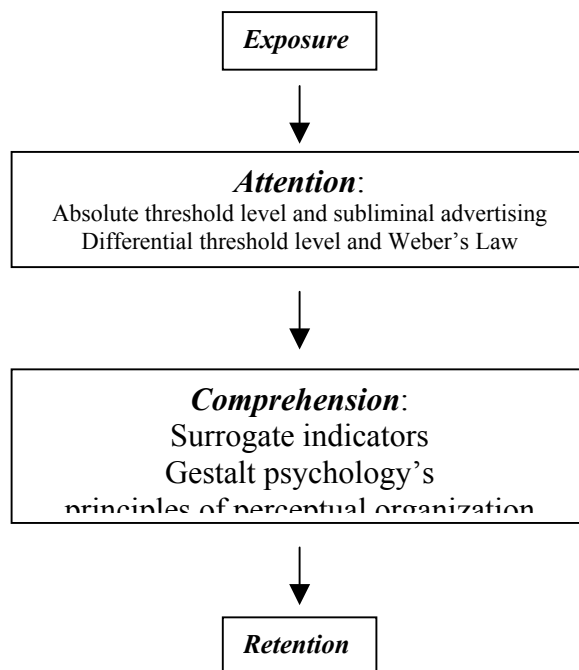
- OBJECTIVES:**
1. To gain an understanding of subliminal messages in light of the perceptual process and the concept of the *absolute threshold level*.
  2. To be a more informed consumer on the controversial issue of *subliminal advertising*.
  3. To be able to analyze the usefulness and limitations of subliminal messages.
  4. To gain experience evaluating ads that could be perceived as subliminal, and to assess personal experiences you and your classmates have had with subliminal messages.
  5. To decide on the morality of using subliminal communications.

### BACKGROUND:

#### Overview of Perceptual Principles Covered in the Remaining Chapter 13 Exercises

Recall the consumer information-processing model outlined in Figure 1 for this Chapter: Exposure, attention, comprehension, and retention. This and the following three Exercises will investigate more closely several phenomena related to the *attention* and *comprehension* stages of the process shown in Figure 46-1.

**Figure 46-1**  
**Overview of Topics Covered in Remaining Perceptual Exercises**



### Exposure

**Exposure** occurs when a consumer confronts (or is confronted by) a stimulus so that one or more of the sensory organs are activated and information processing can begin. Exposure can be either *random* and *involuntary* (e.g., broadcast commercials and point-of-purchase displays) or *deliberate* and *voluntary* (e.g., Web links and print media).

At the exposure level the key consideration for the advertiser is reaching the *target market* by matching characteristics of the targeted customers with those of a medium's *target audience*. Advertisements are then inserted within media vehicles where they are most likely to be encountered, such as next to interesting editorial matter in a magazine or in a relevant section of the newspaper, like placing sporting goods ads in the sports pages.

### Attention

Following exposure, the next step in information processing is **attention**—the degree to which the consumer focuses on the incoming stimulus, thereby allocating information processing capacity to it so that the sensations enter his or her brain for processing. Job one for any advertisement (or marketing effort, for that matter) is to *grab the prospect's attention!*

This and the following Exercise will focus on two aspects of the *attention* phase. First is the ***absolute threshold level***—the minimum level of stimulus intensity that is noticeable. This Exercise concerns this absolute threshold level as well as ***subliminal advertising***—advertising elements that are supposedly snuck in below the consumer's absolute threshold level or degree of consciousness in an effort to secretly influence consumer behavior.

A second phenomenon of interest to marketers in the attention phase, to be covered in Exercise 47, is the ***just noticeable difference***—the level of stimulus intensity *change* that can just barely be detected by a consumer, such as a slight price hike or miniscule cut in product quality.

### Comprehension (Interpretation)

Exercises 48 and 49 will concern the stage of **comprehension**—the consumer's level of understanding and interpretation of the stimulus. Exercise 48 will investigate consumers' use of ***surrogate indicators***—shorthand signals of product quality or performance, such as price and brand name, which might or might not be valid indicators of the product's nature. ***Gestalt principles of perceptual organization***—how the arrangement of the components of a stimulus object affects the way it is interpreted by the consumer—will be covered in Exercise 49.

The final hurdle in consumer information processing is **retention**—the entry of information into long-term memory so that it can be recalled. This will be the subject of the next Chapter on *learning*.

### The Absolute Threshold Level

Whether or not a consumer actively pays *attention* to a stimulus to which he or she is exposed is determined by a number of factors, one of the most important of which is the level of intensity of the stimulus. ***Psychophysics*** is the study of how the physical environment is related to our subjective (psychological) experience, i.e., the relationship between a stimulus and the sensation it produces. This discipline is concerned with the

***absolute threshold level***—at what level of intensity people can just detect stimuli—and the ***differential threshold***—people’s ability to sense changes in stimulus intensity ***differential threshold***.

The lowest level at which a person just barely detects a stimulus is known as that stimulus’ **absolute threshold level (ATL)**. Also known as the ***lower threshold level*** or ***detection threshold level***, the ATL is the minimal level of stimulus intensity that the individual can perceive. It is the point at which the individual can just barely notice that “something” is there.<sup>1</sup> Remember the hearing tests you took back in grade school? The tone you could just barely hear was your ATL for hearing. A dog whistle is below humans’ auditory ATL.

By studying ATLs, scientists have discovered that our senses are very sharp. For example, a typical person can see a candle flame at 30 miles on a dark clear night (It is not true that “On a clear night you can see forever”!). The average individual can also taste one teaspoon of sugar in two gallons of water and smell one drop of perfume diffused throughout a three-bedroom apartment (therefore you need not douse yourself with cologne for people to notice!). Of course, there are individual differences in such ATLs—these are only averages. Furthermore, one person might differ somewhat in sensitivity to stimuli from day to day or from one situation to another.

Despite these impressive sensory abilities, our senses can only perceive a rather narrow range of stimulus intensity. For instance, we are unable to see ultraviolet rays as can bees. Bats and porpoises can hear sounds two octaves beyond our range.<sup>2</sup> You cannot notice radar (radio waves), but a radar detector can. Firms sometimes hire professionals with relatively low ATLs as taste testers or to test the efficacy of personal care products such as deodorants (they actually smell peoples’ armpits—a job that is the pits!) and mints (they smell people’s breath).

### Marketing Stimuli and the Absolute Threshold Level

Of course, marketers should ascertain that their important stimuli (ads, package instructions, prices on products, etc.) are *above the consumer’s ATL*. This is a big problem in a cluttered commercial environment; too often ads blend into the background like “audiovisual wallpaper”: People “see” it, but they *really* do not see it; they “hear” it, but they do not *really* hear it.

Marketers must therefore resort to tactics to get consumer *attention*. Examples include ramping up the volume on radio and TV commercials or using other attention-grabbing techniques like shocking or unique headlines in print ads. For instance, the shocking headline for a public service ad against drunk driving said, “I was in love with a girl named Cathy. I killed her.” Startling sounds like honking horns and ringing phones often open TV and radio commercials to make sure they are not literally or figuratively

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<sup>1</sup> A bit more technically, the absolute threshold level is operationally defined by psychologists as the lowest level at which a stimulus can be noticed fifty percent of the time. Thus, in a hearing test, the level at which you can detect a particular pitch half of the time is the ATL.

<sup>2</sup> The spirit world also lies beyond our visible and audible detection. For instance, although we can’t see and hear God, angels, or demons, their existence is taught in the Old and New Testaments. However, people who spend time developing a personal relationship with God (primarily through prayer and reading the Bible) claim to develop a sensitivity to His presence and Spirit speaking to them—a “still small voice” that spoke to the Old Testament prophet Elijah.

“tuned out.” Likewise, packages on store shelves must rise above the shelf clutter and distinguish themselves via unique, eye-catching graphics.

However, there are also instances in which marketers *do not* wish for consumers to detect certain stimuli—they prefer to remain *below the ATL*. You have heard of the “fine print” in advertising disclosures, packages, and other written materials. This is so tiny not just to save space but also sometimes to unethically avoid catching the consumer’s attention. Similarly, the audio disclosures in radio disclosures that are legally required (“Offer void where prohibited”) usually run at warp speed so that consumers cannot really understand them.

As another example, although consumers might not notice the music in a retail outlet or service establishment, research shows that it can nonetheless influence shopper behavior, with faster music speeding consumers up (as in a crowded restaurant) and slow music making them move at a more leisurely pace (such as browsing in a store).

### The Adaptation Level: A Changing Absolute Threshold Level

Sometimes our ATLs change over time. **Adaptation** (*sensory adaptation*) is the process of adjusting to or growing accustomed to a frequently occurring stimulus to the point where it is no longer noticed. For example, the first chilly day of winter that comes along feels quite cold. However, after several days of cold you “get used to” the chill so that it is no longer so uncomfortable. Likewise, on a very hot day, stepping into an air-conditioned store feels great at first. But after several minutes, you adapt to the cooler level of sensation and no longer notice it. When you enter a locker room, at first you choke on the smell of “eau de locker room” but after awhile it no longer bothers you.

The **adaptation level**, then, is the level of stimulus intensity a person becomes accustomed to. It serves as a *reference point* or standard of comparison for changes in the level of the stimulus. Thus, at a party someone coughing would not be heard. However, in a quiet room where students are taking a test this same sound would be startling.

How is adaptation relevant to consumer behavior? Marketers must work to make sure consumers do not become adapted to marketing stimuli, such as their advertising or packaging, so that they grow bored or tune them out. Changes or variety are often imperative.

Therefore, most ad campaigns, while featuring similar messages and creative executions of that message, offer variations in individual ads so that consumers do not become bored. Although Wheaties remains the “Breakfast of champions” the individual sports stars featured in the ads and on the package continually evolve; Michael Jordan gets old after awhile. In the area of product development, “new and improved” versions as well as *line extensions* (new flavors, scents, styles, etc.) keep a product fresh and interesting for consumers as well as provide variety.

In short, consumers should “expect the unexpected.” The adaptation level phenomenon explains why it is so important to use novel stimuli to “break the boredom barrier” or avoid “the yawn factor.” However, marketers must be cautious in making radical changes, such as altering ingredients in food or drink items. The reason is that often the adaptation level is preferred; customers might better receive evolutionary change than revolutionary change.

## **Subliminal Advertising**

### **Overview of Subliminal Influences**

One much-discussed tactic whereby marketers allegedly lurk below the ATL is the case of *subliminal advertising*. The word **subliminal** comes from combining two Latin words: the prefix *sub* (meaning below) with *limen* (meaning *threshold* or limit, i.e., *absolute threshold level*). **Subliminal** literally means “below the threshold of conscious perception,” i.e., we cannot consciously see, hear, or otherwise perceive the stimulus object. Consequently, **subliminal stimuli** or **subliminal messages** are cues that activate one or more sensory receptors but are below the threshold of perception or ATL.<sup>3</sup>

A person’s subconscious perception of subliminal cues is called **subliminal perception**. Some people believe that one can influence consumer behavior by secretly appealing to the subconscious mind with words, images, or sounds.

Over the last forty-plus years critics have claimed that advertising agencies use these subliminal stimuli in a process they call **subliminal advertising** or **subliminal seduction**—brainwashing and manipulating consumers via placing images, words, or sounds in print, audio, or video advertising media. The theory is, although the stimulus is below the consumer’s level of conscious awareness, somehow the subconscious mind is nonetheless able to process the stimulus, and this can lead to (1) attitude change, such as, brand preference, followed by (2) behavioral change, like a product purchase or a store visit.

However, the advertising industry has consistently and vigorously denied running subliminal advertising. Several advertisers have even developed ads poking fun at the idea of subliminal stimulation. For instance, a Seagram’s gin ad headlined, “Can you find the hidden pleasure in refreshing Seagram’s gin?” pointed out a bubble and said, “If you think this is just a bubble, look again.” A tongue-in-cheek Absolut vodka ad featured a glass of vodka on the rocks headlined, “Absolut subliminal.” Even the advertising industry trade association, the American Association of Advertising Agencies, has run ads claiming that subliminal ads do not exist and that so-called subliminals are simply the product of overactive imaginations.

In the remainder of this Exercise we shall survey four different types of subliminal stimuli:

- (1) **Subvisual messages**—briefly presented visual stimuli in motion media such as movies and television shows.
- (2) **Embeds, incongruities, and suggestiveness**—subliminal elements found in print advertisements.
- (3) **Subaudible messages**—accelerated or garbled speech in low-volume auditory messages.
- (4) **Backward masking**—reversed audio messages, usually inserted in rock music.

We shall see that, while subliminal stimuli perhaps *exist* in some instances, *subliminals cannot be effectively used to persuade or alter consumer behavior*. Although years of research have shown very limited emotional effects of subliminal stimulation there has been no support for its effectiveness in behavior modification. Nonetheless, at

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<sup>3</sup> More precisely, subliminal stimuli occur below the threshold of conscious *awareness* because subconsciously the stimuli are registering, so they cannot be below the absolute threshold level. Operationally, a stimulus is said to be subliminal if, over a number of trials, a subject reports being aware of it less than 50 per cent of the time.

least three-fourths of the general adult American population believes that subliminal advertising is purposely created and used to sell products. And, if some marketers do use subliminal stimuli, they are wasting their efforts and being unethically sneaky in the process.

### History of Types of Subliminal Stimuli

#### Subvisual Messages

The brouhaha over subliminal advertising began in 1957 when a movie theatre in Fort Lee, New Jersey hired the services of the Subliminal Projection Company, run by, the inventor of the term “subliminal advertising,” James Vicary. His form of subliminal stimulation was **subvisual messages**—single frame visual images or words, of milliseconds in duration, implanted into a film (and now also videotape) to repeatedly flash a message every few seconds, notably in motion pictures and television shows.

Vicary’s firm designed a subliminal projection machine that was capable of flashing unnoticeable messages within big-screen movies very briefly (for 3/1000 of a second, every five seconds). For a six-week test run Vicary alternated the subliminal messages, “Hungry? Eat popcorn” and “Drink Coke,” exposing 45,699 patrons. Vicary said that the subliminals increased sales of Coke by 18% and of popcorn by 58%. This episode came to the public’s attention through Vance Packard’s best-selling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*.

However, there are several reasons to be suspicious of the veracity of Vicary’s claims. Vicary never released a detailed description of his study. Nor has there ever been any independent evidence to support his claims; all attempts at replication of his study failed, including several efforts to influence behavior using televised subvisual messages. Moreover, in an interview with *Advertising Age* in 1962, Vicary admitted that the original research was a fabrication designed to help his struggling business. And, despite the notoriety, no regulation or legislation has ever been enacted against subvisual communication.

Nonetheless, periodically reports surface of efforts to use subliminal messages in TV commercials. For instance, a 1970s TV ad for a children’s game called Husker-Do included the subvisual message “Get it!” until some parents noticed and complained to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This regulatory body then issued a warning against further TV or radio subliminals because “whether effective or not, such broadcasts clearly are intended to be deceptive.”<sup>4</sup>

Movies have also been accused of planting subvisuals. In *The Exorcist* a death mask was flashed on screen to give audiences an extra scare. Disney movies have frequently come under attack. In *The Little Mermaid*, a religious group saw a suspect bulge on a character that appeared to be an erection. A wispy S-E-X was found spelled out in the clouds in one scene from *The Lion King*.

Subvisual messages have now entered the computer age, this time with an attempt to use them for peoples’ benefit. For example, an Arizona company introduced self-improvement software called InnerTalk that flashes the user’s choice of 9,000 subliminal messages briefly on the computer screen, regardless of the program running. No one can confirm conclusively that InnerTalk will change behaviors or even attitudes, but for

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<sup>4</sup> FCC 74-78 08055 (January 24, 1975).

\$49.95, computer users can now bombard their brains with hidden messages. Similarly, managers have programmed computers to flash messages such as “work faster.”

### Subliminal Print Ads: Embeds

Concern about subliminal advertising died down until 1974. Then Dr. Bryan Wilson Key published his popular book, *Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America*. A second book in 1976, *Media Sexploitation*, followed this.

Key's concern was with **print media subliminal advertising**. Most notable were **embeds**—hidden words and images, most of which appeal to subconscious drives such as sex and the Freudian death wish (Thanatos). Key claimed that these faint visuals were being placed in magazine ads via techniques like high-speed photography and airbrushing. Consequently, embeds were allegedly subconsciously perceived and could elicit drives such as sexual arousal. This, in turn, supposedly made the products more attractive to consumers and thereby influence their attitudes and behaviors.

Key's most common examples of embeds included women's breasts, male and female genitalia, and death masks in the ice cubes of liquor ads. He famously found the word “sex” as well as many unprintable (at least in this book!) four-letter words emblazoned on people's hair and beards. He even claimed that “sex” was formed by the holes in Ritz crackers, making this delicacy taste even better!

In his third book, *The Clam-Plate Orgy*, published in 1980, Key described images of group sex and bestiality—tiny people and animals writhing around in ecstasy during an orgy—on a pile of fried clams depicted on a Howard Johnson's restaurant placemat! His allegation was that, “Merchandisers, by embedding subliminal trigger devices in media, are able to evoke a strong emotional relationship between, say, a product perceived in an advertisement weeks before and the strongest of all emotional stimuli—love (sex) and death.”<sup>5</sup>

However, there were problems with Mr. Key's “findings” at both theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, he offered no conceptual explanation for exactly how subliminal advertising works. Key backed up his case with a hodgepodge of theories from the fields of communication studies, media criticism, and Freudian psychology, most of which is dismissed by the modern scientific community. Key's illogic was evident when your lead author heard him speak at Stonehill College several years ago. The charlatan confessed, “How this works, I don't know. But it must work, because advertisers keep using it.”

Empirically, there is virtually no experimental support for the efficacy of subliminal embeds. Key's own “research” with his students lacked proper scientific controls, as he did admit. He simply asked how many of his students see embeds he saw in ads, and counted their acquiescence as evidence.

It is true that some psychology experiments have shown that subliminal stimuli can influence high-level cognitive and affective processes (e.g., recognition of and preferences for geometric shapes), although these are fleeting in nature. Some studies suggest that our sensory organs pick up stimuli presented below the threshold of consciousness and that we can process information without being aware of it. A weak stimulus apparently produces a weak response that induces a feeling, though not a

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<sup>5</sup> Available at <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/q103352.html>.

conscious awareness of the stimulus. More recent research also suggests that subliminally presented stimuli can influence behavior.

However, these studies were conducted in artificial laboratory situations. And, the effects are generally so small and fleeting that they become useless in altering consumer behavior. Investigations have failed to show conclusive results in an advertising context. The key (no pun intended) issue of subliminal advertising is whether exposure to subliminal stimuli can effectively persuade and manipulate the consumers' behavior by providing advertisers with a tool to bypass buyers' defenses without their awareness. The nearly universal consensus is that this is not possible.

There are several other questions that Mr. Key has been unable to answer:

- Where is his documentation for the cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects of subliminal advertising? All he offered is anecdotal evidence based on what he and his students “discovered” in print ads. As the ad industry points out, such “findings” seem to be the product of hyperactive imaginations. Whether or not erotic imagery has been deliberately planted, a diligent search for a phallic symbol will probably uncover it. All of us are able to “see” all sorts of things in clouds, mountaintops, trees, and other objects. As just noted, Key's unscientific studies entail leading his students to “see” in ads the same UPOs (unidentified printed objects) he “saw.”
- Why are there no witnesses to the preparation of embeds? If so many advertisers use subliminals, why was Key unable to quote just one of them on how they employ the tactics? Is there not one unemployed ex-stimulator who can come forward with the truth, perhaps writing an expose or even a how-to book? Key never cited such an individual. In fact, Jack Haberstroh, a professor of advertising at Virginia Commonwealth University, surveyed more than a hundred ad directors throughout the U.S., and not a single one claimed to have ever worked on a subliminal ad!
- If subliminal stimulation is rampant and urges people to buy, why do not the government and other public service advertisers use subliminal ads to make people stop taking drugs, abusing children, and driving drunk? College professors could even employ subliminal messages in their overhead transparencies, PowerPoint slides, and videos to get students to study hard, stop going to wild parties and staying up late, give up smoking and excessive drinking, and be courteous and attentive to and absolutely idolize their instructors!

#### *Subliminal Print Ads: Incongruities, and Suggestiveness*

There are two other types of print advertising sometimes described as “subliminal” that do not actually meet the definition of this term since people often are aware of them: incongruities and suggestiveness. Nonetheless, they can sometimes operate at a low level of awareness.

**Incongruities** are ads containing an inconsistency—two or more of its elements do not logically fit together. There is something wrong with the ad's illustration that is not evident at first glance. For example, an ad for Jantzen swimsuits included a female whose trunks were unusually loose and contained a zipper fly, and the man with her wore swim trunks matching her brassiere, implying crossdressing. Another ad for Benson and Hedges cigarettes featured a protruding right hand that was placed at an angle such that it could belong to none of the characters in the ad. Several advertising researchers have



suggested that such ads lead to more information processing, as well as arousal, and, consequently, more favorable ad evaluations.

Also, there are print ads containing **suggestiveness**—the advertisement implies more than the written copy suggests. Although suggestiveness is common in advertising, it *is not* subliminal because we are supposed to notice the suggestive ad elements. Suggestiveness occurs when the message is not blatant, i.e., it is not spelled out explicitly in words but rather is implied via use of verbal language, body language, color, and other perceptual devices. Such implicit communications often include *sexual innuendo*—subtle sexual messages.

For instance, a Snickers candy bar ad depicted a mom hugging her son, saying, “When he comes home from school hungry, there’s only one way to satisfy him—and me,” perhaps implying incest.

Unfortunately, even some advertising people are guilty of misusing the term “subliminal” and thereby perpetuate false beliefs of the industry’s practice of subliminal advertising.

### Subaudible Messages

The first two categories of subliminal stimulation concern visual media. However, the next two types of subliminal communication to be discussed involve auditory media.

**Subaudible messages (subaudible communications, audio conditioning, threshold messaging, or psychoacoustic persuasion)** consist of accelerated (time-compressed) and/or garbled speech played at a low volume and masked under a “carrier” such as music or ocean waves. The result is that subaudible messages cannot be consciously heard. The technique employs spoken words or messages repeatedly transmitted or broadcast below the threshold of normal hearing. The claim is that while the message is unintelligible and therefore goes unnoticed at a conscious level, it is processed at a subconscious level, leading to affective and/or behavioral changes.

For instance, department stores in both the U.S. and Canada reportedly reduced shoplifting by using a “little black box” or sound mixer, like that used by deejays, to fuse bland elevator music with subliminal anti-theft messages such as “I am honest. I will not steal. I don’t want to break the law. If I break the law, I will go to jail.” Sales organizations and athletic teams have employed subliminal motivational tapes to rally the troops, and doctors have used them to calm patients in waiting rooms. Also, self-help audiocassettes abound to assist buyers in breaking bad habits like smoking, losing weight, and improving their willpower. Unfortunately, subaudible messages in rock music have encouraged destructive behaviors like worshipping Satan or committing suicide.

While there is mixed evidence of the effectiveness of such messages, researchers note that only those individuals who are predisposed toward what the subaudible messages advocate will accept them. Thus, a normally honest person will respond to the suggestion “I’m honest - I will not steal” but a professional shoplifter will not. Subaudible messages seem to work like hypnotism: you can subconsciously encourage people to avoid or undertake certain behaviors *only* if they are so inclined. Also, many researchers believe that subaudible communications work due to the placebo effect: people expect them to work and so they do.

Thus, the fears concerning subaudible messages in rock music destroying our youth are largely unfounded, except perhaps in the case of listeners who are already inclined

toward what the messages suggest. For instance, the families of two boys who committed suicide in 1985 sued heavy metalists Judas Priest for supposedly placing in a song the subliminal message, "Do it," that the plaintiffs believed pushed their sons into suicide. However, after an exhaustive review of the subliminal issue and many close listenings to the song in question, the judge found in favor of the band and its record company, CBS. He declared that scientific evidence was lacking and too many other factors could account for the suicides, such as drugs, alcohol, and dysfunctional families.

While there are no reported advertising applications of subaudible messages, the evidence suggests that this is for good reason: they would be impotent in changing consumer behavior.

### *Backward Masking*

Also known as **backmasking** and **audio reversal**, **backward masking** entails inserting an undetected message into an audio medium such as a record, tape, CD, or DVD by playing the message in reverse. Although the words cannot be consciously perceived when the audio is played in its normal, forward manner, the claim is that these imperceptible communications are heard at an unconscious level, thereby influencing attitudes and behavior.

Most reported applications have occurred in the world of rock music. The Beatles were among the first to employ the technique. When this book's lead scribe was a teenager in the age of vinyl, upon hearing certain media and word-of-mouth reports about the existence of hidden backward messages in various Beatles tunes, he and some friends recorded those songs on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. When the youngsters reversed the tape they heard such ditties as "Paul is dead," "Turn me on dead man," and "I buried Paul." However, this was a public relations ploy at a time when the group's popularity had peaked and they needed to revitalize their dominance.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an explosion in backward masking in rock music. The band Queen's tune "Another One Bites the Dust" generated attention when it was reported that the song contained a reversed message "It's fun to (or, in another interpretation, "we decided to") smoke marijuana." Led Zeppelin's epic "Stairway to Heaven" reportedly contained seven satanic messages, such as "So here's to my sweet Satan" and "Satan is Lord." Jefferson Starship's line "It's getting better" translated to "Son of Satan." Electric Light Orchestra sang "On a voyage of no return to sea," which reversed to "He is the nasty one/Christ, you're infernal/It is said we're dead men/Everyone who has the mark will live." The Cars' "Shoo Be Doo" came out as "Satan," and Black Oak Arkansas' "When Electricity Came To Arkansas" turned into "Satan, Satan. He Is God, he is God."<sup>6</sup> (To hear samples of rock music tainted with audio reversals, go to <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Birdland/5430/revolutionrev.aiff>).

One theory underlying backward masking is that selective cognitive processes ordinarily screen out unwanted information. However, when information enters our brain backward it is not filtered, and somehow the subconscious can translate it so to become meaningful. Supposedly, when hearing these songs forward the brain picks up the backward messages subliminally. Consequently, they can affect one's mind, actions, and personality.

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<sup>6</sup> Members of Black Oak Arkansas later reportedly repented and, in fact, accepted God's offer of forgiveness for their blasphemy, becoming devoted Christians.

However, researchers have shown this theory to be untrue. Humans simply do not have a subconscious speech perception mechanism that can decode a reversed signal.

Ministers have claimed that individuals who listen to backward-masked rock music are more likely to become drunks, druggies, sexually promiscuous, and Satan worshippers. However, this overlooks the fact that these behaviors are most characteristic of rock's primary target audience: teenagers and young adults. Remember that basic principle of marketing research: correlation doesn't prove causality.<sup>7</sup> It appears that backward masking is ineffectual in influencing people and of no value for marketing other than stirring up word of mouth and publicity for rock groups!

### Conclusion on Subliminal Advertising

Although subliminal advertising is rare and ineffective, the public continues to view it as a menace to the republic. Why is this? We offer several reasons:

- At least since publication of *The Hidden Persuaders* the advertising industry has suffered a very negative image as consisting of hucksters and manipulators trying to control consumer behavior. However, this belief denies *consumer sovereignty*—the consumer is not a dupe to be manipulated but rather an independent thinker to be served. It also runs counter to the *marketing concept*—to be successful, a firm must give its customers what they want and need, not what they do not require and desire.
- Sensationalism sells. An unfortunate aspect of human nature is that people love to dish dirt and wallow in the mud.
- P. T. Barnum once said people love to be fooled and that “there is a sucker born every minute.”
- People dislike the fact that advertising conspicuously attempts to *influence* (not *manipulate*) them. If folks cannot explain certain emotions or purchases, or if they experience postpurchase *dissonance* (doubt), it is more comfortable to blame mysterious forces at work on them than to take personal responsibility.

In short, all of the evidence suggests that subliminal embeds do not hold the threat of turning the public into mindless automatons or quivering globs of compliance at the mercy of marketers.

None of this is to deny the *existence* of occasional attempts at subliminal ads. There will always be dishonest people doing deceitful things. To sneak hidden messages into ads is deceptive, it violates the consumer's right to know, it tries to control human behavior in violation of free will. Consequently the deliberate use of subliminal communications is immoral. Further, it is quite possible that certain prankster art people in ad agencies have gotten their jollies by sneaking embeds into their work for fun (but certainly not profit!).

However, the widespread practice of subliminal advertising simply does not exist. In those rare cases where it is used, it is relatively ineffectual. Subliminals only work to

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<sup>7</sup> When two variables (e.g., listening to rock music and engaging in socially undesirable behavior) occur together, the first does not necessarily cause the second. This is because a third variable could be influencing one or both of the first two variables (e.g., disc jockeys on rock stations might be advocating “sex and drugs” along with rock ‘n roll). also, there could be reverse causation: the second variable causes the first (e.g., heavy drinkers and drug users might find rock is pleasurable to listen to in their altered state of consciousness).

some degree in the case of constant message repetition (as with subvisual messages and subaudible messages) and where audience members are predisposed toward the message.

It is true that in tightly controlled lab settings subliminals have produced mild but fleeting emotional reactions and heightened existing drives. However, there is virtually no research evidence supporting their effectiveness to alter consumer behavior. A big gap exists between perception and persuasion when it comes to subliminal advertising.

Furthermore, here are quite a number of *practical difficulties* in using subliminal messages:

- Recall from other Exercises in this book that needs and wants cannot be created. Instead, marketers should appeal to and satisfy existing drives. At most, marketers can heighten and influence extant needs at a general level. For instance, a subliminal message saying “Drink Coke” might help induce thirst but not necessarily for Coke. Thus, to change consumer behavior against consumers’ free will is impossible. Because consumers remain sovereign it is always wise to work with consumer predispositions: “go with the flow” and “don’t go against the grain.”
- *Supraliminal stimuli* (ordinary stimuli *above* the threshold level) tend to overpower or nullify subliminal stimuli (hidden *below* the threshold level). Psychological studies demonstrate that a strong stimulus produces a strong response and a weak stimulus a weak response.
- Perceptual thresholds are variable across persons and over time for any one individual. Thus, what is subliminal for some will be supraliminal for others, and what is subliminal for someone today (say, if that person is tired or feeling “blue”) could be supraliminal for him or her tomorrow. To go undetected, then, subliminal stimuli would need to be at an extremely low threshold level, perhaps too low to have even a subconscious effect on most people. (Recall the parents who noticed the subliminal message “Get it” for Husker-Doo.)
- People selectively screen out supraliminal stimuli not consistent with their predispositions and probably do so for subliminal stimuli too. In our normally busy worlds, we do not typically pay absolute attention to a stimulus as subjects in subliminal experiments do.
- Since individuals subjectively interpret stimuli, misinterpretation is likely. Was that message “Drink Coke,” “Drink Cola,” “Drink Pepsi,” “Drink cocoa,” or “Stink Coke”? Recall how the ad industry claims that most so-called subliminal embeds are simply the products of overactive imaginations. It bears repeating: we see and hear what we want to see and hear.

Please—lose no sleep tonight over being subliminally seduced by Madison Avenue!

### IN-CLASS EXERCISE:

1. For each of the following advertisements identify any evidence or possibilities of subliminal advertising based on the three types of print ad subliminal elements described in the Background: *embeds*, *incongruities*, *suggestiveness*. Are these ads more effective through the use of such subliminal elements or would they have been just as effective without hidden messages? For more information (or, at least, opinion) on how these ads are manipulated, check out

<http://www.angelfire.com/rock/cpar/p2k/2ksep17paperless.html>.

2. Consider the following quotation from the FCC Broadcasting and Advertising Regulations (June 1999): “We sometimes receive complaints regarding the alleged use of subliminal techniques in radio and TV programming. Subliminal programming is designed to be perceived on a subconscious level only. Regardless of whether it is effective, the use of subliminal perception is inconsistent with a station's obligation to serve the public interest because the broadcast is intended to be deceptive.” After reading the Background for this Exercise and this quotation, what is your impression of subliminal advertising? Could it be effective in changing consumer behavior? Is it an ethical practice? Is limiting the use of subliminal messages a violation of advertisers’ right to free speech?

3. Visit the following sites and see how subliminal messages have been used in other forms of media: <http://www.snopes.com/business/hidden/hidden.htm#ifield>, <http://www.snopes.com/disney/films/films.asp>, <http://sbe.d.umn.edu/subliminal/visualembeds.htm>, <http://home.talkcity.com/BasinSt/niks20/nsback.htm>, and [http://sbe.d.umn.edu/subliminal/backmasked\\_messages.htm](http://sbe.d.umn.edu/subliminal/backmasked_messages.htm). Were these subliminal effects strategically manufactured or are they simply “in the eye of the beholder”?

4. Although subliminal messages have been declared an unsuccessful attempt at significantly altering consumer behavior, many Americans still believe in their existence. This is ever so evident in the purchases of self-help tapes based on the notion of *subaudible messages*, which can be further explored at <http://www.infinn.com/subliminal.html>. Have you or anyone you know ever purchased or used one of these tapes? If so, did it alter your or their behavior and/or mindset? Do you think these tapes actually have an effect on people or are buyers just convincing themselves that they work to ease the pain of cognitive dissonance?

5. Do you recall having ever seen any ad(s) that you believe were subliminally stimulating? Do you believe the ad(s) was (were) effective? Were they ethical? Do you know anyone who has ever claimed to be the “victim” of subliminal advertising? Do you or does anyone you know have any experience with any of the types of subliminal messages discussed in the Exercise?

### WRITTEN EXERCISE:

1. Answer Question 1 in the In-Class Exercise above for four of the following ads.
2. Find three more ads that someone might believe contain subliminal messages and repeat the analysis in Question 1 in the In-Class Exercise.
3. Answer Questions 2 and 3 in the In-Class Exercise above.
4. Answer either Question 4 or Question 5 in the In-Class Exercise above.

