

Does Subliminal Advertising Exist?

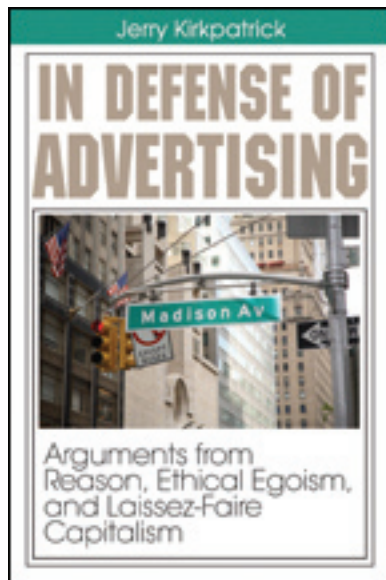
by

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a post from his [blog](#):

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Starting a new blog—and especially since the paperback edition of my book defending advertising has just been published—I suppose I should begin with a post about advertising. So let me deal with a question that frequently arises: “What about subliminal advertising?,” to which I typically respond, “What about it? It doesn’t exist!”

That’s the short answer. Some elaboration is required.

The term “subliminal” means beneath the threshold of perception. Many things are subliminal, such as the circulation of our blood, which we normally do not feel, experience, or perceive moving throughout our bodies. And it is possible to have our skin touched in such a way that we do not notice the touch. Subliminal advertising, however, is supposedly the power to motivate action based on something that no one can perceive, such as a message flashed on a movie or television screen at 1/3000th of a second or the word “sex” unrecognizably embedded in ice cubes in a liquor print ad. James Vicary and Wilson Bryan Key, respectively, are the two proponents of these claims. See this [brief recap](#) of their roles in the history of subliminal advertising. Marketing professor Stuart Rogers argues that Vicary’s movie theater “experiment” was a hoax. (A probably unauthorized copy of Prof. Rogers’ article is available [here](#).)

The notion of subliminal perception is a self-contradiction because it is not possible to perceive something that is beneath one’s threshold of perception. Add to this the fact that advertisers exert great effort to make their messages blatantly explicit—innuendo, sexual or otherwise, is intended to be noticed—and you have no grounds for the subliminal advertising complaint. Critics are never satisfied, though, so they now talk about “semi-subliminal” advertising and “secondary imagery” that is often missed on an initial look. The latter is just

a variation on the subliminal-embed theme of Wilson Key. The former is what Ayn Rand would call an “anti-concept.” Either something is above the threshold of perception or it is not; it cannot be half-way between. There are, of course, levels of perception, once above the threshold, but the lower the level, the less likely we are to be influenced by the message.

Repetitiveness is then thrown into the mix with the argument that we are manipulated by a constant repetition of ads that makes us change our desires without being aware of the process. Hmm. There are quite a few influencers in our lives who use repetition to get us to change our minds (or to reinforce a value or view we already hold): parents in relation to their children, teachers in relation to their students, journalists in relation to their audiences, and, oh yes, politicians—who have been known to use many different communication techniques to win votes—in relation to their constituencies. As I say in my book, when it comes to ethics and taste in communication, advertisers can hold their own against any of these four groups of influencers. Advertising just happens to be a convenient fall guy.

Then there is the flap last winter over Kentucky Fried Chicken’s alleged subliminal advertising ([1](#), [2](#)). A code word was inserted in one frame of a thirty-second commercial. When taken to KFC’s web site, the code word would produce a coupon for a Buffalo Snacker sandwich. ABC thought it was subliminal advertising and only ran the commercial minus the frame containing the code word—despite KFC’s wide publicizing of the stunt and their obvious desire for everyone to go looking for the code word. That the commercial had to be recorded and played slowly enough to view each individual frame speaks volumes about the people who still want to believe in subliminal advertising. Their motivation, as I demonstrate in my book, runs deep and is rooted in hostility toward capitalism, egoism, and, ultimately, reason.

Failure to understand the nature and causes of one’s emotions and, more generally, ignorance of the influence of the subconscious on one’s conscious perceptions are the sources of belief in subliminal communication. A commercial showing a sizzling T-bone steak, for example, at 5PM may trigger salivation in some, perhaps many. Why? Because of the viewers’ stored evaluations of steak

as deliciously satisfying when hungry. A person who has just eaten, however, will not react that way. And a vegetarian may react with indifference or even indignation. The contents of our subconscious minds can indeed be triggered by conscious (not subliminal) perceptions, but the material in the subconscious is a conclusion that was drawn—an evaluation made—some time earlier. Hmm. All this hostility toward advertising, capitalism, egoism, and reason must be triggered by “subliminal” communication from the parents, teachers, journalists, and politicians who repetitiously harp about those institutions’ alleged flaws and evils!