

Answering the Subliminal Ad

By Dennis Payton Knight

Advertising is such a part of our national economy (and consciousness) that we accept it with no more than minor grumbling, usually over frequency, and seldom about content. We are barely offended even when we are met with ubiquitous advertising for products that would have made your dear late mother blush. Heck, even Tugboat Annie would go pink.

But what about the nasty idea that we can be persuaded to indulge in products and diversions by sinister, subliminal suggestion? According to an article in *Scientific American* by Victoria Stern, September 2015, the idea captured popular attention in the middle of the 20th century, and science has only recently begun to parse the effects of subliminal messages.

The article tells how, in a 1943 Daffy Duck cartoon, the words “BUY BONDS” briefly appear. Nobody in the War Department back then knew whether it would work, but it couldn’t hurt to try.

In 1957, James Vicary, a market researcher, claimed that flashing the words, “Eat Popcorn” and “Drink Coca-Cola” for a fraction of a second during a movie would send folks rushing to the concession stand. Five years later, he admitted to faking his study, but by that time your mother and Tugboat Annie were worried about being sent to perdition based on an impulse from a split-second message. Advertisers became intrigued, maybe even giddy, about the possibilities.

Scientific studies at first tended to discredit subliminal advertising as subtly influencing behavior. One study showed that flashing the words “Hershey’s Chocolate” on a series of slides during a lecture did not prompt students to buy the candy bars during a ten-day period.

But by the 1990s other research began to uncover subtle effects, and by the early 2000s, research continued to show that subliminal messages do influence our perceptions. A 2006 study showed that participants flashed an image of a glass of Lipton Ice Tea were more likely to choose that brand, but only if the participants were already thirsty. A different study the journal called “provocative” showed that embedding images related to thirst in an episode of *The Simpsons* actually made people thirstier.

By 2007, it was learned that subliminal messages may also enhance academic performance when, in a study, hidden words related, or unrelated, to intelligence, such as “talent” and “grass” respectively were flashed to students before a practice exam. Those who saw the intelligence prompts performed better on a midterm a few days later.

The *Scientific American* report concludes that imaging studies taken from 2010 to 2015 show our brain responds to subliminal messages in various ways involving the amygdala, which processes emotions, the insula dealing with conscious awareness, the hippocampus involved in processing memories, and the visual cortex.

And there you go. The next time you get a sudden urge to solve a crossword puzzle in the middle of *As the World Turns*, play it back a little. It is likely *The New York Times* has something to do with it.