Seducing the Subconscious
The Psychology of Emotional Influence in Advertising

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For Pippa
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Foreword

“Advertising may be described as the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it.”

Stephen Butler Leacock
Crown’s Book of Political Quotations (1982)

When people are asked about advertising, they often find it quite difficult to remember any. If pressed, they usually come up with famous old campaigns like “I’d like to buy the world a Coke...,” or American Express “Don’t leave home without it,” or The Marlboro Cowboy, or the Jolly Green Giant. In the UK they might mention the Cadbury’s Smash Martians, the Guinness Surfer, Heineken “Refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach,” or the Gold Blend couple.

There then usually follows a discussion about how much advertising influences us. Most of us like to think that it doesn’t influence us unless we are stupid enough to let it. We believe this because we assume advertising works by persuasion, and persuasion is associated with others (typically our parents) trying to argue us into doing something we don’t want to do. Persuasion is a rational verbal process, so if we don’t hear or remember what an advertisement says, how can we be persuaded by it?

Many experts agree that advertising isn’t nearly as persuasive as it claims it is. In the opening paragraph of his book Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion, Michael Shudson writes:

Advertising is much less powerful than advertisers and critics of advertising claim, and advertising agencies are stabbing in the dark much more than they are practicing precision microsurgery on the public consciousness. (Shudson 1984: xiii)
**Foreword**

I agree with Shudson. Having worked in nine different advertising agencies over a period of 23 years, I can testify to just how much chance, serendipity, and stabbing in the dark is involved in the creation of great advertising campaigns. Admen may like to masquerade as experts in persuasion, but in many ways they are little more than gifted amateurs. I’d say the average young person on a date is many times more adroit in the art of persuasion than the average creative team.

But if advertising isn’t very good at persuading us, how come those companies that use advertising are amongst the most successful in the world? I think the explanation is that advertising has ways of influencing us we are not aware of, and that don’t involve persuasion. In this matter Shudson and I are also in agreement, for while he asserts that ads are not very persuasive, he also acknowledges that:

*This does not mean ads are ineffective. In fact ... television ads may be more powerful precisely because people pay them so little heed that they do not call critical defences into play. (Shudson 1984: 4)*

Shudson’s source for this idea was the psychologist, Herb Krugman. Krugman’s theories caused something of a stir in the 1970s, mainly because they suggested that TV advertising received low levels of attention. This was seen by the ad industry as being too difficult a pill to swallow, and Krugman’s ideas were pretty much ignored until the start of the twenty-first century, when I wrote a monograph called *The Hidden Power of Advertising* (Heath 2001).

*The Hidden Power of Advertising* was based on Krugman’s idea that TV advertising could influence us even when processed inattentively. Since its publication in 2001 there has been a steady growth in the number of people who accept that advertising subjected to “low attention processing” can be effective. That said, many of those who work in the ad industry still cling to the notion that advertising works only through persuasion, and works best at high attention.

Although my monograph referred extensively to psychology, it was not seen by academia as being rigorous enough. In order to overcome this hurdle I elected to become an academic myself. I studied for and was awarded a PhD, and I read and wrote articles in academic journals. But the more I researched the subject, the more it struck me that this “other” way in which advertising works, this alternative to persuasion, was quite possibly much more influential than persuasion. Many people have expressed worries about
how advertising might be influencing us without our knowledge, might somehow be “manipulating” our behavior subconsciously; and now I was finding that their worries were not entirely without foundation.

This alternative way in which advertising works is what I call Subconscious Seduction. I should stress this has nothing to do with the subliminal effects mentioned in Vance Packard’s famous book *The Hidden Persuaders*. Packard’s claims about messages exposed below the threshold of perception were based on a hoax, and there is no evidence at all that advertising can influence us in this way. No, perhaps even more worrying is that advertising’s ability to seduce our subconscious uses elements that are in our full view and easy for us to discern. The problem is that although we are able to perceive and attend to these elements, we mostly choose not to.

So advertising’s ability to work in this way isn’t like subliminal exposure, something we can legislate against or put a stop to. It happens partly because of the way our minds work, and partly because of the way we make decisions. This means that explaining the Subconscious Seduction model isn’t a simple story: it involves collecting together and considering complex ideas about how we perceive and think and feel and remember and forget. These ideas have been brought into the public domain only in the last two decades, by academics such as Antonio Damasio, Daniel Dennett, Daniel Schacter, Joseph LeDoux, and Steven Rose. Although these ideas are complex, I have done my best to describe them in language that anyone can understand. I have sought to avoid the situation summed up so eloquently by my great friend the late Andrew Ehrenberg, who once told me: “There is nothing in the world so complex that it cannot, when considered by a group of clever people, be made more complex.”

There are many people who I must thank for helping me write this book. Most especially I would like to thank Paul Feldwick and Jon Howard, whose insights first inspired my research. Also, in no particular order, Tim Ambler, David Brandt, Jeremy Bullmore, Wendy Gordon, Arthur Kover, Agnes Nairn, Douglas West, and the dozens of others who have indirectly contributed to this book. Above all I should like to express my gratitude and love to my wife, friend, and subeditor Frances Liardet, without whose support my career as a writer might never have come to pass.
Introduction

“I think that I shall never see
An ad so lovely as a tree.
But if a tree you have to sell,
It takes an ad to do that well.”

Jef I. Richards
Retort to Ogden Nash (1995)\(^1\)

Advertising is a huge business, and a huge success story. You only have to look at the turnover of those companies who use advertising intensively (Procter & Gamble, Walmart, Unilever, Kraft, Nestlé, Johnson & Johnson, Reckitt Benckiser, etc.) to know that investing in advertising pays off in spades.

But trying to get under the surface and explain why advertising is so effective is surprisingly difficult. One reason is that the companies who use advertising to sell their goods don’t have the least motive for letting others know how effective it is. Of course, the ad agencies have a motive for publicizing their success, because advertising is their advertising, so to speak. But they are bound to confidentiality by the people for whom they create the ads, the marketers who pay them, and those marketers much prefer success or failure to remain a well-kept secret. One reason for this is that if their competitors find out which ads work and which don’t, then all those competitors need to do is imitate the ads that are successful.

\(^1\) [http://www.financial-portal.com/articles/article229.html#Selling](http://www.financial-portal.com/articles/article229.html#Selling)
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Competitive paranoia is especially rife in the USA, where more money is spent on advertising than anywhere else in the world. Ask a US ad agency how much their client has spent on a campaign, or how much it has earned them in extra revenue, and you’ll find the door politely shut in your face. And if you do manage to find someone who can give you this information, you’re more likely to get an injunction than permission to publish it.

There are a few exceptions. The ARF (Advertising Research Foundation) David Ogilvy Awards annually publish a series of case studies which occasionally give you an indication of how successful an advertising campaign has been. But the data are mostly very generalized. They’ll tell you how much more awareness was created, or how many people liked the advertising. They might even mention how much sales have increased over a certain period, or how much their share of the market has grown. But there will rarely be anything specific about what the ad campaign actually achieved.

Take for example the 2009 Dove “Real Beauty” campaign. The Ogilvy Awards case study says that “engagement” increased 12%, but since no one knows what engagement is that doesn’t really tell you much. It also says that the overall strategy increased market share by 33% in the USA, UK, and Germany. But that was over a 4-year period between 2003 and 2007, and was for all the activity that went on over this period (i.e., promotions, distribution drives, sales incentives, PR activity, etc., etc.) What it doesn’t tell you is how much the TV advertising earned.

In the UK, marketers are slightly more relaxed about revealing business data, and the IPA Advertising Effectiveness Awards provide a gold mine of hard evidence about how advertising campaigns have worked. That is why you’ll find I’ve quoted many more UK than US case studies in this book. There is much more information to work with, which makes them much better at illustrating how advertising works.

But there’s a second reason why marketers are coy about how successful their advertising is. And that is because they often don’t know. The industrialist John Wanamaker is famously quoted as having said “Half my advertising is wasted, but I don’t know which half.” Less well-known is that in an interview in 1998, Niall FitzGerald, then chairman of Unilever, observed that “If someone asked me, rather than one of my distinguished predecessors, which half of my advertising was wasted I would probably say

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2 Advertising Research Foundation David Ogilvy Awards on www.warc.com
3 Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, www.ipa.co.uk
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90% is wasted but I don’t know which 90% (Lannon 1998: 20).” Astonishing, isn’t it, that we can ferry people to and from the surface of the moon, yet according to the head of the world’s second biggest advertiser we still can’t work out if an ad campaign has been a success.

One explanation for this confusion is that ads frequently seem able to defy reason. For example, it is widely believed in the ad industry that ads we like are more effective than ads we don’t like, because people are more willing to watch them (Biel 1990). So how do you explain the following?

Love or Hate?

Over the past few years a whole raft of what are known as price comparison web sites have grown up in the UK. These sites enable you to check if you can get a better deal on services such as power, telecoms, and insurance. Traffic for these web sites is almost entirely driven by TV advertising, and so they make an interesting test bed for what sort of advertising does and does not work.

On Saturday, January 16, 2010, in the midst of a terrible recession which had decimated profits of the UK’s leading commercial TV channel, the UK Guardian newspaper published an article with a headline “How to save the TV advertising industry? Simples! Send for Aleksandr the meerkat.” The article referred to “Compare-the-Market.com,” which had ingeniously invented a fictional web site entitled “Compare the Meerkat.” Their hugely popular ad campaign featured an anthropomorphized meerkat called Aleksandr bemoaning that fact that people confused his meerkat dating site with the Compare-the-Market web site on which you could buy cheap car insurance.

“A lot of people have been taken aback by how successful Aleksandr has been,” the Guardian announced. The article pointed out that Aleksandr Orlov, the meerkat in question, had generating an avalanche of followers on Twitter and Facebook, in the process becoming the must-have children’s toy for Christmas 2009. Gerry Boyle, chief executive of media buying giant Zenith Optimedia, was quoted as saying “The huge success of these campaigns in capturing the public’s attention has proved those who argue TV advertising is dying wrong.”

4 http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/jan/16/aleksander-orlov-price-comparison-ads
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So just how hugely successful had the meerkat advertising been? The *Guardian*, quoting Mintel, claimed the meerkat advertising had “propelled” Compare-the-Market.com from being in the low teens to fourth most popular UK price comparison site behind MoneySupermarket.com and Confused.com. Sounds good, but the problem was this also put them behind a website with an equally high awareness advertising campaign, GoCompare.com.

For their advertising, GoCompare.com had invented a character called Gio Compario, an opera singer who regularly interrupted people’s leisure activities by exhorting them to “Go Compare” in a loud operatic tenor voice. Gio Compario had also broken some records in 2009, by being named as the UK’s most irritating ad campaign for a second year running. It was not made clear which of these two campaigns – the meerkat or Gio Compario – had generated the most attention, but there was no doubt which was liked least and which was liked most.

Which makes it all the more surprising that a little over a year later the UK *Sunday Times* announced that “spending on advertising … has driven GoCompare into pole position in what is now a four way fight between Confused, MoneySupermarket, and Compare the Market.” Apparently, despite incurring the nation’s universal opprobrium, the Gio Compario advertising was a huge success. In other words, the UK’s most hated advertising seems to have been a great deal more effective than the UK’s most loved advertising.

What this tale illustrates is that simple indicators such as liking or hating ads are not very reliable predictors of ad effectiveness. It may seem logical common sense that an ad you like will work better than one you hate, but ads are expert at defying logic. And here’s another common sense example. Surely an ad will not work if no one can recall the message it is trying to get over?

The Curious Case of O2

The UK mobile phone network market is renowned as being one of the world’s most competitive, and, as with price comparison web sites, success has always been driven by advertising. During the 1990s, two ad campaigns dominated the market: Orange, with its iconic “The future’s bright, the future’s Orange” advertising, and One-2-One, with its celebrity-driven
“Who would you like to have a one-to-one with?” Alongside these two high profile brands there were two others that struggled for awareness: one was Vodafone; the other, owned by the UK landline operator British Telecom, was Cellnet.

At the end of the 1990s, Vodafone transformed its fortunes by buying a string of companies (including Orange) and becoming the world’s biggest mobile network operator. No such luck for Cellnet. In 2001, the struggling network was spun off and relaunched under the name O2 (pronounced Oh-Two). For some years it ran an unassuming advertising campaign that occasionally showed doves taking off and people dancing, but mostly featured blue water with bubbles bubbling through it and some lilting music in the background. The rather cryptic message at the end was “O2. See what you can do.”

O2 spent a lot of money on this campaign, and although people were aware of their ads, virtually no one was able to recall what they were meant to be telling them about O2. Partly this was because the “See what you can do” message in the ads didn’t really make a lot of sense to anyone, and partly because there were no dramatic price claims or deals or innovative new product features which might have been worth remembering. The fact is blue water and bubbles are hardly characteristics one might look for in a mobile phone.

So, by 2005, you might think you can guess where each of these brands stood in the UK? Here’s the answer. One-2-One had been taken over by T-Mobile, and had 11.2 million UK customers. Acquisitive Vodafone had 14.8 million customers. Orange’s famous advertising had secured it 14.9 million customers.

And what had O2’s somewhat meaningless water and bubbles achieved for the company? Well, it had resulted in the dying network becoming the UK’s biggest phone company, with 17 million customers. No, that’s not a misprint. O2 had in 4 short years become market leader. More interestingly, it had achieved this success without undercutting other brands on price, without having any particular technical advantage, and without using any exceptional promotional activity. O2 seems to have achieved market leadership using little more than its blue bubbling advertising.

How could this have happened? How could advertising that communicated next to nothing have driven a brand to leadership of such a competitive market? As you read on you will find out, and you will also find out how many other companies have done the same. Because my theory is that the
most successful advertising campaigns in the world are not those we love or those we hate, or those with messages that are new or interesting. They are those like O2 that are able to effortlessly slip things under our radar and influence our behavior without us ever really knowing that they have done so. And the way in which these apparently inoffensive ad campaigns work is by “seducing” our subconscious.

Unfortunately, just how advertising manages to seduce our subconscious isn’t a simple story. It turns out it is able to influence us this way because we, as human beings, are peculiarly susceptible to certain types of communication. This susceptibility is a function of the way in which our minds have evolved, so to understand what is going on it is necessary to become acquainted with a lot of new ideas in psychology.

For this reason I’ve approached the subject rather as an engineer might. I’ve started by taking current models of advertising to pieces, and then I’ve rebuilt them in stages into a new Subconscious Seduction model. In the process I’ve used cognitive psychology, behavioral psychology, neurobiology, and philosophy as the building blocks. As I go along I’ve tried to illustrate each stage with case studies of advertising, and at various points I’ve also included diagrams of how the model is developing.

I apologize if you find this approach a little over-diligent, but I believe it is necessary. After all, many people have vested interests in proving the Subconscious Seduction model wrong: some have built their businesses on the old model, and others are just paranoid that advertising will be shown to be something sinister and underhand. But advertising isn’t either of these; it’s just a lot more complicated than any of us ever imagine it is.

The book is set out in five parts, and here is a brief description of each of them.

**Part One: Taking Advertising Apart**

Chapter 1 starts by describing the traditional persuasion model. It quickly becomes apparent that not even those who work in the advertising business are always aware of how advertising influences us. The most common view is that what it does is communicate some sort of persuasive information, which in turn enables us to go out and make a rational decision about what we want to buy.

Chapter 2 looks at alternative ideas, both from within the industry and from related fields such as psychology. The first of these was proposed by the
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psychologist Walter Dill Scott over 100 years ago, when print and outdoor advertising were the only media available. Scott, like me, saw advertising as able to subconsciously manipulate the mind of the consumer. Unfortunately, despite being lauded by many advertisers at the time, his ideas did not fit with those held by the people controlling the media. Bear in mind most of these media moguls were ex-salesmen, for whom the overt presentation of persuasive arguments was the watchword for success, so it perhaps isn’t really surprising that Scott’s revolutionary ideas were sidelined and forgotten.

It is a testimony to the conservatism of the ad industry that the second major assault on persuasion did not take place for over 60 years. This time it was another psychologist, Herb Krugman, and his target was TV advertising. Krugman simply couldn’t understand how the trivial rubbish that made up most of the early TV commercials could persuade anyone to buy anything. He set about proving that most TV advertising was watched in a state of “low involvement” compared with print ads. His ideas were lent weight by the work of a leading statistician, Andrew Ehrenberg, who showed that it was highly unlikely that advertising changed anyone’s attitudes, and therefore equally unlikely that it could be persuasive.

The industry had a huge problem accepting that we don’t pay much attention to ads and they don’t change our attitudes. So it isn’t much of a surprise that the response to Krugman and Ehrenberg was, as with Scott, to express great interest in their ideas . . . and then politely ignore them.

But it seems to be an undeniable fact that we don’t pay much attention to ads, and in Chapter 3 I start laying out the evidence that supports this assertion. It turns out that we probably spend more time avoiding advertising, especially TV advertising, than we do consuming it. And there are many good reasons why we should behave in this way. First, because we have been surrounded by advertising all our lives, it is no longer a novelty. Second, because everything is so competitive nowadays, we assume that mostly all advertisers will do is assert that their brand is better than all the rest. Third, because brands are all pretty good, it seems unlikely that much in the way of evidence will be presented to back up this assertion. In other words, we don’t pay attention to advertising because we don’t expect to learn anything particularly new and interesting from it, and we frankly have better things to do with our lives.

Of course, by ignoring advertising we assume that it will not have any effect on us. In the second part of the book I start to examine whether or not this is true.
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Part Two: The Psychology of Communication

When it comes to the way in which we process communication, our minds turn out to make everything much more complicated than you might expect. Chapter 4 looks at how learning and attention interact when we are processing advertising. It becomes necessary to consider not just where we are directing our attention, but how much attention we are paying at any one time. I also discuss a memory system that enables us to learn even when we pay no attention at all to advertising; a mechanism known as Implicit Learning.

Chapter 5 looks at how our learning from communication interacts with our memory systems. Our explicit memory – the one we use to recall things – turns out to be really quite limited. That is why we find it hard to recall advertisements and easy to forget them. But we are also equipped with implicit memory, which is not only inexhaustible but extremely durable. Implicit memory is informed by Implicit Learning, and it stores pretty much everything we perceive. It is also able to connect these perceptions with semantic memory, where we store meaning. This is a critically important step in explaining how advertising processed at low or even zero levels of attention might be able to influence us.

Chapter 6 looks at a new way of categorizing learning from communication. I define three different types of mental activity: Perception, Conceptualization, and Analysis. These operate across our three types of learning: Active, Passive, and Implicit Learning. These definitions help us get a better understanding of how we process advertising and store what we process. The most important finding is that Implicit Learning is by far the most common way of processing advertising, Passive Learning is the next most common, and Active Learning happens rarely if at all. In this chapter I also discuss subliminal exposure, which has nothing at all to do with how advertising affects us, and the much more important subject of peripheral exposure, which has a lot to do with how advertising affects us.

Chapter 7 examines the problems that arise when advertisers try to get us to pay attention. One obstacle is that the more we attend to ads, the better we are able to “counter-argue” their messages, and the less convincing we start to find the claims they make. Another even more troublesome trait is that, in order to prevent our minds becoming too cluttered, we are equipped with a mechanism called Perceptual Filtering which enables us to ignore those elements we don’t want to pay attention to. That of course means that
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if we don’t think we are going to learn anything from an advertisement we can direct our minds to focus on the bits we enjoy and filter out the bits we don’t (e.g., the message and the name of the brand being advertised).

But there are elements in advertising that elude these defense mechanisms, the most obvious being those connected with emotion. How we process emotion and indeed how our conscious and subconscious really work are the subjects of the third part of the book.

Part Three: Emotion and Consciousness

Until quite recently psychologists thought that emotions were a result of our thinking. In Chapter 8 I show that emotional processing, far from being the last thing we do, is the first. Indeed, it turns out that emotional processing is a function of an instinctive part of our brain that long pre-dates conscious thinking, and therefore has to operate automatically and subconsciously.

In order to understand this it becomes necessary to probe what we mean by our subconscious and what it does. This is dealt with in Chapter 9, and is possibly the most problematic idea you will encounter. Many of those who study consciousness now accept that everything we do with our mind is done at a subconscious level, and that “consciousness” is just an observer. So our conscious mind doesn’t behave like a computer, more like a computer monitor. Our thinking goes on subconsciously, and a small part of it – effectively what our minds can cope with – is fed through to the monitor for us to look at. So when we seem to argue with ourselves, what we are “aware” of is our mind reporting an argument that happened subconsciously sometime earlier.

Spooky? Not really. I find this way of looking at ourselves is surprisingly liberating. It explains why we can do things so well without thinking about them – instinctively reaching out and catching a falling glass before it hits the ground, for example – and it explains why we perceive so much more than we think we do. But it also explains why there exists in us a huge vulnerability to certain types of communication, most notably advertising.

Chapter 10 looks at the interaction between attention and emotion, and explains why persuasion-based advertising models don’t work. Advertisers think that their creativity makes us like ads more and pay more attention to them. What really happens turns out to be the opposite: the more advertisers
attempt to subconsciously seduce us with creativity, the more we like it, the less we feel threatened by it, and the less attention we need to pay to it. So the more creative advertising is, the less attention we pay, and the less well we recall the message it is trying to get over.

But the sting in the tail is that the less attention we pay, the more effective the subconscious seduction becomes. In other words, by paying less attention we effectively give advertisers permission to influence our subconscious.

**Part Four: Decisions and Relationships**

In order to understand exactly how our behavior is influenced by emotion in advertising we first need to understand how we make decisions. Chapter 11 examines in detail what psychologists now accept, which is that our emotions act as a gatekeeper for all our decisions. Indeed, the influence of our emotions is so powerful that we cannot make a decision unless our emotions concur with it. And if we don’t have time to think about a decision, our emotions will effectively make it for us via our intuition. That, of course, means that emotion in advertising is able to influence our behavior far more than anyone ever thought.

There’s more: in Chapter 12 we find that it is also emotion that underpins our relationships, through something known as metacommunication. It might surprise some of you to realize that we have relationships with lifeless entities such as brands, but we do; those who have witnessed the love and attention that some people lavish on their cars will know exactly what I am talking about.

Chapter 13 presents the complete Subconscious Seduction model of how advertising works. This chapter discusses some of the contextual influences that now direct our lives, and combines these with the psychological learning in Parts Two to Four. I find there are two important ways in which advertising is able to influence our behavior at a subconscious level. The first of these is Subconscious Associative Conditioning. This occurs when something in an advertisement triggers an emotive reaction, and over time subconsciously transfers that emotive reaction to a brand. The second is Subconscious Relationship Manipulation. This occurs when the creativity in the advertisement subconsciously influences the way you feel about a brand. The model that emerges in this chapter is by now
quite complex, but, as I said earlier, this is not a simple situation we are dealing with.

Part Five: A Fresh Look at Advertising

In the last section of the book I start to explore the implications of the Subconscious Seduction model. Chapter 14 gives you an idea of just how gullible we all are, and how easy it is for external stimuli of all sorts to influence us. For example, randomly nodding or shaking our heads while listening can change our opinions, and the simple act of filling in a questionnaire with a particular color pen can exert an influence on what we buy. This chapter also explains how we have, tucked away in our subconscious, far more knowledge about the detail of advertising than we would probably like to have. And, what is more, because it is in our subconscious, there is no way we can get it out.

Many of the examples dealt with up until now are from TV. Chapter 15 discusses how new media, most especially the internet, influences us. I also address what is perhaps the most subconsciously seductive of all media, the practice of paying to place products in TV programs.

All this invites us to ask if it is right that advertising should be allowed to have so much influence over us. This question is addressed in Chapter 16. It transpires that the question should be: “Is there anything we can do about how much influence advertising has on us?” And the answer is “very little.” We can and do ban it for products that can harm us – although not quickly enough and not in enough countries – but the wider problem is that if we ban advertising from one media it simply pops up in another. And if we ban it altogether it might well pop up in places where it can’t be monitored and controlled at all. So for the benefit of society, like alcohol, it is perhaps best to have it out in the open where we can keep an eye on it.

In Chapter 17 I explain how you can spot when you are being subconsciously seduced by advertising. In four case studies I show how brands on both sides of the Atlantic have become superbrands using advertising that carries hidden messages. Nothing especially sinister, I hasten to add: just extremely clever.

Finally, I conclude by asking where all this takes us. It won’t surprise you to learn that I have a special concern about what Subconscious Seduction might be doing to our children. But I also wonder why this extraordinarily powerful
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mechanism is not more widely used in public broadcast advertising, where it would be of far more benefit to us.

So I invite you to begin this journey through advertising. I suspect that once you have completed it you will be astonished by how much advertising affects your everyday behavior. And perhaps even more astonished by how little you realized this was going on.
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Taking Advertising Apart