Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine
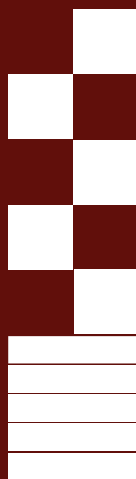
Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons

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Contents

The Psychology of Advertising (1913)

Walter Dill Scott

5th ed. Boston: Small, Maynard, pp. 1–6, 80–88 [with elisions].

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Along with political propaganda, commercial propaganda, or advertising, was of great interest to early social scientists and developed its own stream of literature. Of those scholars addressing the issue in the early 1900s, the preeminent figure was Walter Scott (1869–1955). Scott was a man of considerable energy and professional achievement. He earned his BA at Northwestern University in 1891, then traveled to Germany to study under the noted psychologist and philosopher Wilhelm Wundt, receiving his PhD from the University of Leipzig in 1900. He returned to Northwestern and in 1909 was appointed head of its new Department of Psychology. He was elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1919 and the following year named president of Northwestern.

In 1902, Scott published *The Psychology of Advertising in Theory and Practice*, following it in 1908 with his first edition of *The Psychology of Advertising.* He would issue five more editions of the latter text over the following years and, according to one biographer, "dominated the field of advertising psychology until 1910–1911" (Kuna 1976, 348). At the heart of Scott's psychology was the doctrine of suggestion. He recognized and appreciated appeals to

reason in advertising but saw greater effectiveness in suggestion. "The actual effect of modern advertising," he declared, "is not so much to convince as to suggest." Scott took his research to the industry, not as a critic, but as an adviser. He founded a consulting firm in 1919, which operated for about four years, and much of his published work was in the form of instruction and guidance for advertising professionals.

"Scott's theory of advertising," said Kuna, "with the law of suggestion as its central tenet was *the* psychology of advertising during the formative era in that subject's history" (353, italics in the original). A flavor of this psychological approach to advertising is captured in the following excerpt from Scott's (1913) fifth edition of *The Psychology of Advertising.* The applied, pro-business character of the writing is apparent from the start: "Advertising has as its one function the influencing of human minds. Unless it does this it is useless and destructive to the firms attempting it." The science of psychology, he then argues, can be most useful in helping achieve positive commercial goals.

He treats the theory of suggestion in detail, although the book comes early in suggestion research and lacks some of the nuance of conditionality common in later writing. Again, practical advice dominates Scott's discussion, and he closes with a note of optimism for his professional audience: "It seems that no form of action can be suggested by an advertisement that does not successfully challenge the reader to do what is proposed."—*P.P.*

References

Kuna, David. 1976. "The Concept of Suggestion in the Early History of Advertising Psychology." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 12, no. 4: 347–53.

The Psychology of Advertising (1913)

I. INTRODUCTION

The typical business man is an optimist. For him the future is full of possibilities that never have been realized in the past. He is not, however, a daydreamer, but one who uses his imagination in formulating purposes which lead to immediate action. His power of execution often surpasses that

of his imagination, and he is frequently surprised to see his vision realized in less time than he had even dared to hope.

The advertiser may well be regarded as typical of the class of American business men. At a time when advertisements were poorly constructed and given limited circulation, certain enterprising men saw the possibilities of advertising and began systematically to improve the whole profession of advertising. Artists were employed to construct appropriate illustrations, and skilled typographers vied with each other in setting up the text in the most artistic and legible manner possible. Business system was used in ascertaining the amount of circulation of various publications as well as the kind of circulation. Advertisements were keyed, and other means were employed to discover the exact value of each style of advertisements and of each medium in which advertisements were inserted.

These improvements have been as beneficial as the most sanguine could have hoped for, but in and of themselves they were not sufficient to place advertising upon a scientific basis. Advertising has as its one function the influencing of human minds. Unless it does this it is useless and destructive to the firms attempting it. As it is the human mind that advertising is dealing with, its only scientific basis is psychology, which is simply a systematic study of those same minds which the advertiser is seeking to influence. This fact was seen by wise advertisers and such conceptions began to appear in print and to be heard in conventions of advertising men some ten years ago. Occasionally one who was especially optimistic prophesied that at some time—perhaps in the distant future—advertisers would turn to psychology for guidance. [...]

Although the attitude of the advertising world has changed and even though much has been done to present psychology in a helpful form to the advertisers, the work of the psychologist is not yet available to the business world because the material has not been presented in any one accessible place. Contributions are scattered through the files of a score of American and European publications. Some articles appearing under this head are of minor significance, while others are so important that they should be collected in a place and form such that they would be available to the largest possible number of readers. The psychology of advertising has reached a stage in its development where all that has thus far been accomplished should be reconsidered. The worthless should be discarded and the valuable brought out into due prominence in systematic arrangement. In view of this condition of affairs the author has assumed the pleasing task of systematiz-

ing *the* subject of the psychology of advertising and of presenting it in such a form that it will be of distinct practical value to all who are interested in business promotion. [...]

VI. SUGGESTION

The mental process known as "Suggestion" is in bad repute because, in the popular mind, it has too often been associated on the one hand with hypnotism and on the other with indecency and vulgarity. Hypnotism in the hands of the scientist or of the fakir is well known to be a form of suggestion. A story which does not specifically depart from that which conforms to the standards of propriety but which is so constructed that it leads the hearers to conceptions that are "off color" is said to be suggestive. In this way it has come to pass that the whole subject of suggestion has been passed by with less consideration than is due it.

There is no uniformity in the meanings that are attached to the term *suggestion* even among the most careful writers. If I were sitting in my office and considering the advisability of beginning a certain enterprise, I might say that one idea "suggested" a second and this second a third, etc. A scientific definition would not allow this use of the term but would substitute the expression "called up" for "suggested." Thus I should say that one idea "called up" the second, etc. *Suggestion must be brought about by a second person or an object.* In my musings and deliberations I should not say that one idea suggested another, but if the same idea were called forth at the instigation of a second person or upon the presentation of an object, I should then call it suggestion—if it met the second essential condition of suggestion. This second condition is that *the resulting conception, conclusion or action must follow with less than the normal amount of deliberation.* Suggestion is thus a relative term, and in many instances it might be difficult to say whether or not a particular act was suggestion. If the act followed a normal amount of consideration after a normal time for deliberation, it would not be suggestion, while if the same act followed too abruptly or with too little consideration it might be a true case of suggestion.

Every normal individual is subject to the influence of suggestion. Every idea of which we think is all too liable to be held for truth, and every thought of an action which enters our minds is likely to result in such action. [...]

Thought is dynamic in its very nature and every idea of an action tends to produce that action.

The most perfect working of suggestion is to be seen under hypnosis and in crowds. In hypnosis the subject holds every idea presented as true, and every idea suggested is acted out with no hesitation what ever. Here the mind is so narrowed by the artificial sleep that no contradictory or inhibiting idea arises, and hence no idea can seem absurd and no action seems out of place. There is no possible criticism or deliberation and so we have the extreme case of susceptibility to suggestion.

The effect of a crowd upon an individual approaches that of the hypnotizer. The individual is affected by every member of the crowd and the influence becomes so overpowering that it can hardly be resisted. If the crowd is a "lynching party" the whole atmosphere is one of revenge, and everywhere is suggested the idea of "lynch the culprit." This idea is presented on all sides. It can be read from the faces and actions of the individuals and is heard in their cries. No other idea has a chance to arise in consciousness and hence this one idea, being dynamic, leads to its natural consequences.

It was once supposed that suggestion was something abnormal and that reason was the common attribute of men. Today we are finding that suggestion is of universal application to all persons, while reason is a process which is exceptional, even among the wisest. We reason rarely, but act under suggestion constantly.

There has been a great agitation of late among advertisers for "reason why" copy. This agitation has had some value, but it is easily over-emphasized. Occasionally customers are persuaded and convinced, but more frequently they make their purchases because the act is suggested at the psychological moment. Suggestion and persuasion are not antagonistic; both should be kept in mind. However, in advertising, suggestion should not be subordinated to persuasion but should be supplemented by it. The actual effect of modern advertising is not so much to convince as to suggest. The individual swallowed up by a crowd is not aware of the fact that he is not exercising a normal amount of deliberation. His actions appear to him to be the result of reason, although the idea, as presented, is not criticised at all and no contradictory or inhibiting idea has any possibility of arising, in his mind. In the same way we think that we are performing a deliberate act when we purchase an advertised commodity, while in fact we may never have deliberated upon the subject at all. The idea is suggested by the advertisement, and the impulsiveness of human nature enforces the suggested idea, hence the desired result follows in a way unknown to the purchaser. [...]

The second most effective class is probably the ideas suggested by the words of our companions. Advertisements that are seen frequently are difficult to distinguish in their force from ideas which are secured from the words of our friends. Advertising thus becomes a great social illusion. We attribute to our social environment that which in reality has been secured from the advertisements which we have seen so often that we forget the source of the information.

Street railway advertising is especially effective at this point because the suggestion is presented so frequently that we soon forget the source of the suggestions and end by attributing it to the advice of friends.

In advertising some commodities argumentation is of more importance than suggestion, and for such things booklets and other similar forms of advertising are the most effective. Such commodities are, however, the exception and not the rule. In the most successful advertising argumentation and forms of reasoning are not disregarded, but the emphasis is put upon suggestion. Inasmuch as more of our actions are induced by suggestion than by argumentation, advertising conforms, in this particular, to the psychological situation. It puts the emphasis where the most can be accomplished and subordinates those mental processes which hold a second place in determining our actions.

As stated above, those suggestions are the most powerful which we receive from the actions and words of other persons. The successful advertiser seems to have worked upon this hypothesis in constructing many advertisements. He has also taken advantage of the fact that we soon forget the person who originally suggested the idea and become subject to illusions upon the matter. [...]

It seems that no form of action can be suggested by an advertisement that does not successfully challenge the reader to do what is proposed. The suggested idea haunts one and even though the action may be absurd, it is difficult to resist.