

## The Porosity of the Consumer

Mark Tadajewski, University of York; Royal Holloway, University of London. Email: [marktadajewski@gmail.com](mailto:marktadajewski@gmail.com)

Matthew Higgins, Open University. Email: [matthew.higgins@open.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.higgins@open.ac.uk)

### Abstract

In this paper, we explore and extend the work of Daniel Pick. Pick articulates the ways in which the political and intellectual atmosphere shapes how we understand human thought. As a case in point, advertising and marketing have been influenced by theories, concepts and empirical materials that problematised the materialistic interpretation of mind. This is most overt in the debates relating to hypnotism and telepathy. To extend Pick's analyses, we engage with these areas, focusing initially on the issues of hypnotic and telepathic crime, subsequently outlining the activities of E. Virgil Neal. We maintain that it was politically problematic for marketing to enrobe itself in hypnotic verbiage and trace the relevant changes in the language used to frame marketing and advertising discourse. What Pick's writings and the narratives unravelled in this manuscript illuminate is the conceptualisation of the consumer as a porous being.

**Keywords:** Marketing; Advertising; History; Mind; Hypnosis; Telepathy; Porosity.

### Introduction

Interdisciplinary research vitalizes our scholarly area. Heading into sister disciplines, reading what they are doing, helps us deepen our knowledge and contributions. In this paper, we will engage with historian Daniel Pick's (2022) *Brainwashed*, identifying the core threads of his work, linking these to marketing and consumer research. Pick encourages us to appreciate the contexts in which worldviews, concepts, theories, and practices are generated. All our ideas are historical products and appropriate exemplars – what Pick (2002: 25) calls “flashpoints” – can be used to scrutinize our world today. As he makes clear, the concept of brainwashing arose at a distinct historical moment. Yet, it has forerunners and continues to shape the experiences of various groups (e.g., prisoners), whilst lingering within discussions of contemporary events such as Havana syndrome (Corera 2021). Registering this, we supplement the narratives provided by Pick (2022), tying them back to his earlier work (Pick, 2000), then going beyond his reflections in our interrogation of literature pertinent to marketing and consumer research specifically. This enables us to pinpoint a core theme for marketing theory: the porosity of the consumer.

We are increasingly aware of our porosity (e.g., Barrett et al 1882; Comer and Drollinger 1999; Farber 2017; Miles 2014; Nickels et al 1983). As the infamous Facebook experiment from 2012 controversially illuminated, content injected into our news feeds can generate more elevated, positive frames of mind (Kramer et al 2014). Negative content, by contrast, has the potential to cause a spiral of depression which spills out into non-virtual life. It no longer takes an eye-roll, tut or rebuke from someone physically proximate to modify our emotions. Large corporations can do this without us registering their involvement. They can influence how we think and feel, and shape how we respond and react, whether this is to accept, challenge, or succumb to some “bleak cultural aporia” (Ahlberg et al 2022, 667).

What we are currently seeing in terms of the notion of consumer porosity is the operationalisation of a view of human nature that reaches back to our disciplinary origins (cf. Ritson and Elliott 1999). The idea that the customer is king, able to make rational, thoughtful decisions, largely uninfluenced by those around them, with the firm as their servant, is a

fiction (Lazarsfeld 1934, 1935; Miles 2015). Throughout the history of our subject, the representation of what marketing theorists and practitioners saw themselves doing has been more complex. Perhaps even more honest. They acknowledged their interest in stimulating (Shaw 1915) and regulating demand (Kotler 1973). For some thinkers, business people come close to brainwashing, occasionally resorting to coercion to regulate less powerful members of the community or supply chain (Israeli et al 2022; Tadajewski 2009b). Those narratives do, however, tend to get downplayed or forgotten. Unless, that is, we have a product, tool or technique we are trying to sell which claims to be the next big thing in predicting and channelling the customer (Miles 2014; Thompson 2019). Then, far from the consumer being our central focus, even our idol, the astute practitioner becomes the master of the commercial universe.

Whether we think back to the heyday of motivation research, the furore about subliminal advertising (Rogers and Smith 1993) or the marketing of big data and algorithmic technology (Thompson 2019), cajoling or controlling the consumer is often a leitmotif. Taking such issues seriously is a refrain of literature within (Harrison et al 2012) and outside of our subject (Pick 2022). Research in history, for example, explores the concept of brainwashing and related ideas. In the Korean and Vietnam conflicts as well as during the Cold War, psychological insights were used to reshape human minds (Pick 2022). For some, the effects were alarming, highlighting how scientific knowledge could curtail human freedoms, reshaping our sense of self, view of the world and political commitments. For others, psychological understanding could furnish us with the ability to reshape our thinking processes, patterns, and habits. It contained the seeds of emancipation.

### **Thinking about Brainwashing**

In his book, Pick (2022) illuminates various cases which will fascinate and disconcert those interested in the power relations attendant to modern life. The Chinese government with their re-education programmes, the Supreme Soviet with its apparent ideological hold over the population, and prisoners of war returning from detention expressing positive evaluations of their captors, all telegraphed the potential mind-control powers of governments (Pick 2022). Monitoring of populations (foreign or domestic) in conjunction with rising attention to psychological “adjustment”, all contributed to a tense social context.

What discourse about brainwashing reflected was a sense of concern over disparities of power between the citizenry, business and government. Commercial practices were becoming increasingly sophisticated, with corporate skills in demand management receiving attention from critics including James Rorty, Helen Woodward and Vance Packard. What Pick reveals is the malleability of the concept: “brainwashing is a slippery concept” (Pick 2022, xv). He outlines its application and connects it to associated ideas including hypnosis, suggestion, re-education, thought- and mind-control, all of which link brainwashing to the genealogy of our discipline. For Pick, concepts such as brainwashing are useful tools to explore the social world, but we must not let these concepts solidify and determine what we see. One person’s brainwashing is, after all, another’s re-education.

Significantly, it is important that the world of lived experience is juxtaposed against our conceptual architecture to allow us to appreciate gradations which tend to be side-lined when we are using a framework to explore contexts and political systems far removed from our own. After all, even within the most controlling environments like Soviet Russia of the 1950s and 1960s, there remained room for intellectual and behavioural agency (Pick 2022). Citing the case of Russia is not a free-pass for the United States. The latter should not be interpreted as a bastion of freedom, consumerist or otherwise. However,

“It would be inappropriate to liken the scale of persecution for dissidents and protestors under Stalin or Mao to the punishments meted out to critical intellectuals in the United States or other Western liberal democracies in the post-war decades...All the same, we should not minimise the scale of surveillance, harassment and sometimes active oppression of the most militant and challenging left-wing and other radical political opponents of US policy in the 1950s and 60s America, including some who were white, privileged and well established...Serious, certainly revolutionary dissent against the existing order was policed, albeit in different ways, in both of the two world systems, communism and capitalism...Yet...some spaces for spoken, written and artistic principled opposition remained in the post-war United States, unlike in China or the Soviet Union at that time.”

(Pick 2022, 133)

In every society, the way we negotiate the political-economic system involves us in many different compromises. Compliance can be orchestrated in many different ways (e.g., Pick 2022, 145, 146, 148). Business school curricula, advice books touting ten steps to success, and “caring” corporate cultures, have all primed our commitment to capitalist values (Hietanen et al 2022; Gross and Laamanen 2021). Tying people into mortgages, encouraging the purchase of shares and investments (Tadajewski and Jones 2016), continual exposure to advertising, social points of comparison, planned obsolescence and the pseudo-individualism offered by the marketplace (Rorty 1934/1976) cement our positionality within the circuits of capital. This is not to suggest that people are unilaterally deceived by the values, views and commitments being manifested. The picture is more nuanced. In some respects, the consumer might be extensively manipulated by marketers. At other times, people try to divest, leave the “rat race”, and find meaning outside of a one-dimensional world (e.g., Atik et al 2020; Campbell et al 2019).

Pick’s examples from the 1950s and 1960s are often derived from prominent supporters (e.g., Ernest Dichter) and critics (e.g., Vance Packard) of capitalism and marketing. To be sure, the optimistic, liberatory views of consumer culture that Dichter encouraged, and Packard’s (1960) worries over the power of advertising and marketing research are important exemplars. Dichter, notably, is a multifaceted figure. In his writing, the consumer is not a dupe (cf. Moss 1904). They possessed agency. Dichter’s self-designated role was to illuminate the world of consumption to help people improve their quality of life (Tadajewski 2013). But he did issue a warning. The world of consumption promised to better our lives. Even so, we must never lose sight of the fact that with new technologies to study or engage the customer, the flows and webs of power relations are shifting in ways we may not notice. The engineering and manipulation of our consumption behaviours remained an ongoing threat (see Tadajewski 2013).

Packard’s (1960) analysis in *The Hidden Persuaders* is somewhat analogous to the narrative proffered by James Rorty (1934/1976). Rorty used the advertising industry as a frame to explore the problems associated with the capitalist system<sup>1</sup>. Like Packard, he believed that the advertising community was selling the ideology of consumption and thereby buttressing the status quo. Relatedly, the audience for Packard’s text(s) were confronted with a disconcerting picture of marketplace reality. While U.S. citizens might look askance at the machinations of Russian politics, Packard asserted that U.S. consumers were some of the most manipulated people outside of the Soviet Union. Dichter, never one to shy away from controversy, was quick to state that textbooks presented us as highly rational, when in reality we were more often led by our emotions, which marketers could utilise to their advantage (see also <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/documentaries/nothing-exists-until-you-sell-it/>).

The real human being walking around retail stores, he opined, engaged in little reflection when buying and consuming.

From a Veblenite or critical theoretic stance, rather than the customer being king, they were a sucker (Rorty 1934/1976) or a chess-piece whose moves are largely predetermined (Lazarsfeld 1941). The U.S. and Russian patron were, generally speaking, living quite different consumption experiences (Tadajewski 2009a). This did not stop geopolitical posturing from taking on consumerist hues (Spring 2011), as exemplified by the 1959 Kitchen Debate in Moscow between the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. Vice-President, Richard Nixon. Their exchange about the benefits of capitalism versus communism took place against the backdrop of a state-of-the-art American kitchen.

Across the critical literatures, marketing communications tend to be presented as powerful, acting like an opiate on the central nervous system, enhancing our passivity (Fromm 2001). Such representations might be overblown (Peters 2003); certainly, some of the critical theorists indicated as much on occasion. Adorno (1975), for one, notes that “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would like us to believe, not its subject but its object” (Adorno 1975, 12). Not being sovereign did not necessarily translate into being brainwashed. We might be making the types of compromises that Pick (2022) explores in order to manage our current circumstances:

“It is to be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the *prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well hidden doubt about its blessings*. The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. They force their eyes shut and voice approval. *People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them...knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured*. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all.”

(Adorno 1975, 16; emphases added)

The satisfactions of the marketplace were real, but ephemeral, driving people back into the shopping centre, looking for the next distraction. There is, then, some truth to the idea that marketers are selling dissatisfaction (Kilbourne 1999). But it is a dissatisfaction that advertising pioneers who moved from selling goods to selling insight into the dynamics of the puffery-suffused marketplace, like Helen Woodward, sought to circumscribe.

Alongside the various groups that provided product reviews and evaluations to assist the buyer (Pick 2022), Woodward’s activities helped to curtail the communications muscle of big business and, she hoped, enhance purchasing rationality (e.g., Woodward 1939a, 1939b). By providing countervailing information what groups like Consumers’ Research and Consumers Union underscored was the porosity of the customer, how open they really were to the subjectivity-shaping power of the marketing community (e.g., Pick 2022, 202). Arguably, we are never far from “psychological manacles and blinkers” of one kind or another (Pick 2022, 130). Nevertheless, through education, they can be de-coded, registered, and jettisoned (Williamson 1978).

### **Acting Differently**

One of the most fascinating examples that Pick unravels relates to the experiences of ex-prisoners of war (POW) from the Korean conflict. Central to these narratives are: (1) the need

to appreciate the historical context (both war conditions and lived experience in the country of origin); (2) the circumscribed agency POWs faced in their home country; and (3) the necessity of moving beyond surface interpretations of brainwashing to investigate the factors that shape decision-making especially when they jar with preconceived notions (see also <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/documentaries/david-hawkins-battle-mind/>).

Pick's account documents how after the cessation of conflict, former prisoners were given the opportunity to return home, remain in their present location or be relocated to a selected destination. It was assumed that former prisoners would want to return "home". This was not the case. There were a small number of Americans and one British soldier who refused repatriation. Public and government groups were aghast at this rejection of past lives. Had these people been brainwashed? Expressing their commitments, the former POWs espoused interest in the political-economic and egalitarian social relations in China. Pick discusses a number of examples including the case of Clarence Adams (a southern born, African American) and Samuel David Hawkins (white, poor, raised in the south-central belt of the U.S.). Adams had experienced racism all his life. Institutionally and interpersonally, the image the U.S. projected of freedom and social mobility did not reflect the racially problematic country that Adams endured. A new country held out the promise of offering him the freedoms denied in the States. Far from being brainwashed, that is, failing to reflect critically on his decisions, Adams juxtaposed his experience with a *largely* unknown, but potentially better opportunity, and took it.

As Adams stated: "I certainly knew what life was like for blacks in America and especially in Memphis...I decided to go to China because I was looking for freedom and a way out of poverty and I wanted to be treated like a human being instead of something sub-human" (Pick 2022, 66). Equally, for Hawkins, the desire to escape a difficult home and family life, limited opportunities for socio-economic advancement, meant that a "new life in China" outweighed the costs (at least for a time) (Pick 2022, 69). In both of these cases, calling the people involved "brainwashed", with its connotations of powerlessness and limited reflection does not accurately represent their decision-making. They retained their criticality when it came to China, continuing to reflect upon their respective situations, making moves to leave the country when the costs outpaced the benefits.

Pick's (2022) work, consequently, is useful in terms of highlighting when we might wish to retain strong concepts like brainwashing as well as indicating where we need to probe their inappropriate extension. Human beings, as Pick traces in detail, possess remarkable fortitude and exhibit considerable pragmatism in navigating their way through power-laden contexts. Nevertheless,

"...even if not brainwashed, we are all, surely, at the best of times, suggestible, impressionable and interdependent. None of us is ever discrete, fully self-knowing, self-fashioned, self-made, able to think all by ourselves or fully about ourselves. We are all leant upon, profoundly affected by others, and never in full control of our minds. Facebook knows we practically all want to 'relate', and we all know too that, to put it another way, nobody is free of covert influence, or ever fully transparent to themselves or to others; and we can find ourselves allied unconsciously with others, even without a full-blown brainwash operation."

(Pick 2022, 23)

The self is porous, sometimes tenacious, sometimes fragile, capable of extreme resistance and compliance in any given situation. Importantly, how we think about the self, issues of

porosity or resistance are fundamentally linked to the theoretical and conceptual atmosphere operative at the time.

### **Intersubjectivity, Porosity and Criminality**

Pick focuses upon an important issue, namely that “the history of advertising was often caught up in larger debates about the nature of the mind” (Pick 2022, 230). Marketing and advertising scholarship, for example, has been shaped by multiple strands of thought which were predicated on the notion that intersubjective influence with and without the mediation of the ordinary senses was possible. We should recollect that telepathic thought transmission was considered the original mode of communication between God and the angels (Peters 1999), a view that weaves through (with suitable revision) to the psychical researcher, F.W.H. Myers, and Sigmund Freud respectively (e.g., Rabeyron and Evrard 2012; Rabeyron et al 2021; Tadajewski 2022a). Both were members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR).

SPR affiliates furnished spontaneous and experimental psychological findings that supported the veracity of hypnotic and telepathic influence. Myers, for instance, believed that telepathy was a sense that had fallen into disuse over the course of human history and would become important in any post-terrene existence (i.e., after death). Nonetheless, we, like Pick, would advise caution about assuming that the debates of the nineteenth century on hypnotism, telepathy, the unconscious, subconscious or subliminal self, reflect an “incipient Freudian understanding of the mind” (Pick 2000, 77). Of course, Myers cited Freud, but Myers’ ideas were much further developed than Freud’s at this juncture (cf. Freud 1913; Myers 1892).

There are overlaps, however. We can say that Freud adopted a related view to Myers’ and Barrett’s interpretations of telepathy, with the former also maintaining that telepathy was a feature of earlier human existence which might be reactivated (Pick 2000). Pick’s (2000) research on thought-control reminds us that brainwashing is part of a longer historical trajectory which takes us to, roughly, the middle of the nineteenth century. Notably important is the growth in interest about Mesmerism and hypnotism. Hypnotic experimentation and its use in stage performances spotlighted the extent to which individual psychological control is undermined by suggestion (Wiley 2012). To engage with these issues, Pick (2000) focuses on the fictional character of Svengali (the impresario) and his mesmeric control of Trilby (du Maurier 1895), which enabled the latter to deliver high-level musical performances, but at the cost of her health and wellbeing.

Du Maurier’s text reflected on the limits to scientific knowledge, materialism and pointed to potential powers that were mostly unexplored by the scholarly community. Contesting accepted wisdom about science, race and the extent of intersubjective control between multiple parties underwrites both du Maurier’s and Pick’s contributions. Connecting with debates on the possibility of hypnotic crime (Wolffram 2017), the family resemblance linking these diverse streams of reflection is a desire to defamiliarise the social world. No matter how powerful intersubjective or social forces may seem, there remains the possibility of thinking and acting otherwise.

Depending on which scholars were consulted, only certain groups could be hypnotised (usually those with some pre-existing condition). For others, everyone was potentially hypnotisable, with experimentation revealing how underneath our everyday consciousness, there were multiple selves and an unconscious, subconscious or subliminal stream of consciousness that was not always amenable to regulation by the empirical self. The notion that we might be mentally porous (Gurney 1884a), capable of being affected by another actor

(Gurney 1884b), elicited considerable alarm. What if people could be hypnotically stimulated to commit crimes (e.g., *The New York Times* 1891, 1894, 1895, 1899, 1901)?

Engaging with these issues, Thomson J. Hudson (1893/1916) examined the linkage of hypnosis and criminality. Some commentators believed hypnotic crime to be perfectly possible (e.g., Liégeois). For Pierre Janet and Gilles de la Tourette, it was highly dubious to suppose that we can compare inducements to commit crime in an experimental context with everyday life. In Hudson's words,

“Such experiments prove nothing, simply because they are experiments. The subject knows he is among his friends. He has confidence in the integrity of the hypnotist. He is most likely aware of the nature of the proposed experiments... We must, therefore, look elsewhere for positive evidence to demonstrate the impossibility of making the innocent subject the instrument or the victim of crime.”

(Hudson 1893/1916, 126-127)

It was speculated that the subconscious registered the problematic nature of the request and whilst willing to permit the action in an environment where no harm would occur, nothing could be extrapolated from this performance. Frederic Myers outlines this argument:

“...in these cases of blind obedience to hypnotic suggestion, we see a certain knowledge, consciousness, memory, which are properly subject to the will which commands one stratum of the personality, falling temporarily into dreamlike compliance with impulses which reach them from a stratum not their own. For the moment the subliminal will stands aside; but just as the waking will resumes its sway when the dreamer becomes too violent, so also does the subliminal will intervene if the obedience to hypnotic suggestion is in danger of being pushed too far... I mean the fact that it is often easier to induce a subject to commit some great imaginary crime, - say to put arsenic in his aunt's tea, - than to perform some trifling act... such as taking off his boots in public. It is urged that somewhere within him there must be a shrewd suspicion that the supposed arsenic really came out of the sugar-basin. And yet this saving knowledge can hardly be located in his waking stratum which retains absolutely no knowledge of the incident. I should suggest that a complete comprehension of the suggested acts exists in the subliminal strata, and that when grave need arises the subliminal self will generally avoid compliance.”

(Myers 1892, 354)

When people were asked to engage in activities that violated their moral and ethical codes (e.g., drinking alcohol, committing crime), they generally refused (e.g., Myers 1903/1992, 116). There were, in other words, distinct limits to our porosity (e.g., Hudson 1893/1916, 130).

### **Look into my Eyes: Hypnosis, Marketing and Criminality**

Blurring the boundary between hypnosis, marketing and criminality, the case of E. Virgil Neal (1868-1949), the founder of the (once very famous) Tokalon cosmetics company, is apposite. From his earliest years, Neal displayed considerable intelligence and business acumen. He is one of those pioneers who are largely ignored because his educational and career pathway did not follow the trajectory of university attendance and subsequent professorship at one of the core institutions for marketing thought (e.g., Harvard, Wisconsin).

Rather, Neal entered the Robbins' Central Business College (Sedalia) in Missouri in 1888-1889 (Conroy 2009).

Such colleges were appealing to those with restricted finances and uncertain career opportunities. Fees were low, employment was practically guaranteed, and the scholarly standards compared well with university offerings. In Conroy's words,

“The Catalogue of the C.W. Robbins' Central Business College for 1888-1889, the years Neal attended and graduated, trumpeted that the institution was “the largest and most thorough Business College of its age in the United States.” It had “The most complete Faculty, elegant and complete suite of rooms in America.” Six hundred [and] thirteen students, women as well as men, were enrolled in that academic year. They hailed from Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wyoming, in addition to Missouri.”

(Conroy 2009, 17).

E. Virgil's success led to appointment as lecturer (circa 1888-1895), before moving to the Peirce College of Business (Philadelphia). During this time, Neal had become a skilled writer, using his knowledge of accounting, banking, and bookkeeping to produce a number of books targeted at the correspondence school market (i.e., designed for easy absorption and practical usage). His financial skills are indexed in the fact that Neal earned a veritable windfall from them (roughly \$333,000 *then*, circa \$11m *today*) and he went on to lucrative, even if sometimes legally and ethically problematic, careers across a range of industries, including the cosmetics trade (Conroy 2009).

Of more interest for our interpsychic purposes is the fact that whilst studying at business college, Neal immersed himself in the hypnotism literature, undertook public performances, eventually producing correspondence course materials and edited collections on related matters (i.e., hypnosis, suggestion and suggestibility) (Neal and Clark 1900). Quitting his teaching role, Neal adopted the stage persona and penname of Xenophon LaMotte Sage, soon becoming “a celebrity” in spellbinding circles (Conroy 2009, 28). In Conroy's account, Neal's ability to hypnotise multiple people at any time underwires his charismatic facility to “influence” those he worked with and sought to target as customers. The 1897 book that he fashioned “brought him a sizable fortune” (Neal in Conroy 2009, 32).

In *Hypnotism as It Is*, X. LaMotte Sage (1897/1900) frames hypnotism as a means to influence the thoughts of people without them knowing it. Theoretically, it is indebted to Hudson's (1893/1916) explication of the “dual organization” of the mind (see LaMotte Sage 1897/1900, 59). The first element of the duality is called the objective mind; it is located in the brain, focuses on the “objective world”, that is, the world apprehended via the normal senses and evolutionarily developed to handle current environmental conditions. In monitoring the objective world, it is the seat of reasoning, weighing up information being gathered and using this to inform action.

The subjective mind, by contrast, does not draw upon the traditional senses. It operates via various forms of intuition, represents the location for our memories and “performs its highest functions when the objective senses are in abeyance...it is that intelligence which makes itself manifest in a hypnotic subject when he is in a state of somnambulism” (Hudson 1893/1916, 29). Reflecting this status, the subjective mind is highly suggestible, uncritical, and the part of the mind that projects and receives hypnotic and telepathic influences. Where the objective mind is located in the cerebral cortex, the subjective is free from the bindings of anatomy. As Hudson describes the nature of the subjective mind:

“...the persistency with which the subjective mind will follow every idea suggested...is well known to hypnotists [such] that when an idea is suggested to a subject, no matter of how trivial a character, he will persist in following that idea to its ultimate conclusion, or until the operator releases him from the impression...regardless of the presence of others, and totally oblivious to all his surroundings which do not pertain to his idea; and he will persist in doing so until the impression is removed by the same power by which it was created.”

(Hudson 1893/1916, 39)

The use of Hudson’s conceptualisation is a reflection of its popularity. It received considerable attention as well as criticism for conflating the subjective mind with the soul; the latter being an argument not borne out by evidence. LaMotte Sage’s text is thus part of a wider set of theoretical and empirical works that registered the existence of multiple strata within the mind (Tadajewski 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

Where Hudson postulated two minds, others presented multiple subliminal selves co-existing with a single empirical (supraliminal) consciousness, all of which constituted the individual (Myers 1903/1992). They generally tended to follow the arguments crafted by Myers. Hudson himself uses the SPR literature (as does LaMotte Sage) as a basis for *The Law of Psychic Phenomena* rather than conducting much original research. Despite this, for LaMotte Sage, Hudson’s analytics provided the theoretical foil for his practical hypnotic work. Neal claims that prior to the publication of his book, he had “hypnotized thousands of people” (LaMotte Sage 1897/1900, 12). While the text emphasises the value of hypnotism for medical purposes, Neal’s interest in various topics including phrenology and hypnotism is not motivated by altruism, scholarship, or a desire to overcome the limitations of a materialistic interpretation of self. Pecuniary motivations refract his immersion in psychical topics. Neal studied these areas,

“...not for spiritual uplifting but for their money-making value. He not only made “fat money” from demonstrating his skill in these areas *but he applied their insights, their “key to human nature,” to business and advertising.* Advertising was a fairly new science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. It relied on psychology, the power of persuasion. And Neal became a master of this art.”

(Conroy 2009, 36; emphasis added).

Neal’s books on hypnotism and suggestion were popular, having “world-wide impact” (Conroy 2009, 40). Notwithstanding the fact he was patently aware of the importance of branding, product selection, varied pricing and convenient mechanisms for supply, Conroy (2009) suggests that Neal’s mesmeric skills played a role in his success: “Virgil threw himself into the cosmetics side of the beauty business with his formidable skills in hypnotism, personal magnetism...at full throttle” (Conroy 2009, 70).

Theoretical perspectives consistent with hypnotism shaped the early development of marketing theory and practice, but it could not be directly imported into our subject as “hypnotism”. Scholars had to skirt the issue carefully. Sensibly, they did not usually depict business practitioners controlling their automaton-like customer. Du Maurier’s fiction and the medical-scientific debates on these issues all meant that articulating a hypnotically-oriented interpretation of marketing was a step too far. As Pick recalls,

“...mesmerism and hypnotism characteristically involved at least two human subjects...[and] called the very notion of the subject’s self-control and self-possession

into question. Moreover, the encounter between the hypnotiser and the hypnotised was fundamentally unequal. If its causes and meanings were opaque, its observable effects were often unmistakable, and were frequently cast as an insidious infiltration of a subject's mind by the untrustworthy practitioner.”

(Pick 2000, 68-69)

Marketing and advertising scholarship thus partially retained a hypnotic axiology with its emphasis on control (cf. Tadajewski 2022b, 658), while searching for a conceptual apparatus that sounded much more innocuous<sup>ii</sup> (i.e., suggestion and service) (Tadajewski 2022a, 2022b; Tadajewski and Jones 2021).

### **Being Suggestive**

The concept of suggestion is an ideal epistemological-political foil (Tadajewski 2022a). According to the writings of the Nancy School, hypnotic practice was facilitated by suggestion and suggestibility<sup>iii</sup>. For marketing and advertising professors and practitioners, suggestion represented a more neutral sounding description for what they were attempting to accomplish. They made suggestions to the consumer which could be accepted or rejected. Aside from the change in language, the assumptions about marketer control remained in place, with early textbooks outlining the psychological theories and relevant techniques that could skew the power dynamic towards the practitioner and benefit their pocketbook.

The concept of suggestion was usefully one step removed from the occult, hypnotic and telepathic literatures (Gould 1992; Tadajewski 2022a, 2022b). In conjunction with major figures associated with the Nancy School, including Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault and Hippolyte Bernheim, “masters of the mind” (Wallace 1986) like Boris Sidis all averred that a fundamental characteristic of humanity is our suggestible nature (e.g., Sidis 1895, 1896, 1898). From birth, we are subject to suggestive influences. What this means is that there is no meaningful point in the human lifecycle when some level of suggestion is not in play. Its naturalisation makes it *largely* non-threatening.

Shifting his attention to Edward Bernays, Pick actually remains linked to earlier work on telepathy when we read Pick's analysis in conjunction with William Walker Atkinson's (1907a, 31) conceptual shift from telepathy (and “mental magic”) to telementation. Let us unpack this point, turning initially to Atkinson's work for context. Atkinson bases his reflections on, among others, the theories, concepts, and empirical research generated by the SPR (e.g., Atkinson 1907b, 5-7) which, in turn, is influenced by literature drawn from around the world (Atkinson 1910/2010). He maintains that telepathy, thought transference and “mind reading” are all phenomena that his audience will have experienced in some form. For instance, one person may make a point in conversation that another affirms is exactly what they were thinking (Atkinson 1907b).

As Atkinson explains, telementation involved the projection of thoughts and affects “at a distance” usually without the mediation of the “normal” senses (Atkinson 1910/2010, 5). In his work he outlined how to produce telementative flows as well as methods of protection from unwelcome suggestive influences. It could be used to shape mental receptivity from a distance; as a trigger for the “mentative cyclones” or “whirlpools” that contagiously cause consumption crazes; or for market research purposes.

Ideas associated with telementation when the “occult” or “psychical” connections are excised, scaffold simplistic forms of advertising theory and models of communication such as

bullet theory, the hypodermic model, linear perspectives and contagion theoretics (Tadajewski, 2022a). By the time Pick focuses on the writing of Edward Bernays, the inter-psychical shaping of consumer practice has a rich, complex history that bridges Pick's (2000) engagement with du Maurier and his 2022 study on brainwashing.

## **On Freud**

Before Bernays, there were moves to incorporate psychological and psychical insights into marketing and business practice. They were not indebted to Bernays' uncle, Sigmund Freud. They were traceable back to the SPR and its more active members including Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, William F. Barrett and Frank Podmore as well as Theosophy (cf. Gauld 1968, 296-298; Hamilton 2009, 190-191, 254, 276, 280; Myers 1903/1992, 30-31).

The direct citation of SPR members within the broad contours of our discipline – Freud excepted – gradually became less frequent after World War I (cf. Brottman 2009). Freud had visited the U.S., a promotional campaign for his ideas had flourished (Dennis 2011; Rilling 2000) and the recuperative needs of the period directed attention to clinical psychology and psychoanalysis (Manning and Manning 2007; McDougall 1919). Some consumer-focused pioneers like Christine Frederick (1929) cited key psychoanalytic thinkers in the 1920s and recommended the associated ideas, but we must be careful about overplaying Freud's influence, even with the rise of motivation research.

The idea that we are only dimly aware of the suggestive influences that shape our individual and group behaviour does, of course, feature in Bernays' writing (Bernays 1925/2005, 1928, 1935, 1942). In making his case, Bernays follows the tramlines associated with Theosophy and psychical research, albeit minus the references to telementation, telepathy or occult ideas like astral bodies. Arguably, what links Bernays and Ernest Dichter is not a paradigmatic commitment to Freud's ideas (see Dichter 1979, 92). Rather, both Bernays and Dichter were interested in helping emancipate people from Puritan-like consumption views (Justman 1994; Tadajewski 2013). At the same time, practitioners interested in motivation research and its toolkit of in-depth interviews, focus groups, projective tests and so forth, articulated a view of the consumer that exhibits some continuity with the discourses of hypnotic crime and criminal telepathy from the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Wolffram 2009, 2017). In these criminological debates, it was speculated that hypnosis and clairvoyance might be used to secure relevant evidence from a felonious individual. Hypnosis, in other words, allowed the police to probe the subconscious memories of a suspected criminal, enabling them to bypass the rationalisations or lies being proffered (Wolffram 2017).

Motivation researchers were interested in overcoming consumer rationalisations about why people buy products. To handle the patron being unable or unwilling to disclose their buying motivations, advertising agencies used lie detectors and hypnosis to probe drives that were "buried deep in the unconscious" (Agnew and O'Brien 1958, 85). The rationale for the use of hypnosis is consistent with the kinds of arguments expressed in the 1880s (and beyond) in abnormal psychology or psychical research. They needed to overcome mental impenetrability. Referring to the work being undertaken at the Ruthraff & Ryan advertising agency,

"They have found that a subject under hypnosis sometimes can remember in great detail things that he cannot remember at all in a conscious state, and with a lessening of inhibitions, answers appear to be more accurate and honest. There have been interesting examples of advertisements remaining effective after a long period of time... There is certainly a great deal, valuable to advertising, that may be learned in this way, but the

method is expensive, and it is difficult to obtain [a] truly representative sample because a great many people object to being hypnotized or to having a stranger splash around in their subconscious for whatever reason.”

(Agnew and O'Brien 1958, 85)

People may well be porous. They can also resist influence attempts. As Pick appreciates, Vance Packard realised that we could avoid the effects of advertising and commercial culture. In engaging with Packard's critique, Pick's (2022) study keys into the intellectual trajectory of advertising and sales scholarship, notably the diverse connections between Sidis (1898), Shryer (1912), Krugman (1965, 1968), Krugman and Hartley (1960, 1970), Ehrenberg (1974), Pollay (1986) and Holbrook (1986).

Sidis (1898) and Shryer (1912), for instance, register consumer agency regarding marketing and sales practice. People did not always do exactly what a salesperson recommended. Porosity was not complete. Still, marketers stressed consumer agency, but at the same time they sought new methods and modes of marketplace control (cf. Levitt 1956). Perhaps the most notable case is Francisco's (1944) study which proposed that in a post-war context practitioners had to increase the efficiency of their selling activities to ensure the economy remained healthy. To assist, Francisco outlined how motion pictures could be used to mechanise the selling process. It would help senior staff control their salesforce, reduce the idiosyncrasy of sales presentations, and enable the demonstration of offerings to much larger audiences. Usefully, selling to groups enabled inter-psychoic stimulation and channelling. Let us directly cite his ideas:

“Group selling is...more effective than individual selling because of what the social psychologist calls the “social facilitation” that is at work in the audience and that does not obtain in the individual contact. The various individuals in the group audience tend to react as a unit; the attitude of one member influences that of another and they all respond in unison. In the talking picture audience the members are usually seated in orderly rows, *a situation which regiments their bodies and exerts a parallel tendency toward regimenting their minds...The physical conditions under which the talking picture is shown enhance the impact of its content. The audience is in a darkened room, with all extraneous sounds and sights excluded, and with the attention fixed upon the same source of visual and auditory sensations, the screen. This fixation of attention approaches, in degree, in some instances, a state of hypnosis, for it has much in common with the process of hypnotization...this...renders the subject's mind highly suggestible inducing him to accept uncritically whatever is presented in the screen story.*”

(Francisco 1944, 121; emphasis added)

Concomitantly, there were many texts which claimed to help readers increase their psychological impenetrability. They promised to teach people how to control their thoughts, thereby resisting influence attempts from other individuals, groups and advertising. One thought-community, advertisers and marketers, thus tries to increase porosity, a countervailing offering claims to shore up the fortress of self. Alexander (1928), in particular, points out that suggestibility is subject to physiological, psychological and sociological forces (see also <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/documentaries/three-films-about-mass-influence-by-lily-ford/>). When we find ourselves within a mob, for example, thought-control becomes difficult unless we can cultivate a critical, reflective mindset that mentally distances us from the ebbs and flows of the situation (e.g., Sidis 1895). This is potentially made more

difficult when the mob or crowd is subject to some level of orchestration like Francisco's (1944) group selling fantasy:

“For the average man...one of the most difficult things in the world is to control his thoughts when he is a member of the crowd. For the crowd, no matter what its constitution may be, whether made up of men of good birth and education, or men with neither of these advantages, ranks as the lowest form of human association. The crowd is a collective mind with little intelligence and is dominated by its instincts and emotions. Attend a congress of any body of men or women...and you will note...the far from high quality of the displays of intelligence.”

(Alexander 1928, 233)

Purposefully practicing critical self-reflection helped to defuse attempts by individuals, advertisers or politicians from exerting unwanted control over our thoughts. The adoption of “defensive” and “critical” attitudes braces us against suggestion dynamics.

Like Holbrook (1987), Pick (2022) states that the advertising community is constituted by a plurality of different firms, whose messages are not homogenous although they tend to promote a consumption logic. As Pollay (1986, 1987) avows, advertising usually reflects a comparatively limited set of values and aspirations, with non-commodifiable aspects of life generally absent. Pick's perspective thereby chimes with ideas expressed by Holbrook, Pollay, Krugman and Ehrenberg (i.e., advertising as promoting a consumption ideology, but functioning as a weak force which could generate within-subject counter-argument or slide into our subconscious). As he puts it,

“Advertising experts were not in unison, still less were they omniscient or omnipotent. But they did have an enormous *presence*...unleashing a whirlwind of signs, and releasing an avalanche of stories about how to live a modern, fulfilling life, and what the social and political parameters were. The advertisers were able to have an influence, as they were quick to insist, even where the viewer's or listener's attention was scant or divided; they might even claim that when prospective purchasers were half-attending, or ignoring the commercials, the message could be exceptionally effective, since information could flow into the mind, or the brain, as it were, without our conscious registering, or at least without full recall.”

(Pick 2022, 212; emphasis in original)

Even when there are powerful groups striving to maintain their mind-share dominance, such as the cigarette industry, spending huge sums of money on marketing as well as funding scientific research, subsequently using this material to promote findings that support their views, their *presence* can be questioned and used against them. On the Hidden Persuaders website (Pick's work is a section of a much bigger project on issues of marketing and persuasion), the documentary, “Notes from the American Air Waves” (<http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/documentaries/three-films-about-mass-influence-by-lily-ford/>) relays the contestation between the tobacco industry, its lobbying efforts, funding of academics and the response by non-smoker activists whose own marketing aesthetics, combined with skilful responses to big tobacco, are impressive (cf. Marcellus 2012; Martin et al 2021). The activists were ably assisted by the interventions of supportive lawyers who asserted that broadcasters had a responsibility to present both sides of the smoking debate. What this entailed, in short, was that for every three pro-smoking advertisements, broadcasters had to provide airtime for a non-smoking communication.

Containing the influence of these destructive firms would never be easy, but Lily Ford's film does underline the possibility of resistance in the face of seemingly unassailable odds.

It might nevertheless appear as if the power dynamics in which we find ourselves make it almost impossible for people to exert the kinds of agency witnessed in the above film. As we indicated, marketing scholars and practitioners have a long history of being interested in overcoming the psychological defences of the consumer. We can expect this to continue. Synthetic telepathy is securing attention as a viable technological frontier (Tadajewski 2022a). The availability of vast computing power, data storage and the manipulations these afford is an ongoing threat to self-management and democratic politics (Pick 2022). Remembering Pick's suggestion that we must juxtapose our conceptual apparatus with lived experience, we may wish to think about whether the surveillance capitalism outlined by Zuboff (2019) is consistent with our experiences today. Perhaps, to some extent it is (cf. Agrawal et al 2022; Dickie et al 2022; Ruane et al 2022). But, perhaps not (e.g., Williams 2020). Cory Doctorow's admittedly hyperbolic comments are worth bearing in mind when we feel powerless in a world dominated by large, supremely wealthy corporations (cf. Bertini and Koenigsberg 2021):

“...everybody's who's ever claimed to have figured out how to do mind control was a bullshit artist or deluded or both... They're all people who dream of taking away other people's free will. But none of them ever did it... And the psychological research that purports to form the technical basis for the claims about mind control is not great. It's the stuff from the replication crisis. It's kind of warmed over Skinnerianism.”

(Doctorow in Moscrop, 2022)

To be sure, we *should* be wary. Equally, though, in a world where surveillance and algorithmic control allegedly permeates most facets of our lived experience, we are still not totally transparent. As Daniel Pope illuminates: “For instance, as a cis male in my 70s, I have often been treated to web ads for home pregnancy tests in Spanish, a language I'm ashamed to admit I don't know” (Pope 2021, 442n1). The filter bubbles and algorithmic culture that apparently encircle are deeply imperfect. Nor do they occlude us from seeing the dysfunctions of capitalism, class conflict, wealth inequality and rising use of foodbanks that have the potential to come up to our door and enter it (Pick 2022). Control is not total, and a status quo scarred by these dysfunctions does not need to persist.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to engage with and expand upon the lines of thought found in Daniel Pick's historically rich writings. Linking Pick's earlier and more recent publications has allowed us to make connections to complex psychological and psychological reflections that occupied earlier marketing, sales and business practitioners of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Throughout these discussions, it is apparent that the way we conceptualise the mind and human action is heavily implicated by the worldviews in circulation. This continues to be the case. Worldviews are scaffolds that enable us to make sense of a complicated cultural and social landscape, but can become over-extended. The kinds of issues raised in this paper – about agency and control, freedom versus domination – continues to generate interest. Most notably, we see these themes inciting theoretically sophisticated ruminations on techno- and semiocapitalism. These tend to call forth a world of surveillance in which resistance is (almost) immediately coopted (Hoang et al 2022, 2023). Calling attention to these features of the contemporary world is not, of course, problematic provided we remain open to alternative interpretations. Terminal marketing scholars do seem to be reflexive in this regard. Their critiques are usually framed as speculative (Ahlberg et al 2021). The danger

arises when speculative thinking becomes ossified, that is, when theoretical perspectives are “deployed” (Hoang et al 2023) rather than actively problematised (Ahlberg et al 2022).

In these narratives, we see a consumer subject with “no hope” (Hoang et al 2023). Such analyses run the risk of treating marketing tactics as more effective than practitioners’ wildest fantasies (Hult et al 2017; Zwick and Bradshaw 2016). After all, those promoting their managerial skill-sets and consulting availability in practitioner outlets tend to affirm the importance of Big Data, machine learning and Artificial Intelligence as the *future* (Davenport and Mittal 2023; Dickie et al 2022; Matz 2023). They stress that these tools are not associated with “brainwashing” (Matz 2023). Their sales proposition is replete with hedging and qualification, reflected in references to the “promise” of these techniques, how they “might” develop and their possible importance for competitive advantage (Metz 2023). In almost the same breath, it is admitted that no “model” (Metz 2023, 128) or “predictions” are “perfect” (Matz 2023, 131). Yet, at the same time, they offer suggestions about how to subvert platform controls used to prevent personality targeting (e.g., Matz 2023, 128). Control is never total, then, but efforts to facilitate it continue in ethically questionable ways.

Similarly, terminally inclined scholars, provide us with pinpoints of brightness in a world they describe as entering a new dark age (Hoang et al 2022: 101). There are glimmers of optimism. There is only “*The impression we are powerless*” (Hoang et al 2022: 86; emphasis added). There is “*almost a level of total conformity*” (Hoang et al 2022: 99; emphasis added). Fatalism is tempered. The idealised figure of the revolutionary who can challenge the structures of capitalism haunts this work. It is used to evaluate other forms of resistance which fall short of systemic-level radicalism (Hoang et al 2023). Evidently, most people will look “powerless” if their day-to-day existence is compared to some kind of revolutionary archetype who seeks to overthrow capitalism.

Put otherwise, the bleak worldview articulated in recent research should place us on our guard as much as marketer claims of cognitive and behavioural control. When we read the papers being produced by practitioners on related areas (e.g., algorithmic control, quantum computing), their ability to control the consumer is rarely consistent with the depressive panorama being painted within critical circles. Between the ganglions of surveillance capitalism and the limited skillsets of marketers, there is a vast unexplored terrain. Taking a “postulate” (Dussel 2006) like “the consumer is porous” in conjunction with broad exploratory parameters (i.e., “to what extent?”) may generate insights without predisposing us to elevate human agency or deny it.

A practical postulate serves to direct our energies towards the exploration of a topic (Dussel 2011). As part of this we need to register the historical debts our scholarship incurs. References to porosity should not be taken merely as a reflection of the “temporary, fluid and porous qualities of our times” (Gabriel 2015, 26). As this paper has demonstrated, this is ahistorical.

Before we speak of an “end” of times, a new “dark age,” or present human beings cherishing “small wins” in their day-to-day life as refracting a “post-pessimistic” ethos (Hoang et al 2023), we need to grasp the historicity of the practices we discuss. In doing so, we might open-up productive lines for alternative reflections on human praxis and consumer research. When we refer to people as manipulated, as impotent, as concerned with their small world, we proffer highly situational interpretations of life that are perhaps too close to our own conditions of existence (cf. Dussel 2006). There are scholars and activists committed to thinking beyond the horizons of Euro- and Americanocentric modernity (Faria and Hemais 2021). For these groups, the future has not been cancelled.

We suggest that serious attention needs to be given to interdisciplinary studies that theorise consumer porosity. To what extent are we truly porous, shaped by intra- and intersubjective influences that are registered, bypass our conscious awareness or currently utterly neglected by contemporary marketing thinking and extant methodologies? Obviously, marketing practices shape individual and group subjectivity in different ways. Following Pick, these can be scrutinised through “flashpoints”, exemplified perhaps in the use of social media and multi-level marketing practices in QAnon (Tiffany 2020), crypto currencies (Denvir 2022), and jihadist recruitment (Shaw and Bandara 2018). These can be conceptualised as involving brainwashing (Pick 2022), nudging (Goldstein et al 2008), suggestion (Tadajewski 2022b), seduction (Deighton and Greyson 1995) or the stimulation of desire (Belk et al 2003; Hietanen et al 2022). These conceptual framings do not exhaust all intra and inter-psychic processes, but what other new and novel ways for understanding the formatting of self are available and worthy of attention?

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<sup>i</sup> Rorty, of course, is more critically oriented than Packard. His views were influenced by Veblen, Trotsky and some aspects of Social Gospel thinking (Rorty 1999). In his early publications, capitalism along with a war footing can short-circuit social change (Rorty 1936). Yet, hope, and an expectation of political-economic change threads throughout his analyses: "Our domestic situation [in the United States] is that of a progressively deteriorating social and economic anarchy, with a definite shift towards fascism... It is possible that the pressure of the unemployed and of militant rank and file labor movements will be just strong enough to organize the reaction but not strong enough to stage an effective battle on either the economic or political front. To recognize this possibility implies no attitude of defeatism or impotence. There are other possibilities... There is the possibility that, after the clear demonstration that capitalism cannot plan, cannot release the forces of production, cannot finance consumption, there will come a fundamental change in our social psychology. At some point – just where and when I don't know – the American dream of freedom, of opportunity, of democracy, of justice as things actual or possible within the framework of the capitalist economy, will be definitely discarded by the masses of the industrial and agricultural workers. The break, I suspect, will come rather suddenly when it comes, and the factors making for such a break are steadily accumulating" (Rorty 1936, 380).

<sup>ii</sup> An exception being Francisco (1944) who continues to use hypnosis as a comparison point.

<sup>iii</sup> Recognition of the power of imagination and suggestion has a very long history, traced back to ancient times. Lawrence (1910) highlights their role in conjunction with the use of amulets, charms, "temple sleep", "fairy cures", incantations, edible prescriptions, the influence of the "King's touch", implements such as metallic tractors, and locations like the Temple of Asklepios, Aesculapius, Lourdes, Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré and so forth.