

SUMMARY

DRUNK TANK PINK

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Summary of Drunk Tank Pink by Adam Alter

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Learn how colors, words, and symbols unknowingly alter the way you think, behave, and perceive reality.

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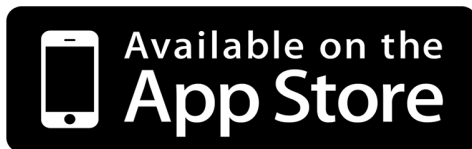


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Introduction

The concept of subliminal messaging is a popular one among conspiracy theorists and fiction writers. That words and images playing too fast for the conscious eye to see, or too low a frequency to hear, can influence your decision making on a subconscious level is a fascinating and terrifying proposition.

While subliminal messages as depicted in film and television aren't supported by scientific research, it is a well documented fact that our behavior and perception can be influenced in ways we don't know about, by things as simple and everyday as color.

Take the color pink, for reasons that are hard to discover looking at the color pink consistently curbs aggressive behavior. Pink holding cells, pink housing projects, pink school halls, all have repeatedly been shown to reduce violence, vandalism, and physical aggression.

It begs the question, what other unknown psychological cues are out there influencing us in ways we can't even recognize or perceive?

Remember The Name

Many modern last names have their origins in the occupations of our ancestors. At a time when your vocation was passed down from father to son, the Baker family would be called as such because they were literally bakers, smiths were blacksmiths, and so on.

But names often work in reverse, rather than being the result of one's past, they can also influence one's future.

Studies have shown that boys named Dennis are disproportionately more likely to become dentists, while others have shown college students with unique names are more likely to drop out than those with common names. Is this due to some mystical power inherent to names?

Probably not, it's more likely that when your name sounds like an occupation you may pay more attention to this similar sounding occupation at a young age and go on to display interest in it simply due to that early familiarity. Similarly your uncommon name doesn't cause you to drop out, but it may be a reflection of the uncommon parenting methods and attitudes of your parents, which in turn might increase the likelihood of dropping out.

Names play an influential role in much less mysterious ways as well. Since popular children's names go through trends, it's often easy to guess someone's age simply by their name. How many young women do you know named Ethel?

Your name can also reflect your ethnic background, which unfortunately can often lead to issues and advantages due to racism. Studies have shown that when a company is presented with job applications where no information is given about the applicant besides their name, "white"

sounding names like Brittany or Chad are nearly twice as likely to get call backs than “black” sounding names like Yolanda or Tyrone.

It’s also been found that the complexity of names can shift perception, “Bush” is a much simpler and more common name than “Dukakis”, and voters pretty consistently show a preference for candidates with short, simple names.

Signs, Symbols, and Labels

Imagine two people standing in front of a poster that is painted one solid color, like blue for instance. They both agree the color is blue, but are they seeing the same color? Does that “blue” look the same in each of their minds’ eyes?

Your first reaction is likely “of course”, but don’t be so sure. This is a concept philosophers of the mind refer to as “qualia”, the subjective individual experience of reality. And qualia, it seems, can be deeply influenced by things like language.

When discussing color hues in English we typically state the name of a color along with a qualifier, ie “dark blue” “light blue” “powder blue” etc. Other language however, like Russian, use distinctly different words for what we would call dark blue and light blue. And research has shown that native Russian speakers see those two hues as being extremely different from one another, as different as two unrelated colors, like red and yellow. Whereas English speakers see them as very similar, literally being small variations of the same color. It appears that differences in language can affect the physical processes of the brain.

Other psychological cues, like history and culture, can directly affect how we perceive the world. What ideas and emotions do you associate with the color red? How about white? Would you consider white to be representative of the concept of death or the experience of grief? Because that’s precisely what the color traditionally represents in Japan.

Which political affiliation do you associate red with? In modern day America it’s likely with conservative politics, while in the 1950’s it would have been firmly associated with the far left wing.

These sorts of symbols and language can have very real implications as well. Children in school who are labeled as being “gifted” early on tend to

continue to be academic successes, the inverse is also true. Is this because they were just born smarter? Perhaps, but research has found that teachers are more likely to spend more time helping, and give more praise to, the “gifted” children than the “troublemaker” children. When a small child only has the experience of being ignored and chastised as “challenged” is it really a surprise when they become just that?

There are so many ways our senses can be tricked, a study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that the exact same beverage when served twice using two different colors was reported by taste testers as tasting more distinct and different than two completely unrelated beverages that were given the same color.

When Others Are Watching and Hierarchies of Needs

A panopticon is a hypothetical prison design in which every room is able to be viewed by guards and inmates aren't able to tell when guards are watching or not. This design doesn't require guards to monitor every room at the same time, since the prisoners can't tell when they're being watched or not they have to behave as though they're being watched all the time.

That the presence of others deeply and directly affects how we behave should seem a rather obvious observation, however the ways in which other people watching, or even just the idea of them watching, alters our behavior may surprise you.

Like all primates humans are a social species, we depend on social interactions to operate and by and large our understanding of reality is based on consensus. The way we perceive ourselves and the world around us is inextricably linked to the perceptions of others.

In psychology Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a description of what drives human behavior and motivation. The foundational needs are obvious, our most instinctual drives are for food and water, air, and sexual reproduction. Those are the most basic underlying motivations we have, since they're the ones necessary for both our individual survival and the survival of our species.

However the behaviors caused by these motivations can be complex. For instance men are known to take risks more often than women, which contributes to the fact that men die in more accidents than women do, and the primary origin of this predisposition to risk taking is an instinctual drive to impress potential mates.

It's also been found that strippers receive more tips from men watching when they're ovulating, suggesting that our brains are able to detect fertility on an unconscious level, and alter our behavior accordingly.

The higher needs, the ones we pursue only when our base needs have been met, are safety and social stability, pursuit of success and fulfillment, and self-actualization. That last one includes such things as affection, companionship and friendship, and love. How these affect our perception includes things such as our perception of physical pain. When held by, or otherwise in physical contact with, a loved whilst injured or in childbirth and so on people report feeling significantly less pain.

But what about other behaviors? Psychologists have done experiments wherein workers in an office setting were given free coffee but were encouraged to contribute small donations in a donation jar whenever they took some. The experiment found that when a picture of eyes were placed above the jar people were more likely to donate money.

In another experiment an energy company gave customers access to information comparing how much electricity they use compared to those around them, the result was that customers would reduce their electricity use to the levels of their neighbors.

Experiments going back to the late 1800's have shown that athletes perform better when people are watching. The feeling of being evaluated pushes people to try harder.

Cultural Perspective

Eastern Asian cultures, particularly those of China and Japan, tend to value the collective much more than the individual, whereas western cultures like that of the USA are the opposite. This isn't just shown by political affiliations or government systems, it's shown in how we look at the world.

We can see this in the marketing trends and techniques used. American marketing tends to place a lot of emphasis on products and services providing choices or displaying uniqueness, whereas Chinese marketing tends to focus more on the importance of conformity and fitting in.

Experiments regarding how we perceive others have also been done. When shown images of a character standing in front of a group of other drawn characters students from the US and Japan were to interpret the emotions of the character in front. Sometimes it's facial expressions were the same as those in the back, sometimes they were different. The American student's interpretations of the front character's mood didn't take the emotions of those around him into account whatsoever. They were asked to interpret that particular character's feelings and didn't find the emotions being displayed by the others as relevant.

Japanese students however took into account the emotional expressions of the background characters. If they were depicted as sad, even while the front character looked happy, Japanese students interpreted the front character as being more sad than American students did.

We see this in art and poetry as well. In both painted portraits and poems western artists tend to focus much more on the individual subject of the piece in a very literal sense. The painted face or body of a person in a western portrait tends to take up most of the space on the canvas, whereas Chinese portraits tend to be drawn with the backgrounds taking up much more space.

Colors and Emotions

It may be a myth that the color red makes bulls angry, but colors do in fact affect humans. As stated previously the color pink has been shown to make people feel calmer, and even physically weaker.

Blue has some similar effects. When blue lights are used to light city streets they've been shown to reduce crime. Blue lights have also been linked to higher work productivity than typical light colors.

The primary and secondary colors have very strong connections to nature; the sun is yellow, plants are green, water is blue, etc. This might be why mental hospitals that make heavy use of greens and blues have been linked to positive effects on the emotional states of patients.

And interestingly despite the fact that many colors have different connotations in different cultures, such as white representing purity in the west but death in Japan, red's association with passion and love is extremely widespread. In fact, speaking of Japan, red is the preferred color of Japanese wedding dresses.

Male drivers have been found to be significantly more likely to pick up female hitchhikers when the hitchhiker wears red. Red and black are the most common colors used in short skirted cocktail dresses as well.

Color can change how we perceive words. Black letters on a white background have shown different results in marketing than white letters on black backgrounds.

Our Environment

Brutalism has consistently been polled as the most hated style of architecture by the general public. The stark angles and plain beige concrete are often described as feeling depressing and oppressive. Boston City Hall for example has been voted one of the most hated buildings in America since before it was even finished. Your physical environment plays a large role in your emotional state and attitude.

As pointed out in the last chapter, natural colors like blues and greens, and the presence of natural features like plants, are correlated with better stress management and health.

People who grew up in open areas with access to nature tend to be better at coping with stress than people who grew up in urban areas that lack access to nature. Population density also has a negative correlation with altruistic behavior. When large numbers of people live in closer proximity to one another they're less likely to help those around them or engage in small acts of charity. Densely designed cities also correlate with higher feelings of claustrophobia and higher degrees of substance abuse. Excessive noise pollution has been shown to negatively affect childhood development, and light pollution negatively affects quality of sleep.

Sick people and people who have recently had surgery are also shown to heal faster if they have access to nature, even if it's just in the form of a view from a window. This shouldn't be surprising, unhappiness causes excess amounts of stress hormones like cortisol to be produced, which in turn affect our health. And imagine how unhappy you'd feel in a blank room with no view!

Architecture that mimics the geometry of nature tends to be reported as inspiring more positive emotions than artificial and colorless looking buildings. Straight lines and flat planes are almost always viewed more

negatively than curves and arches. It's no wonder the dome is one of the most popular architectural designs in history!

How our environment looks also plays a role in encouraging certain behaviors. People that live in areas with lots of litter are themselves more likely to litter, and areas with lots of run down buildings in need of maintenance are more heavily correlated with arson and property destruction.

Even things as simple as how clean one's house or bedroom are have lasting effects on our moods. Clutter is associated with people feeling more chaotic and less motivated, whereas clean and well organized homes and rooms are associated with feelings of calmness.

Whether The Weather

The term “campaign season” historically referred to the months that wars tend to take place. For logistical reasons it’s easier to wage war and maintain supply lines when there’s not snow around. However warm weather is associated with violence in many more fundamental ways.

The summer time virtually always has higher rates of crime than the winter. Again this shouldn’t be surprising, people simply spend more time outdoors in the warm months. But heat waves themselves are also correlated with spikes in violent crime in particular.

Heat makes people less patient, more irritable, and more prone to aggression. Generally speaking countries with warmer weather have higher crime rates than those with colder weather, and areas of a country with hot weather are higher than those without. Studies in Los Angeles have found that when the temperature rises to 85 degrees violent crime jumps up to 5.7%. However there’s an upper limit to this, once temperatures rise beyond 90 crime often falls. Which again is due to the simple fact that people spend less time outdoors.

Politics can also be affected by weather. Countries further away from the equator tend to have more social welfare programs, and a more collectivist political culture than those closer to it. This makes sense because the harsher the environment the more people have to work together and depend on one another to survive.

We also know that couples tend to have sex more often during the cold months, this may simply be due to having to spend more time indoors, but it may also be because cold weather increases feelings of emotional vulnerability and loneliness.

Perhaps this is also related to why countries in colder countries, such as Scandinavia, tend to have much higher rates of suicide. Along with this is

the fact that there's less sunlight in these countries, and during the winter in general, which leads to deficiencies in Vitamin D which in turn is correlated with higher rates of depression.

A common way to help treat feelings of depression in the winter months is the use of therapy lamps. White lights that trick the brain into feeling like it's seeing sunlight.

Final Summary

We like to think of ourselves as being in control of our own thoughts and behaviors, but the reality is that our behavior, and emotions, and our very perception of reality are all influenced by forces we might not even be aware of. Signs, symbols, subtle cues, subliminal messages, and complex social relationships all have an effect on our beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

The color of rooms, the temperature outside, the color of clothes people around us wear, can all alter our behavior without us realizing it. The marketing industry bases its success on exploiting these psychological nuances, as does political propaganda.

We're also much more motivated by our base instincts than we might like to think. Risks we take and how we behave can be influenced and subconscious sexual motivations. How hard we work can depend on who is watching. How we alter our own attitudes and behaviors can depend on feelings of acceptance or rejection.

Next time you go outside try to be more aware of how your environment makes you feel. How a billboard design makes you think. Or how those around you are affecting your behavior.



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