**An Interview with Professor Chris Hackley**

**Seattle Anxiety PLLC: December 2nd 2022**

<https://seattleanxiety.com/psychology-psychiatry-interview-series/2022/12/1/professor-chris-hackley-on-the-psychology-of-advertising>

*Chris Hackley, Ph.D. is a Professor of Marketing in the School of Business and Management at Royal Holloway University of London. He's an expert in the field of marketing and business.*

Tori Steffen:  Hi everybody, and thank you for joining us today for this installment of the Seattle Psychiatrist Interview series. I'm Tori Steffen, a research intern at Seattle Anxiety Specialists. We are a Seattle based psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy practice specializing in anxiety disorders.

I like to welcome with us today Professor [Chris Hackley](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/persons/chris-hackley). Dr. Hackley is a Professor of Marketing in the School of Business and Management at Royal Holloway University of London. He's an expert in the field of marketing and business and he has written several publications on the topic, including the article, *Brand, Text, and Meaning*, as well as the book, *Rethinking Advertising as Paratexual Communication*, which takes a literary theory perspective on advertising as text.

So before we get started today, could you please let us know just a little bit more about yourself and what made you interested in studying both marketing and psychology?

*Chris Hackley:  Sure. Welcome to the talk, everybody, and thanks for asking me, Tori. Yeah, many, many years ago when I was teaching in two year colleges, I decided I was a little bored with marketing and I thought I'd change career track. So I studied for a second Bachelor's Degree in Psychology with the Open University, that's a part-time school in the UK. My plan was to change track to ed psych because I thought that was pretty interesting at the time.*

*So I completed the degree and completed the diploma so that I could get membership of the British Psychological Society. But just then I managed to develop my career into research universities where I was able to write my own courses and I found that I could integrate my fondness for psychology into my own teaching and research. So there wasn't any need really to change career track anymore.*

*And of course I had a young family at the time, so it would've been economically unrealistic to do that. So I was able to combine my interests, really, since I had more freedom to write courses I wanted to do and write books about the things I wanted to study.*

*So that's where that came from and how my career developed. And of course marketing is very much about psychology in many ways. And so the two interests combined quite neatly, I think.*

Tori Steffen:  Right. I was thinking the exact same thing that both fields would kind of help with the other. So that must have been great to study both. Well, getting down to basics, could you explain for us how marketing is related to psychology?

*Chris Hackley:  Yeah, some people would suggest that it's all psychology, really, the psychology of persuasion. And there are many people with cognitive psychology backgrounds who become marketing academics. And there are many sort of research streams based on cognitive psychology in the marketing literature.*

*I think it's also broader because marketing touches on many other subjects of course, and I approach some of it from a sociological perspective, well perhaps from the borders of sociology and psychology. So that's why I think it's broader than just psychology. And of course management is a very much a multidisciplinary subject to study as well.*

*So I think one can look at marketing very much through a psychology lens, but I think if one only does that, one does miss some important things. And I'm influenced by the psychology degree that I studied, which was a little bit unusual. It was at the time the course was led by a lady called Professor Margaret Weatherall, who is a very, very well known psychologist, but she specializes in qualitative psychology.*

*And the course was really leaning toward what some of the tutors called sociological social psychology. So in other words, they took a lot of perspectives that perhaps in a lot of psychology departments would be regarded as more of the sociologists remit rather than the psychologists. And that was what* *attracted* *me very much about that particular degree because they looked at the borders of sociology and psychology.*

*And I think that's where marketing does get very interesting because marketing phenomena are not just in people's heads, they're also in the culture, and the context around people. So I think it's really the borders of psychology and sociology that marketing does get really interesting.*

Tori Steffen:  I would definitely agree with you there. How might you say psychological theories, maybe [Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](https://seattleanxiety.com/maslow-hon), how might that be connected to marketing?

*Chris Hackley:  Well, my simple answer would be that it isn't.*

Tori Steffen:  Okay.

*Chris Hackley:  It's enormously overused and it's marketing academics and consultants are very, very good at appropriating little bits of theory that sound kind of good and that they can use. And Maslow's, unfortunately, is one of those, I'm sure Maslow himself would be absolutely horrified at the uses to which his hierarchy is put by marketing people because of course he was a humanistic psychologist and he did not advocate that people could become self-fulfilled through consumption. And I'm sure the very idea would be anathema to his entire philosophy.*

*So the use of Maslow's, Hierarchy, is a piece of bare faced thievery by marketing academics and consultants. It can be... Quite a few theories in marketing, they're not really theories. They're more back of the envelope frameworks, which are useful discussion points. And they're use useful for bringing out particular topics. So their use really is as teaching devices, but I don't think there's necessarily a lot of integrity in that, intellectual integrity.*

*They're kind of useful in the classroom and marketers are very pragmatic in their use of theory from other disciplines. Pragmatic is probably a better word to use than thievery.*

Tori Steffen:  That definitely makes sense. Well, thank you for explaining that for us. And how might ethics play a role between that relationship of psychology and marketing?

*Chris Hackley:  Well, it's extremely important and it's extremely important, I think, for marketing academics to expose unethical practice that the problem comes in the very nature of marketing, which is essentially about persuasion. And a lot of the ethical issues arise in how precisely that is done.*

*And of course, Vance Packard back in 1957 when he wrote his book, Hidden Persuaders, was horrified when he found out how advertising agencies use psychology to persuade people as he saw it, in a rather sinister way, to persuade people in ways of which they were not aware.*

*And marketing, as a discipline, it's about the same age as psychology, about a 100, 120 years in its modern form. And it's persistently had this rather dual nature where it tries to present itself as being the discipline that makes life better by improving the allocation of resources in ways in which economists can't do because of the assumptions of their discipline.*

*So marketing brings to bear behavioral and psychological and other disciplines to try to understand human desire and human choice and decision making more accurately so that markets can be cleared more efficiently. But as Maslow, sorry, as Packard pointed out, this can get a little bit manipulative. And I suppose the modern day equivalent of that would be what they call neuromarketing, where a lot of big global brands do this.*

*They hire a bunch of out of work neuropsychologists, buy them an MRI scanner and put them to work, putting consumers through it and looking to see what their brains look like when they are looking at certain adverts or eating a certain brand of ice cream or something. And a lot of hope and money is invested in neuropsychology, neuropsychology for marketing or neuromarketing, as they sometimes call it. The results have been, I think, very limited so far.*

*But of course the aim is total controllable organizations over consumer behavior, which is not a nice, not a good thing, I don't think. And the dual nature of marketing I referred to earlier was referred to its public face as the science and the discipline of resource allocation that makes life better and makes people happier by giving them more stuff that they want, and as well as generating jobs and wealth and income and so forth.*

*But on the other hand, it's also has a reputation as being a rather dubious site of hucksterism, sinister manipulation, and downright dodgy dealing, which of course, which it fully deserves, as well. Some of the greatest marketers in history have been people like P.T. Barnham and Edward Benes, of course, and a lot of other very dodgy characters whose ethical standards were a little bit flexible, should we say?*

*So marketing is particularly interesting, to me, because it has this dual nature and it has this, perhaps you could call it a tension within it between these sort of the marketing appeals to people's rationality and its attempts to give people a greater range of choices from which they can make useful decisions to improve their welfare and their quality of life.*

*And on the other hand, just trying to manipulate people and obviously a part of marketing is stimulating desires that we didn't know we had for stuff that we don't need.*

*So it is a very complex field and it does both of these things. And ethics of course has many, many dimensions of application in marketing, and it's more important, I think, than ever.*

Tori Steffen:  Absolutely. Yeah. You mentioned [neuromarketing](https://seattleanxiety.com/psychiatrist/2022/11/8/advertising-in-dreams-potential-impacts-on-the-human-psyche), which is really interesting topic to bring up in relation to ethics. How would you say the field of neuromarketing, particularly, is related to maybe mental health or one's personal psychology?

*Chris Hackley:  Well, I'm not in any sense an expert on neuromarketing, and I know that a lot of proponents of it feel that it has great potential. I'm a little bit of a skeptic, mainly because I don't think psychology resides entirely in one's central nervous system. I think the borders of... I think a lot of psychology is relational, and it's to do with the context and the cultural situation of people, but I think its results have been very limited so far from what I've seen.*

*Obviously the idea of a golden bullet, as it were, for organizations to stimulate desires in us and action without just really being aware of that is extremely sinister and not something one would really wish for in a pluralistic liberal democracy. So I think the aims of it are a little bit dubious, but I was told not so long ago by somebody in the media industry that a lot of big brands won't allow the latest advertising campaign out of the door until the neuromarketers have shown it, put people through the scanners, and shown them the ads.*

Tori Steffen:  Wow.

*Chris Hackley:  So I guess for the marketing industry is very, very risk averse a lot of the time. And anything they think they can do to reduce a little risk a little bit, they do cling onto. And so ideas of marketing science are very, very attractive for that reason.*

*And so if they can reduce risk just a little bit by using neuro marketing, then they'll try to do that. And I guess it does have its uses, but I couldn't comment any further on it really, because I'm not up enough on neuromarketing, I'm afraid.*

Tori Steffen:  Got you. Yeah, it's definitely one of those newer fields. So still a lot to learn. Well, in your article, *Marketing Psychology and the Hidden Persuaders*, you mentioned that psychology can enable a more critical engagement with marketing. Could you explain how that works for our audience?

*Chris Hackley:  When I initially studied management and business, I found it intellectually kind of unsatisfying because there wasn't enough critical thinking in it. We've already mentioned a lot of marketing theories that don't really stand up to a proper critical analysis because they're really more consulting or teaching frameworks than theories as such. So, forgive me, I've lost my train of thought on your question?*

Tori Steffen:  Yeah, so just how more critical engagement with marketing, or more the psychology, is related to that extra critical engagement?

*Chris Hackley:  So later on when I started to study psychology, I found it extremely useful, firstly, in understanding methodologies more thoroughly because my business and management education was a little bit superficial on that, but also simply because the psychological approach is to appraise theories by their evidence and by their capability of predicting and explaining and so forth. So it's a much more systematic social science training in a psychology education, I think.*

*And I think that brings a great deal to the study of marketing and management, which is not necessarily present in marketing and management degrees because since the 1950s and 60s, the idea of management has become very much dominated by a toolkit for action for managers and the need to step back and really critically analyze the ideas and the theories and management has been relegated, a little bit, to some final year courses and to postgraduate research and so forth.*

*So yeah, I would say that I think in my institution we do this pretty well, but a lot of undergraduate management degrees, they don't really teach critical thinking rigorously enough, in my opinion. So I think psychology really does help a great deal with that because people are trained in critically evaluating competing claims and especially competing claims that are sort of justified by particular theories.*

*So, for example, so many management and marketing students are taught Maslow and goodness knows what they think of Abraham Maslow. The vast majority of them would not go to read about Abraham Maslow and his work. They would just say, "Oh, this guy understood the buying process very well." Or, "He understood how consumption works to make..." Goodness knows what they think because they're usually not given the context around that.*

*So that's where I think a psychology education can be extremely helpful.*

Tori Steffen:  Okay. Yeah, that definitely makes sense that it could give you those extra tools to have a little bit more critical thinking when looking at advertising and media, so that's great.

How might you say that consumers engage with marketing on a more conscious or critical approach to avoid those hidden persuaders? Any advice on that front for us?

*Chris Hackley:  I can give you one example, which is a generational divide. I've been involved in quite a bit of research on product placement in movies, which of course has been going on since the silent* movies, *but these days it's much more talked about and well known. And indeed movies now they put out press releases of their latest product placement brand agreement as part of the advanced publicity.*

*So there's a generational divide in the sense that older people tend to think that product placement and similar forms of sponsorship within entertainment vehicles is inherently deceptive because it's an advertisement that looks like an entertainment. And for an older generation people, who are really more used to a divide between editorial and advertising that used to be more rigorously imposed in media, that's a deceptive practice.*

*For younger people, it's not. That they assume that media is going to be completely suffused with brands, because that's what they've always seen and they're not used to a media where there is a rigorously imposed line between editorial and advertising. So for younger people, when they watch movies, they enjoy spotting the placements. They don't regard it as underhand or sinister. I think they kind of feel flattered that somebody would go to so much trouble in expense to try to manipulate them. And they quite enjoy playing the game and spotting the subtleties of these placements.*

*Especially when they're integrated into the plot or the scripts and so forth. So there's, for younger people, there's a much greater acceptance of that. Sorry, my doorbell just, I don't know if you can hear it, my doorbell just went and the dog is going crazy, But hopefully you can't hear that.*

*So I think consumers are aware of the potential for marketing to manipulate, but that they come at in different ways and younger consumers, in particular, they tend to talk about subliminal advertising. And for them that sort of manipulation is dark, but also kind of interesting, because the idea that we're being manipulated is quite an interesting theme.*

*So that theme does come up sometimes, although it doesn't really exist, subliminal advertising, it's a bit of a myth, but that's the level at which I think some people do feel that marketing can manipulate. So I think in general there is a lack of critical engagement by consumers with marketing. Where it is engaged, it's sometimes a little bit misdirected. So I think marketers are always a little bit of a step ahead.*

Tori Steffen:  Makes sense. Yeah, that's very interesting about how it might differ among ages. I hadn't thought about that before. So thank you for sharing. And I know we mentioned Packard earlier.

Could you explain for the audience, Packard's vision of marketing manipulation, and in your opinion, do you think it's still relevant today?

*Chris Hackley:  It's a long time since I read Packard's book. The particular incident I recall is his observation that advertising agencies were using, what they described as depth psychology, to understand people's deepest emotions and motivations. And in particular, he was shocked that they were using these techniques on children. He was shocked that he felt this was very, obviously, intrusive and potentially quite a sinister form of manipulation.*

*And nothing has changed. Advertising agencies still do. And in Britain, for example, where we're not very good at protecting children from marketing, our regulation in that area is quite weak. And it's not unusual for agencies to specialize in the marketing to children. Agencies will go into kindergartens and show logos to the kids and they'll put their hands up and say, "Oh yeah, I know that one. That's Marlboro."*

*Well, because the kids see these things all the time and advertisers are pretty cynical. They know very well that advertising on kids channels, cable channels, is a way of getting adult products talked about in the house.*

*So what Packard wanted to alert people to is still very much a reality today. Probably he'd be more horrified now when he learned about the way that digital platforms manipulate children, for example, through advert gaming and drawing children into all sorts of consumption.*

*So what he warned about has truly come to pass, I think. And the world of digital media is an absolute minefield for children today. It's pretty scary.*

Tori Steffen:  It definitely can be scary. So yeah, it definitely sounds like his vision is still pretty relevant, and like you said, he might be quite surprised.

Well, your article also goes into the topic of TV product placement and how it can relate to a young consumer's sense of identity. Could you explain how that works for us?

*Chris Hackley:  Yeah, I'll try. Well, marketing is very much about emotions and identity. So the idea now is quite commonplace, really, that we consume in order to fulfill our sense of our own identity and our sense of group membership. So in a sense, anthropologists would say all marketing and consumption is about displaying the right sort of tattoos or shells or whatever to signify one's status in the group and one's membership of particular groups, and marketing elaborates on this with brands.*

*And now today, we're very accustomed to seeing people walking around with brands prominently displayed on their clothes and so forth. And that's what marketing tries to do. It tries to create offers that chime with people's sense of their selves, and it also tries to create aspirational offers so that we can buy things because of a group, because we can appear to be a member of a group to which we'd like to be a member, even if we're not necessarily a genuine member of it.*

*So I think our identity is extremely important to marketing, and it is a way of really articulating our sense of ourselves and our sense of meaning in the world, but in a symbolic way rather than an actual way.*

*So to that extent, it's also potentially damaging, psychologically, if people, for example, are shut out of the market because they are disadvantaged in some way, because the market doesn't regard them as a useful target, if they are economically disadvantaged, so they can't take part, then there is the risk of a feeling of lack or unwillingness or something. And that's the unfortunate thing about the consumer society, that if you're not included, then you are excluded. And that can be very damaging to people's sense of identity.*

Tori Steffen:  I would agree. I think that psychology is definitely relevant when it comes to the sense of identity in marketing.

*Chris Hackley:  Absolutely.*

Tori Steffen:  Thank you for sharing that. So there is some research out there regarding the ethical nature of subliminal promotion. Could you explain your thoughts on the topic of subliminal promotion for us, and if you think it may be related to anxiety in consumers at all?

*Chris Hackley:  That's an interesting question. Well, I touched on subliminal advertising a little while ago. I think it does connect to* [*anxiety*](https://seattleanxiety.com/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad) *in the sense people do feel that marketers are very powerful and probably manipulating us. But that sense is quite vague, I think.*

*Most people, most ordinary consumers wouldn't have heard of neuromarketing, for example, they wouldn't have heard of depth psychology and as regards subliminal advertising, that became a very popular sort of idea. But the original experiment on which that was based turned out to have been* *incorrect. I forget the precise year or the theater, but it was a movie theater where they were said to have projected images of ice cream at less than 1/16th of a second, which meant that one doesn't register it consciously, but unconsciously it's there. And then people were apparently got up, in unusual numbers, at the break to buy ice cream.*

*So from this, the word came about that subliminal advertising, literally meaning advertising that's flashed up on the screen more quickly than we can consciously register it, was a powerful thing. It turned out that was actually a fraud, that experiment. And there is no evidence, the subliminal advertising is banned and certainly in the UK by the regulators, but there's no evidence that it does work. No good evidence that it does work.*

*But what I found that young consumers tend to do now is the literal meaning of subliminal, as in an image that's flashed more quickly than the eye can process consciously, has been lost. And they tend to use the word subliminal as a general term to mean something that is sinister, underhand, and manipulative. So it tends to have morphed into a broader usage.*

*And this ties in a little bit with product placement. People do understand that that's an attempt to manipulate, but as I mentioned earlier, young people tend to be pretty blasé about that, and they quite enjoy the game of spotting these attempts to manipulate them.*

*So I think that the idea of subliminal advertising, which really reflects the idea that Packard spoke to all those years ago, reflects a general sense of anxiety that we are being manipulated by these technologies and by these images that marketers create. And people are never quite sure, people always say, "Oh, advertising doesn't influence me," but people are never really quite sure. And of course the market shares of the various brands tell us a completely different story that advertising does indeed influence us.*

*So I think there is a generalized anxiety about that, but we're probably not anxious enough about it because I think there is a lot of, I guess, complacency about marketing activities and not enough close examination of them probably.*

Tori Steffen:  Yeah, absolutely. It would make sense that one might be more anxious if they're more aware of those hidden persuaders. So definitely takes a little bit of awareness to get there, but it can help.

Well, I came across another interesting project of yours. It's called *Branded Consumption and Identification: Young People and Alcohol*, that looked really interesting. Could you describe for us what was being studied in the project?

*Chris Hackley:  Sure. This was a few years ago when what they called binge drinking was a big thing in the UK. So there was a lot in the media about young people, particularly students, drinking way too much and way too early. And we decided myself, the project was led by Professor Christine Griffin from Bath University, and so Christine's a psychologist. She got myself and another professor of marketing involved, and then there was a couple of other psychologists.*

*So we decided to interview young people to try to understand exactly what it was they got out of getting very drunk. And so this is probably quite culturally specific to the UK, I think. Not entirely. There were strong parallels with some aspects of American research and Australian research, but the idea was to get really smashed as quickly as possible. And one of the main reasons was because it cemented bonding in the group.*

*When we were interviewing these groups of young people, they became really animated when they would tell the terrible stories of what happened to them when they were really drunk. Sometimes with* *really bad stories, people ending up in hospital with broken limbs, or people getting beaten up or something.*

*But this all tied in with the idea that the nighttime economy was a sort of liminal zone in which anything could happen. And all you'd got was the togetherness with your friends and they had to look out for you. And people would get very, very drunk and if their friends didn't look out for them, something might happen, but that would still give them a drinking story.*

*So as the interviews went on and the focus groups went on, we realized this was all about group bonding. It was all about friendship and deepening the bonds of friendship. We did interview some people who didn't drink, but they were kind of out of it a little. They were kind of excluded. And some people would say that, "In my first year in university, I found it difficult to really get in the social scene because I don't drink.” And it was all about the drinking, you see?*

*So at the time, the British government put out some adverts ostensibly to persuade young people not to drink so much. And they showed young people getting terribly drunk with torn clothes and ending up upside down in a hedge or something. And the strap line would be something like, "Do you want to end up like this?" And this was the theme of the ads, and we realized that there is no embarrassment. This was the whole point. The whole point was to do something outrageous or to experience some risky event and then to be able to laugh about it for years afterwards with the group. It was a drinking story that cemented the bonds of friendship in the group. And you were kind of a hero if something awful happened to you when you were drunk because you could tell the stories forever with your friends.*

*And so we realized these government ads really did the opposite of what they were ostensibly intended to do because they glamorized drinking. They were depicting exactly what the young people got out of extreme drinking, you see.*

*So we put out a press release saying, "Actually this government campaign is going to make it worse. It's a catastrophically conceived campaign." And we were informed by... We wrote a string of articles about this. I wrote some based on literary theory such as Mikhail Bakhtin's, Theory of the Carnivalesque, the idea that on special occasions one can upturn the social order and reverse the normal order of things, and drink was intrinsically a part of this. And this sort of rebellion against the social order was a very powerful thing, and it kind of refreshed people and enabled them to have a rebirth the next day. And this was what the heavy drinking was partly about.*

*So that got covered in the press and stuff, and we had to do interviews and things. So that all became kind of fun and we carried it on. But that was the basic idea of it, that we wanted to understand exactly what people got out of getting very drunk. I have three sons who were teenage boys at the time, so I got a little mini experiment in front of me so I could understand how their drinking practices differed from mine a generation before.*

*So it was particularly fascinating to me. So, that was basically what we did and essentially what we found*

Tori Steffen:  Great. Those are great findings to come by. A really interesting project there. I didn't think about how it could actually have a reverse effect than what the advertising was originally trying to accomplish. But it definitely makes sense, and it seems like you guys went about it in a very good way of coming by that information.

*Chris Hackley:  Yeah, things have moved on now. Binge drinking so much in the news, but the idea of drinking to get drunk is still, of course, very, very prevalent. And the public health cost of* [*excessive drinking*](https://seattleanxiety.com/psychiatrist/2022/9/27/examining-substance-use-disorder-alcohol-drugs-or-prescription-medications-a-qampa-with-sas-therapists) *is going up all the time in the UK, as it is in many other countries. So that the issue is still very much a live issue. And it's also bound up with the regulatory framework because in the 1980s, the government liberalized the sale of alcohol in the UK and now you can buy it from anywhere 24 hour hours a day as you can in a lot of states in the USA.*

*And that, of course, is all part of the whole frame that the entire regulatory context as well. So it remains a problem. But some research has shown that more younger people now are drinking less. One of the reasons being they can't afford it now because the cost is relatively much higher now.*

Tori Steffen:  That's interesting. Well, I guess that's good that hopefully it's be going down, not as much binge drinking. Great. Well, Dr. Hackley, do you have any final words of advice for our audience or anything else that you'd like to share with us today?

*Chris Hackley:  I guess, I don't know about advice. I'm don't think I'm very good at giving anybody any advice, but I think psychology and marketing are very, very mutually enriching subjects to study. And I think that there's really... I think on the one hand, social science does look down on management and business studies with some reason, I'd say. On the other hand, management and business studies exist in a little bit of a self-referential bubble and it needs more engagement with social sciences and social psychology.*

*So I would like to see much more mutual engagement between the various disciplines, the social science disciplines and management, especially in the construction of degrees and the construction of teaching. There is quite a lot of mutual engagement at the higher of levels of research. But I think younger students deserve a stronger social science background in their management and business. And that would give them a stronger critical appreciation of the techniques that marketers use in order to navigate their own way through those techniques.*

*So I would like to see a much stronger connections between social science, especially psychology, and marketing education.*

Tori Steffen:  Great. Yeah, I could definitely see how that would just give the students a broader sense of the ethical nature of marketing and how it relates to personal wellbeing as well. So great. Thank you so much for sharing that, and it's been very nice chatting with you today and I really appreciate you joining us for our interview series and contributing. So thank you so much.

*Chris Hackley:  My pleasure, Tori. Thank you for asking me. I hope people find it interesting.*

Tori Steffen:  Absolutely, I think they will. Well, hope you have a great rest of your day, Dr. Hackley, and thank you again.

*Chris Hackley:  You too. Thank you, Tori. Bye. Bye.*

Tori Steffen:  Bye.

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