

# A STUDY ON SUBCONSCIOUS TOUCHPOINTS IN ADVERTISING

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## Abstract

Subliminal advertising has been creating a buzz amongst marketers and consumers since decades now. Have you ever thought of the reason why suddenly you feel the craving to have Coke or popcorn during the Movie interval? Perhaps you have fallen for one of the most mystically secretive form of advertising: Subliminal. These advertisements are the stimuli, audible to the subconscious brains. The term subliminal was popularized in the book "The hidden persuaders" by Vance Packard. Post that books like "Subliminal Seduction" in 1973 came into the limelight due to the perception of the public that the content of Subliminal ads are "Deceptive". This paper thus cynosures to study the various possible aspects of this form of advertising and to what extent this is applicable in the Indian Advertising scenario. Though this form of advertising has not been considered to be much effective as per the past researchers, but the present research on this topic has shown some other side of the story. Since India has been following Mass advertising as a religion since time immemorial, hitting on the consumers subconsciously would not only attract more consumers but would also revolutionize the industry as a whole. This paper thus aims to study the possibilities of such revolution in Indian context.

**Keywords:** Subliminal, Advertising, Mass advertising

## INTRODUCTION

### History of Subliminal Advertising

In the 1950s, a researcher named James Vicary coined the term to describe what he claimed he found in his Popcorn Experiment. He argued that sales of concessions had increased based on the spit second flashing of visual stimuli suggesting people make these purchases. Vicary later retracted his claim but the thought was an intriguing one for the public. Can we be made to take actions based on information received below our conscious awareness? People thought the obvious: how scary is that?

Years later, when a 1973 ad for a board game named Husker Du included the flashing of the words 'Get It', the ad was removed from the air. The incident led to the Federal Trade Commission's official stance against the ads. The Commission saw these ads as deceptive and banned the practice of using subliminal ads, even though there wasn't definitive research to prove the effects. Even now, the question of whether we are affected by subliminal marketing is up for debate.

A subliminal message is a signal or message designed to pass below (sub) the normal limits of perception. For example it might be inaudible to the conscious mind (but audible to the unconscious or deeper mind) or might be an image transmitted briefly and unperceived consciously and yet perceived unconsciously. This definition assumes a division between conscious and unconscious which may be misleading; it may be more true to suggest that the subliminal message (sound or image) is perceived by deeper parts of what is a single integrated mind.

In the everyday world, it has often been suggested that subliminal techniques are used in advertising and for propaganda purposes (e.g. party political broadcasts).

The term subliminal message was popularized in a 1957 book entitled The Hidden Persuaders by Vance Packard. This book detailed a study of movie theaters that supposedly used subliminal commands to increase the sales of popcorn and Coca-Cola at their concession stands. However, the study was fabricated, as the author of the study James Vicary later admitted.

In 1973 the book Subliminal Seduction claimed that subliminal techniques were in wide use in advertising. The book contributed to a general climate of fear with regard to Orwellian dangers (of subliminal messaging). Public concern was enough to lead the Federal Communications Commission to hold hearings and to declare subliminal advertising "contrary to the public interest" because it involved "intentional deception" of the public.

Subliminal perception or cognition is a subset of unconscious cognition where the forms of unconscious cognition also include attending to one signal in a noisy environment while unconsciously keeping track of other signals (e.g. one voice out of many in a crowded room) and tasks done automatically (e.g. driving a car). In all such cases there has been research into how much of the unattended or unconscious signal or message is perceived (unconsciously), i.e. is the whole message sensed and fully digested or perhaps only its main and simpler features? There are at least two schools of thought about this. One of them argues that only the simpler features of unconscious signals are perceived; however please note that the majority of the research done has tended to test only for simpler features of cognition (rather than testing for complete comprehension). The second school of thought argues that the unconscious cognition is comprehensive and that much more is perceived than can be verbalized.

Various types of studies of subliminal perception have been conducted. For example, of whether anaesthetized patients are completely unaware whilst apparently completely asleep/unconscious. Although the patients themselves report no knowledge of events whilst they are anaesthetized, more indirect methods of examining what they can recall confirm that information is perceived without any conscious awareness.

Similarly, studies of patients with neurological damage show that patients who claim e.g. not to be able to see certain stimuli nevertheless respond on the basis of information received from those stimuli. For example, in the case of the syndrome known as blindsight patients can be unaware of receiving information within an area of their visual field that they believe to be damaged.

Subliminal messages might gain their potential influence/power from the fact that they may be able to circumvent the critical functions of the conscious mind, and it has often been argued that subliminal suggestions are therefore potentially more powerful than ordinary suggestions. This route to influence or persuasion would be akin to auto-suggestion or hypnosis wherein the subject is encouraged to be (or somehow induced to be) relaxed so that suggestions are directed to deeper (more gullible) parts of the mind; some observers have argued that the unconscious mind is incapable of critical refusal of hypnotic or subliminal suggestions. Research findings do not support the conclusion that subliminal suggestions are peculiarly powerful.

The technology of subliminal messaging has been developed quite far e.g. in the hemispheric technologies of the Monroe Institute (see below) and such techniques have been used in very real world situations such as the rapid and comprehensive training of men in the armed forces to recognise foreign ships and aircraft. Research suggests that the effectiveness of such tapes or CDs is greatly affected by whether the user believes they will have an impact (placebo effect).

#### **SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES IN ADVERTISING:**

A form of subliminal messaging commonly believed to exist involves the insertion of "hidden" messages into movies and TV programs. The concept of "moving pictures" relies on persistence of vision to create the illusion of movement in a series of images projected at 23 to 30 frames per second; the popular theory of subliminal messages usually suggests that subliminal commands can be inserted into this sequence at the rate of perhaps 1 frame in 25 (or roughly 1 frame per second). The hidden command in a single frame will flash across the screen so quickly that it is not consciously perceived, but the command will supposedly appeal to the subconscious mind of the viewer, and thus have some measurable effect in terms of behaviour.

As to the question of whether subliminal messages are widely used to influence groups of people e.g. audiences, there is no evidence to suggest that any serious or sustained attempt has been made to use the technology on a mass audience. The widely-reported reports that arose in 1957 to the effect that customers in a movie theatre in New Jersey had been induced by subliminal messages to consume more popcorn and more Coca-Cola were almost certainly false. The current consensus among marketing professionals is that subliminal advertising is counter-productive. To some this is because they believe it to be ineffective, but to most it is because they realise it would be a public relations disaster if its use was discovered. Many have misgivings about using it in marketing campaigns due to ethical considerations.

During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, a television ad campaigning for Republican candidate George W. Bush showed words (and parts thereof) scaling from the foreground to the background on a television screen. When the word BUREAUCRATS flashed on the screen, one frame showed only the last part, RATS. Democrats promptly asked the FCC to look into the matter, but no penalties were ever assessed in the case. The effect this had on the overall presidential race was unclear; the Democrats and Al Gore received ridicule for finding malicious intent in something that could have been a simple mistake; the Republicans received ridicule for the lack of attention to detail and Bush's mispronunciation of "subliminal" (it came out as "subliminable"). (It bears mentioning that the "subliminal message" is easily viewable when the ad is played at regular speed. If the message were truly subliminal, that would not be the case.)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Subliminal is an adjective applied to the process of stimulation below the threshold, or limen, of conscious perception (Kaplan, & Sadock, 1987). Proponents of subliminal advertising contend that subliminally presented messages can alter attitudes and drives, and cause recipients to behave in a way in which they otherwise would not (Key, 1974). Such behavior might range from voting for a specific candidate to purchasing a particular product.

Other people who think that subliminal message presentation may be effective in altering attitudes and drives oppose the practice. These people are fearful of mass brainwashing by commercial or political interests (Kotter, & Armstrong, 1989).

The great majority of empirical research in subliminal advertising has concluded either that (1) it has not been possible to learn enough about the effects of subliminal message presentation to make a reliable assessment of its effectiveness, or (2) the practice is not effective in altering attitudes and drives (Beatty, & Hawkins, 1989). Nevertheless, the concept and the purported effectiveness of subliminal advertising continue to receive wide support among both theorists and the general public (Kilbourne, Painton, & Ridley, 1985).

The 1970 Hawkins study, which continues to be cited as evidence of the effectiveness of subliminal advertising, based its hypothesis on drive theory, and behavioral response theory. Cuperfain, & Clarke (1985) included incremental effects theory in the theoretical underpinning for subliminal advertising, and Saegert (1987) proposed sexual arousal theory as an alternative theoretical basis for understanding how subliminal advertising works.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research has been carried out primarily amongst 85 customers. The research involves getting the data from the candidates through Interviews, Focus groups and observations. Collection of data includes showing them five pictures of Subliminal advertisements of different brands. Brands included were Amazon, Mc Donalds, FedEx, SFX magazine, Pepsi vs Coca Cola Halloween advertisement. The candidates were inquired first for the basic information and then they were asked to go through the print ads. The data thus is been collected through personal observation of what goes in a person's psyche when they look at an ad, plus Interviews were

Research data : Primary data

Place : Ahmedabad

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To analyze how many consumers are affected by subliminal advertisements.
- To understand and conclude if this type of advertising could be used in the present or future to deliver impactful ads
- To understand the hidden psychology of the consumers and study their behavior and understand how they perceive the advertisements.

Primary data techniques:

- The candidates were screened and information was collected through various ways,
- Interviews, Focus groups and Observation being some of the techniques.
- Interviews were taken on one on one basis in order to understand the psychology of the candidates.
- Observation was made with respect to the body language and reactions of the candidates as soon as they saw the subliminal ads, which was noted for consideration.
- After proper scrutinizing the data, certain findings were drawn which are given below.
- Findings :
- Out of 85 candidates , 40 were females and rest of them were males.
- As per the data obtained after proper screening of the candidates, it was observed that most of the candidates were not much aware of the unique kind of advertising subliminal claims to be.
- Though they weren't much aware of this type of advertising method, it was found out that most of them were affected by this type of Advertising.
- Out of 85 candidates, approximately 64 percent of the candidates were found to have a positive inclination towards the brand after watching the subliminal print ads.
- This further proves that subliminal ads have an impact on the subconscious brain of the consumers. And this type of advertising could be used in the future for effective advertising.

## CONCLUSIONS

After interviewing and asking several questions to the candidates, below mentioned conclusions were made :

- Consumers aren't much aware about this particular technique of advertising but it is found that they do get affected positively after watching subliminal ads.
- Since it is found to be of some importance, advertisers could make use of this technique for effective advertising.
- Nowadays advertising industry has been following an old cult of advertising with a little difference or comparison, Hence this form of advertising could make a little difference in the herd.

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