The True Meaning of Subliminal Advertising: Is it Really Effective?

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Abstract

There has been a significant amount of research done to find out the true meaning of subliminal advertising and if it is really effective. Many believe that subliminal advertising purposely plays on the consumer’s sub-conscious manipulating them to make impulsive decisions. The research addresses a broad understanding of why many researchers argue that this is in fact a false definition of what subliminal advertising really is. The research helps to understand the true meaning and definition of subliminal advertising. The research further focuses on the effectiveness of subliminal advertising in the global context.

Key Words: subliminal advertising, subconscious, definition, global
Introduction

Subliminal advertising dates back to 1957 when advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather, were experimenting with an ad in a movie theater and the ad subliminally influenced consumers to “eat popcorn” and “drink coke” (Broyles 2006). Later that year marketing researcher James Vicary claimed that he held a six-week study showing these exact messages across the screen for 1/3,000 of a second, which lead to an increase in sales of both products. Vicary later admitted that the results of this experiment where manipulated to restore face from previous researches that failed. Even though Vicary’s study was fool it stirred up the beginning of many controversial arguments to later come. Not only have these various experiments created controversies, but the frequently misuse of the word has added fire to the flame. By definition subliminal advertising is the practice in which messages are delivered to the consumer below their threshold of individual conscious awareness. Since majority of the research done rarely focuses on the true meaning of subliminal advertising and more on the facts of its effectiveness many simply argue that the practice is completely deceiving. In rebuttal opposing researchers believe if you compare allegations directly to the most commonly used definition of subliminal advertising, it would be preposterous to believe that advertisers have the capabilities to understand the vulnerabilities of each consumer’s mind. Due to the fact that subliminal communication is highly misunderstood or rarely visited because of the high rate of uncertainty, it creates room for subjective arguments that leaves unclear data to answer the innumerable questions raised by subliminal advertising. However, if advertisers were using unethical techniques to influence desired actions of consumers the chances of finding any hardcore evidence to support this theory would be slim to none. As stated before there were various studies that simply focused on the effectiveness of subliminal advertising, especially after Vicary’s spoof in 1957, which have led most to believe placement of subliminal messages connotes effectiveness. Contrary to popular belief, there have
been various subliminal works that did not conclude that subliminal advertising propelled desired behaviors of consumers (Broyles 2006). In order to prescribe theory on effectiveness there must be clear concise knowledge on all determining factors, you have to know exactly what the factor means to see what it really does. Researchers and philosophers have compiled years of information to defend marketers and advertisers and this what seems to be very viable marketing technique. Regardless of the actual findings over these years of research the perception of the advertising business stays the same- subliminal advertising exists, advertisers use it frequently, it is profitable to companies, and it is by far deceiving consumers (Broyles 2006). Having a research that gives a greater understanding of what subliminal advertising really is and the effect it has globally can give the advertising world affirmation for its use of subliminal advertising and the general public confirmation that subliminal advertising is an ethical marketing technique that not only generates profit for companies but also identifies undiscovered desired wants of the consumer.

**Literature Review**

The study of sensation and perception dates back to the 19th century, which would later emerge into the study of *subliminal perception* in which stemmed from the term *limen*—the threshold of consciousness (Broyles 2006). Most of the confrontation comes from advertising research that finds some underlying message in ads and then exploits it to the mass public. Referring directly to the definition if something is truly subliminal you shouldn’t be able to identify it (Edward 2011). Jim Edwards of CBS News states, “Most subliminal ads are happy accidents, or people seeing what they want to see”. This could be true; information later in the research could have many supporting details. The following ads represent ads that have subliminal images but not every consumer will notice the image. If you pay attention to figure 1
below the Dickies ad represent masculinity of the hard workingman, but each consumer may see something different. These messages are mostly seen in gender related ads and this may be as close as you can get too unethical but legal. I may take a few looks to notice the hidden image but eventually you will see it.

Pay close attention to figure 2 it’s another example of consumers seeing what they want to see. It is also a gender-based ad and not every consumer is going to notice the subliminal message in the ad. This ad is even less effective than the Dickies ad in figure one because it can

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1 Figure 1 above Dickies ad with hidden subliminal image Figure 2 below Benson and Hedges ad.
still be a valid argument if the hidden images are really there even after the it is made obvious to
the eye. Left of the figure is the original ad and on the right are subliminal images that have been
pen pointed in the ad.

There are also subliminal messages that consumers purposefully see. These messages are
placed in the ad to attract consumers to the product appealing to the consumer’s desired wants. A
great example of deliberately placed messages would be Dunkin Donuts “Flavor Radio”
campaign. On the public transit in Seoul, Korea Dunkin Donuts placed this sleek invention,
which played Pavlovian jingles and sprayed aromas of fresh coffee on every bus with a Dunkin
Donut on its route, to attract customers to their stores. The aroma of the coffee is subliminal, but
it is purposely placed in the ad for the consumer to be able to notice it in order to grasp their
attention. It doesn’t take tons of research for anyone to know that morning coffee is a trend
globally or to understand how refreshing the aroma is to coffee lovers in the morning. If you pay close attention to any coffee ad from Folgers to Maxwell House you will see how there advertisement plays on the aroma of coffee when the consumer wakes up in the morning. Dunkin Donuts decided that interactive advertising would appeal to the consumer’s desired want more if they could actually smell the coffee and it worked. Store visits near these particular bus routes rose 16% and coffee sales rose to a stumping 29% (Marable 2012). Product placement is another effective form of subliminal advertising. Some researchers believe that most subliminal material is so weak that it is not only recognizable by the consumer, but it is not recipient by the stimuli which makes the message ineffective (Tsai, Liang, Liu 2007). This may in fact be very true, but product placement is something that can be recognized by consumers especially big brand items. When Reese’s Candy was placed in ET sales rose 65% in 1982 and the popularity of the Ray Ban Wayfarer sunglasses skyrocketed after Tom Cruise wore them in the smash hit Top Gun (Tsai, Liang, Liu 2007). When consumers went to see these movies they had no idea that they wanted a Reese or a pair of Ray Bans, but they could have had a craving for a chocolate candy bar or needed a new pair of sunglasses. The Reese’s candy bar was placed in the movie because the audience would be able to relate, it looked normal, and it would make the character seem all so surreal. When the consumer visits the concession stand in the middle of the movie they already have the thought of chocolate on their mind, then they remember how normal it is to ask for a Reese’s candy bar. As for Tom Cruise and him wearing Ray Bans it’s obvious that most consumers would think they were cool because Cruise was the epitome of cool. This celebrity endorsement gives the product credibility and a sense of attractiveness (Tsai, Liang, Liu 2007). Throughout the history of advertising subliminal messages have been the preludes of many advertising arguments. This is due to prevarication of information in regards to subliminal
advertising. Professor Benjamin Wolman categorized subliminal stimuli into four criteria of awareness and unawareness, which have been misapplied in majority of research on subliminal advertising. The misuse of these definitions accounts for disinformation of the subject matter present-day (Taylor 2007). Taylor compared his research on the controversy of subliminal advertising to The Judas Priest trial. This trial as about two teenagers who supposedly had these terrible lives and one day they were listening to a song by The Judas Priest while drinking beer and decided to shoot themselves in the head with a shotgun. The Judas Priest had various songs that encouraged suicide but this particular song had adlibs that chanted, “Do it” throughout the record (Taylor 2007). This trial began many researches and continuous studies to see if subliminal messages could affect behavior in such a manner. Many argued that the adlib of the song is what caused the boys to shoot themselves, and other argued that something that you are totally unaware of could not be successfully processed, understood, and then acted out. A doctorate student of the field prepared a study where he had to audio messages one that consisted of subliminal messages about self-improvement and the other on self-esteem. Before the study he switched the title labels on the audiocassettes and his results would later state that each person in the study had an increase emotion of the area of the title instead of that actual message subliminally placed on the cassette. Incontestably it is clear that the research result aimed to prove that subliminal messages only have an influence on prior thoughts and do not cause people to act in an unaware stage. This research was extirpated immediately, Taylor (2007) described it as terrible science. Sure enough there are many forms of subliminal messages that influence a previous thought, which are discussed earlier in this research, but does not mean that subliminal messages don’t have an influence on the subconscious. That is the purpose of the technique in its entirety, subliminally placed messages are supposed to grasp the consumers who have a sense
of connection to the product and from that point on influence a desired behavior of the consumer. Post thoughts and emotions are key in retrospect, but are not necessary to influence the stimuli.

**Conceptual Models**

Before an ad is created or even before the product the ad represents is manufactured, the first question asked is what consumer need is being catered to? Placing subliminal messages in ads helps the consumer identify a desired want through some type of emotion. Every consumer retains every message placed in an ad differently; it may have a common affect on consumers who have common wants or needs, but the way it is processed may be totally different. Therefore, if needs and wants have to be identified on a common ground Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory serves as the perfect model to create an effective ad or product. Typically on a hierarchy chart you go from top to bottom but Maslow Theory proposes that the last three levels are interchangeable depending on consumer prioritization.

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2 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory 1954
When thinking of the last three stages of Maslow’s model think about a fortune cookie. The quotes in fortune cookies are quotes that appeal to the masses, the matter in which the consumer relates the quote to their personal life is going to be different for the most part. This is the same process with subliminal messages; similar to the process of reading the fortune cookie the consumer has no idea what the message is going to say then the message is read and the quote instantly has some relevance to the consumer. In 1988 Albert Ellis begat a theory that suggests that subliminal information is processed and acted upon. Ellis’ theory states that an activating event influences a belief which then brings forth an emotional or a behavior consequence.

This theory represents the true essence of subliminal advertising. The actual ad the consumer sees is the activating event, then the subconscious processes the message and retains a belief about the product, then finally the consumer has a certain feeling about the product which determines if the consumer makes the purchase or not.

**Conclusion**

It's apparent that subliminal advertising exists and that its effective most of the time not matter where it is placed. Subliminal advertising is also an ethical technique it doesn’t invade the privacy of the consumer nor does it deceive the consumer. For the most part the higher the rate of attraction the consumer has for the product the higher the consumer’s response rate will be to

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3 Albert Ellis ABC Theory 1988
the ad. There are several ways to explain how effective subliminal messages are, but the meaning doesn’t change. Society has created their perception and philosophies about subliminal messages and advertising, but the truth remains. Subliminal advertising is simply that act of embedding messages in ads that influence consumers by appealing to their senses or emotions or unconscious assumptions with hopes of desired consumer behavior in return. This is by all means brilliant, but an ethical form of marketing as well. Subliminal messages can have some bad affects if you take The Judas Priest trial in regards, but again people see or hear what they desire in subliminal messages. Although the message can influence behavior the amount of belief has to be determined between the two.
References


