

Subliminal Advertising: Not Mere a Coincidence

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Abstract

According to Newman, generally, advertisements are expected to bring behavioral changes in its target audiences, whether major or minor. Subliminal Advertising is one such form of advertisement which is solely based on manipulation of human brain. Such advertisements contain a hidden message or sign, used to support the key message by influencing human mind unconsciously. Due to its capability of driving the unconscious part of mind, such messages are considered against the public interest, and hence advertisements with such messages are also perceived as deceptive. As these messages are often overlooked by common people and can be recognized only by people with certain instincts, some call it intentionally added and others call it just a coincidentally perceived addition. Thus, paper endeavors to explore the existence of subliminal advertising and contemplate upon the effectiveness and limitations of the same.

Keywords: Subliminal message, subliminal advertising, covert advertisement, unconscious mind, deception

Introduction

Nadezhda says that, the basic objective of an advertisement is to sell or promote a product or any idea by influencing its target audience, and to influence, various means are used like encouraging, persuading and sometimes manipulating too. As a matter of fact, an advertisement cannot be effective if it is not manipulative to some extent. This is how an advertisement pushes the target customer to buy a product or an idea. Like any other form of advertisements, subliminal advertisements also create behavioral changes in the human mind by manipulating them; what makes it different from the other forms of advertisements is that, it supplies the message surreptitiously. One may find the manipulation offensive and deceptive, if it is communicated to its audience without any intimation. Their behavior and decision-making process of buying a product or ideas get affected and they don't even realize it.

According to Newell and Shanks, being subliminal, such advertisements tap the unconscious part of the human brain. Researchers have observed that the role of unconscious brain in the process of decision making is undeniable. An advertisement or "...marketing based on the utilization of unconscious processes can be very effective" (Leonard, 2012). This is the reason that advertisers use this concept of advertising time to time; it is also very less expensive because it is usually a value addition along with the key message, but may prove to be more impactful than the key message itself. But in 1973, Wilson Bryan Key in his book

Subliminal Seduction created a climate of fear with regard to subliminal messages, which led to the abandonment of subliminal advertising in USA because it involved “intentional deception” of the public (Philip, www.psychologistworld.com). But, there have also been some findings which question the existence of subliminal message in advertisements saying that no such thing exists in advertising; although, it is probably in the mind of the person who observes it. However, Amanda Onion of ABC News believes that, even if subliminal messages are used in their best manner they are not persuasive. But in this world of competition, it is hard to abandon something which may prove to be beneficial.

Subliminal Message and Subliminal Advertising

In psychology, subliminal message is said to have a signal below threshold. It is to be mentioned that if the signal of any message is above threshold then only the message is perceived by the listener or observer, but if it is below this level, the listener or observer might not be able to perceive it. In other words, a subliminal message is a signal or communication considered to be passed below the standard limits of perception. The definition of a subliminal message believes in the concept of the division of mind in ‘Conscious’ and ‘Unconscious’ (Philip, www.psychologistworld.com). In an advertisement, a subliminal message usually consists of the name of any product or idea to be promoted. These messages, deliberately or inadvertently, are observed to be incorporated in two ways:

Direct Approach- advertisements of such approach contain the name of the product or idea as a subliminal message and are usually exposed to the audience when they are in the process of observing / perceiving something else. It is like when a group of audience is enjoying a movie in theatre and suddenly a message “Drink Coca-Cola” flashes after certain interval. This was done by James McDonald Vicary in an experiment conducted in 1957 (Snopes.com, 3 May 2011).

Just after the end of the Korean War (25 June 1950 – 27 July 1953), a phase in which ideas like mind control and brainwashing had found a place in the public consciousness, James McDonald Vicary claimed that he arranged for the words ‘drink Coca-Cola’ and ‘eat popcorn’ to be flashed briefly on screen every five seconds during screenings of the film *Picnic*. Though the duration of each flash was too short for anyone to consciously detect, Vicary said that this subliminal exposure boosted Coke sales by 18% and popcorn sales by 58%. (Leonard, 2012)

However, in an article published in Advertising Age magazine, Vicary admitted that he had never carried out the subliminal “experiment” – “it was concocted as a gimmick to draw attention of customers to his failing marketing business” (Jim, 2011). But the admission came too late to wipe out the idea of subliminal advertisement from the advertiser’s psyche. “The concept of subliminal advertising remained a part of our culture, sometimes the source of paranoia, sometimes the subject of comedy – and sometimes the inspiration for serious efforts at persuasion level” (Leonard, 2012). The Impact of such advertisements depended on the way it was incorporated in the show / program.

Auxiliary Approach- Considering the impact of subliminal advertisements, advertisers invented another way to attract or hold the attention of the audience. In this approach, a hidden sign or image is integrated in an advertisement; such advertisements already consist a complete promotional message, but in addition, a sign or an image is included, which are more often found to contain sexual indications. In the global scenario, there are so many examples of such advertisements; one relevant example is again by the Coca-Cola. Few years back in USA, the can vending machine supplied by Coca-Cola had a picture of a giant Coca-Cola can on the door, on the top of which there was a shape made of ice. That shape of ice evidently represented the shape of a nude woman (Figure 1).

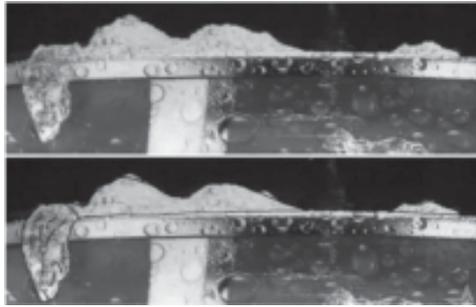


Figure 1.

Source:<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-10-best-subliminal-ads-ever-made/7/>

The shape of a woman was hidden in the core content and was nowhere related to the Coca-Cola brand image and neither was claimed by the company, but it certainly created a talking point and a wide discussion upon its contribution towards the growth of the company. One more example comes from an Indian company Ayur Herbals; in a Print and an Online advertisement of Ayur Herbal Shampoo published in the month of March 2014 in various newspapers and websites, the products were placed in a line beside a girl in such a manner that it created a subliminal sexual indication in the minds of the viewers (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

Source: <http://epaper.divyabhaskar.co.in/thumbnail/magazine/rasrang/211/23032014/mpcg/1/>

Historic and Recent Continuation

Though originated by a hoax, subliminal advertisements succeeded to be a part of the advertising industry. Since 1957 till present, brands like *SFX Magazine* in UK, Swensen's ice cream in USA, Coca-Cola in USA and many others have used this concept for their promotion. Not just the products but also the political parties have used it in the campaigning. In the 2000 election campaign the Republican presidential "...Candidate Bush was trying to make a point about candidate Al Gore's healthcare proposals..." through advertisements (John, 2013). Along with the image of Vice-President Al Gore, the advertisement contained a portion of the slogan "Bureaucrats decide". In this advertisement, the word "RATS" was flashed for a split second, before the complete word "bureaucrats" appeared. Though, Mr. Bush completely denied that the word was planted deliberately as a subliminal message, "Alex Castellanos, who made the ad for the Republican National Committee...admitted that the word 'rats' was a visual drumbeat designed to look at the word bureaucrats" (John, 2013).

This idea of promotion significantly originated in the western region but is being used worldwide now. To cite another instance of the same, in India, in the 14th episode of the show *Koffee with Karan* (Season 4), host Karan Johar says "...let's take a Bru..." instead of "...let's take a break..." (*Koffee with Karan*, 3 March 2014) it seemed like he fumbled, but one cannot deny the fact that it could be an intended effort to promote 'Bru' which is a famous coffee brand in India even when the show is co-sponsored by 'Nescafe', another famous coffee brand. With these examples, it is evident that in advertisements the subliminal messages, if used as direct approach, are used as an unclaimed surreptitious tool to influence the consumer's mind when it is busy perceiving any other message.

Covert Advertisement Vs Subliminal Advertisement

Vasanthi describes Covert advertisement as an advertisement in which a product is promoted by embedding it into any entertainment program or media. In such advertisements the product is actually placed as a part of the setting, and may or may not be shown prominently. An example of this type of advertisement is when any actor uses a particular brand or product in the movie. The objective of covert advertisement is to benefit from the popularity of that particular program/entertainment in which it is being used. Though all product placements in any movie or program are not necessarily covert advertisements, it is when the manufacturer pays the producer of the flick to place their product or brand in it. Sometimes it is the other way around; for example - a director places a product or brand in the film, then before the release, the manufacturer of that product or brand may be asked to pay a certain amount, if the manufacturer denies paying, the name of that brand or product is blurred. There are many products / brands that uses covert advertisements to promote their product e.g. Aston Martin, Audi, BMW, Bournvita, Honda etc.

Covert Advertisement and Subliminal Advertisement, both works as undercover promotional tools, the difference is in the way they are represented. Products

promoted via covert advertisement are substantially a part of the program or show what is clearly visible and experienced by the audience, this makes is unobjectionable; whereas, when a product is promoted via subliminal advertisement, it appears before the audience as an unexpected element and affects the unconscious part of the brain, which makes it offensive.

The objective of this paper is to find out what proportion of the audience perceives subliminal message in an advertisement, and if they do, whether they are influenced by that subliminalism up to that extent that they prefer the product or the brand promoted.

Method

To reach the objectives of the study, a combination of questionnaire and observation were followed. A sample size of 100 respondents from the age group of 25-35 years was taken for the study. This age group was taken considering the fact that India is a country of youngsters and most of the advertisements are viewed by them. The respondents were separately shown five Print and five Electronic subliminal advertisements, which were randomly selected online considering their relevance and aptness regarding the study. The respondents were asked to respond whether they observe or perceive anything subliminal in it. The responses were taken in two stages. In the first stage advertisements having subliminal message with auxiliary approach were shown to the respondents and were asked to identify the subliminal part in the shown advertisements. Many of them were unaware of subliminalism in advertisements, so, after explaining the term, they were asked again to give their responses. In the second, stage the respondents were requested to answer the questions regarding the preference of the products/brands involved in those advertisements. In the case of subliminal advertisements with direct approach, the name of the product / brand itself is mentioned; therefore the respondents were directly asked about its effect on their product preference.

Results

Out of the 100 respondents only 4% were able to find out the subliminal part; but when the term subliminal advertisement was explained to them with an example, as many as 28% respondents was able to observe it. When asked about the impact of such advertisements only 11% (out of 28% who observed it) agreed that it may influence their decision-making while buying the product of same category (Table 1).

Subliminal advertisements with direct approach were easier to be perceived than the auxiliary approach. When respondents (who were aware of the term 'subliminal advertisements') were shown five Print and five Electronic subliminal advertisements with direct approach, out of the 100 respondents, 87% perceived the subliminal part. However, when the respondents who perceived it were asked about its impact on their buying preferences, 23% (out of 87% who observed it) agreed that they may opt for the product/brand promoted (Table 1).

Table 1 : The following table shows the responses of the 100 respondents about Auxiliary Approach and Direct Approach

Approach	Able to find subliminalism (before explaining subliminal advertisement)	Able to find subliminalism (after explaining subliminal advertisement)	Agreed that subliminalism in advertisement may influence in decision making
Auxiliary	4	28	3 (out of 28)
Direct	6	87	20 (out of 87)

The results showed that subliminalism in Print advertisements are easier to find out than to find in electronic subliminal advertisements. Out of the total respondents, believing that it may affect their unconscious mind, 70% found it offensive. 65 percent of the total sample size found it obscene too as most of the advertisements carried sexual indications as subliminal part. The results also showed that subliminal advertisements with direct approach are more impactful than auxiliary approach.

Conclusion

Though results showcased that subliminal advertisement with auxiliary approach has negligible impact on influencing the audience to prefer the product/brand or idea involved in it, but it certainly is capable of creating a buzz among its audience. However, advertisements with direct approach which can be easily perceived proved to be more advantageous for the advertisers. The impact of such advertisements on any of the two, creating buzz or persuading to buy, depends on two aspects how easily it is being perceived and how it is being represented. This paper nowhere intended to encourage the practice of subliminal advertisement, but to know its efficacy. This is to mention that few of the result percentages may vary in real life because when those 100 respondents were exposed to subliminal advertisements they all knew that they are going to encounter some sort of subliminal message which is hidden in advertisements, but when they face it in the process of watching TV or reading newspaper it appears before them unexpectedly with its maximum impact.

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