

Deceptive Subliminal Advertising: A study on Ariel, Cadbury's, King Fisher, and Tata DoCoMo

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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in
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Gopakumar A V

Dean, Humanities, Kristu Jayanti (Autonomous) College, Bangalore, India

Aby Augustine

Kristu Jayanti (Autonomous) College, Bangalore, India

Abstract

The advertising industry, a prominent and powerful industry, engages in deceptive subliminal advertising which most of us are unaware. By bypassing one's unconscious mind using subliminal techniques, advertisers tap into the vulnerabilities surrounding the unconscious mind, manipulating and controlling them in many ways. Through this study, titled "Deceptive Subliminal Strategies in Advertising: A study on the subliminal strategies in advertisements of Ariel, Cadbury's, King Fisher, and Tata DoCoMo." researchers explore the subliminal strategies of Dr. Wilson Bryan Key's -Figure Ground Reversal, Embedding, Double entendre, Low intensity key light and low volume sound, Tachistoscopic displays and Audio masking in print and electronic media advertising of popular brands in India.

Keywords

advertisement, subliminal techniques, unconscious mind

Introduction

Advertisements bombard every minute of our lives, and have penetrated deep into all walks of our societal life. The irony is that, most of us do not realize the mind games the advertisers have been playing on our subconscious minds for the last six decades. Why we are not realizing this is because these advertisements bypass our

unconscious mind using subliminal techniques, and advertisers tap into the vulnerabilities surrounding our unconscious mind, manipulating and controlling us in many ways. Another unfortunate part with this scary truth is that the authorities' helplessness in bringing legislation against these advertisers engaged in subliminal strategies. This kind of advertising with the subliminal messages is there on every major TV advertisement and print advertisement, making us mute spectators who are no longer in control of the situation.

Subliminal stimuli literally means "below threshold", contrary to supraliminal stimuli or "above threshold", are any sensory. [1] Stimuli below an individual's threshold for conscious perception. A recent review of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies shows that subliminal stimuli activate specific regions of the brain despite participants being unaware. [2] Visual stimuli may be quickly flashed before an individual can process them, or flashed and then masked, thereby interrupting the processing. [3]. Audio stimuli may be played below audible volumes or masked by other stimuli. The effectiveness of subliminal messaging has been demonstrated to prime individual responses and stimulate mild emotional activity. Applications, however, often base themselves on the persuasiveness of the message. Importantly, research on action priming has shown that subliminal stimuli can trigger only those actions that one plans to perform anyway: an action can be triggered subliminally only if the person already has the specific intention to perform this specific action. Through this study, researchers explore the subliminal strategies of Dr. Wilson Bryan Key's - Figure Ground Reversal, Embedding, Double entendre, Low intensity key light and low volume sound, tachistoscopic displays and other subliminal techniques in advertisements of Cadbury's, Ariel, Tata DoCoMo and King Fisher.

Experimental confirmation

The first psychologist to coin the term "subliminal advertising" was James Vicary, who tested out his idea in 1957. He declared that over forty-five thousand moviegoers were subjected to images flashed briefly across the screen stating "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola," which caused popcorn sales to increase by an incredible 57%. Although his widely publicized experiment is how many consumers and advertisers today became aware of this phenomenon, Vicary himself later admitted that his results were not influence their decisions. Additionally, while some ads blatantly display hidden sexual images or undertones, many of the claims made that ads feature suggestive elements are grasping for messages that are not there or were not intended by their creators. If subliminal advertising does, however, have the potential to affect buyers' choices, is it an ethical practice for businesses and psychologists to use and develop? Rebecca Clay's article from the American Psychological Association gives examples of psychologists, such as Esther Thorson, who have been "analyzing ads to learn more about the art of persuasion" and make subliminal messaging into a kind of science that they can sell to advertisers. Psychologists, though, should not employ their knowledge of perception and cognition to alter behavior against consumers' conscious wishes.

Realistically, subliminal persuasion is probably not going to stop, but if consumers become more educated on its methods the effects of such advertising will likely diminish.

Analysis of subliminal advertising strategies

Vance Packard has distinguished the consciousness into three levels. Conscious-rational levels, where people know what is going on, and is able to tell why. The second and lower level is called, variously, preconscious and subconscious but involves that area where a person may know in a vague way what is going on within his own feelings, sensations, and attitudes but would not be willing to tell why. This is the level of prejudices, assumptions, fears, and emotional promptings and so on. Finally, the third level is where we not only are not aware of true attitudes and feelings but would not discuss them if they could. Advertisers use subliminal techniques to influence the second and third level of consciousness. They target the consumer's fears and desires, manipulating them in ways never thought possible. On the other hand, advertisers present to the consumer on the conscious level a safe, neutral, naturally appealing ad to pacify the consumer's resistance to subliminal advertising.

According to Dr. Wilson Bryan Key, this defense mechanism operates automatically and invisibly. It is a double edged sword. It prevents perceptual (sensory) overload, suppresses anxiety, erases bad memories, prevents disturbing conscious memory associations, and basically keeps one sane. Although it blocks these events from one's consciousness, it redirects them to one's unconscious mind and these events still influences their behavior. Advertisers take advantage of these defense mechanisms to inject subliminal messages into subconscious mind. By using cultural taboos, their defense mechanisms block sexually explicit images from conscious mind but the unconscious mind still perceives the image. Viewers associate the message with the product and when one see this product on the shelf at a later date; their subconscious mind would follow the purchasing command and consequently influencing conscious mind to buy the product. In the case of repression, the subliminal command hides away in unconscious memory until an event, like the sight of the product on the shelf, triggers it. Graphic design artists have a wealth of tools at their hands to expertly embed subliminal messages into their pictures. The researchers are trying to decode the subliminal messages in the above mentioned ad campaigns, and are using subliminal strategies put forwarded by Dr. Key, namely: figure ground reversals, embedding, double entendre, tachistoscopic displays, and audio masking.

Figure ground reversal in King Fisher ad campaign “Lust for Kingfisher Lager”

To protect the brain from sensory overload, our perceptual defense mechanism distinguishes every perception into figure (foreground, subject) and ground (background, environment). Viewers consciously notice the figure, while the

ground floats around it unless something there brings it to the foreground. Perceptual psychologist Dr. E. Rubin created his famous Rubin's Profiles that can be found in almost every psychology text book today. His profiles, the faces and vases, old women and young women, duck and rabbit, are syncretistic (two sided) illusions. Noticing one set of features, viewer see one thing, while noticing another set of features, the same viewer sees something else. Advertisers take advantage of this to paint subliminal messages into the picture's background. They are usually cultural taboos, making it even harder for the audience to perceive it. In this ad campaign, "Lust for Kingfisher Lager" "one can see thighs and breast of women in background and in the foreground two partial images of a beer bottles, making it a convincing example of Figure Ground Reversal for embedding subliminal message.

Embedding in Ariel "No stains No Stories ad campaign"

Embedding is the processing of hiding one image in the form of another. This is a difficult process but if successful, very influential. Key writes, "Embeds enhance perceptual experience of the picture... Emotionalized, repressed information remains in the memory system for long periods, perhaps for a lifetime. Graphic artists have gotten a lot of expertise at embedding objects in these pictures. Using this similar technique, the advertisers have embedded "sexual acts' in the lip smear in Ariel's "No stains No Stories" print ad Campaign. The advertiser tries to associate a sexual connection with stains, and is logically irrelevant in a detergent advertisement. This multitude of illogical sexual images intentionally embedded in the lip impression targets the subconscious mind of the potential customer.

Double entendre in TATA DoCoMo

Many images, phrases, and slogans have hidden double meanings behind them. This is called double entendre. Symbolism can also go into this category. Often, their hidden meanings have sexual connotations. For example Tata DoCoMo's "Do the New," when taken out of context, have sexual implications. Key writes: Double meanings appear to enrich significance in virtually any symbolic stimuli. Unconsciously perceived information of this taboo nature ensures a deep, meaningful emotional response, and continued memory. Furthermore, Brand name "Docomo" is conveniently spelt out as "DoCoMo" to single out "Do" to trigger the subconscious mind of the viewer.

Tachistoscopic displays in Cadbury's "Perk ad campaign" (1994)

Tachistoscopic display and lighting and background sound, are used in film and video advertisers. This approach displays flash images onto the screen in fractions of a second not perceivable by the conscious mind. In this Ad campaign, "Perk Ad Campaign" (1994), there are flashy messages of less than a second with sexual connotations to target subconscious mind. The advertisement plainly portray a hunger strike of college students, and gives one an idea that in such hunger strikes "Perk" chocolate bar comes handy as an energy supplement. Along with this humor

element, it flashes some subliminal images where a girl displaying a placard with a text “Hunger Strike” between her legs, and targeting a boy with another placard with a text “Bhook Hartal Dekho Hamara Hal” (means understand our situation during a “Hunger Strike”). Statements have no logical connections in the advertisement, but sexually connote the plight of men when women restrict themselves from sexual activities, and the need to woo women with a bar chocolate to satisfy their sexual needs.

Audio masking in Cadbury's Chocolate advertisement (2014)

Audio Masking is another subliminal strategy, and it involves hiding the target auditory stimulus in some way. Auditory subliminal stimuli are shown to have some effect on the participant, [6] but not a large one. In the “Cadbury's Chocolate” ad campaign, advertisers juxtaposes 'intercourse sounds' with 'jovial sounds', and make it consciously ecstatic for the viewers. Here, the advertisers intentionally underplay “sexual sounds” by masking with other jovial tones, and redirects the sexual tone subdued by other tones to the subconscious mind to trigger their buying desires.

Conclusion

There are many factors of communicational strategies that influence consumer perception; for that reason one of them is through subliminal advertising, the one that makes that imagination to be more and more reproductive and heterogeneous, providing the consumer a great variety of opportunities. Moreover, subliminal are inherently deceptive because the consumer does not perceive them at a normal level of awareness, and thus is given no choice whether to accept or reject the message, as is the case with normal advertising, and cannot be curbed by legislation. Advertisers take advantage of the vulnerabilities in our subconscious minds, using the latest computer technology, and they have unparalleled resources to manipulate each image to target a specific weakness in us. Researchers found prevalent usage of subliminal advertising strategies in Indian advertising scenario, when they analyzed the popular print and electronic media ad campaigns of the popular brands created by the well-known advertisers. These Advertisers would of course deny any such activity and claim that if you stare into anything long enough, you will find it. But the most substantial evidence is that they spending billions annually on research and subliminal advertising. Therefore, the way out here is that advertisers should ethically accountable to the consumer, and from the consumer side, they should not buy a product because its packaging looks good or because it has a name brand.

Notes

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Images

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[http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/kingfisher-lager-tits- 5247255/](http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/kingfisher-lager-tits-5247255/)

<http://adoholik.com/2008/03/25/ariel-lipstick/>

Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0gBVYU20cQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyNQr8k622c>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL0Dvd0Cifg>