

An essay on subliminal advertising



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Introduction

Ever since James Vicary pioneered the notion of subliminal advertising in 1957, subliminal advertising has been a controversial topic. Vicary claimed that showing short (0.03 seconds) subliminal advertisements of “drink Coca Cola” and “eat popcorn” during a movie in a cinema substantially increased sales of these products. This exposure time was not enough to be registered by the conscious mind but supposedly it influenced our unconscious mind and the subsequent decisions we make. It turned out that Vicary’s study was never published and the whole thing was a publicity hoax (Pratkanis, 1992; Karremans *et al.*, 2006; Rogers, 1992). However, the notion of subliminal advertising remained. Nowadays the subliminal industry is a huge business. Americans spend \$50 million per year on self-help audiotapes that contain subliminal messages which supposedly help with issues such as weight loss or smoking cessation (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). This paper investigates what is known about subliminal stimulation and what effects it has on subsequent behaviors.

Theoretical framework

According to Arrington (1982: 3), “advertisers often have been accused of using techniques which manipulate and control the behavior of consumers and hence violate their autonomy”. One of those techniques is said to be subliminal advertising. Some marketers believe that subliminal advertising adds a new dimension to traditional advertising (Trappey, 1996: 517). The major issue of subliminal advertising is whether subliminal messages are effective so that people act upon them. Proponents of subliminal advertising believe that subliminal advertising can influence behavior and unconsciously build brand awareness, which after all are key indicators of advertising effectiveness (Macdonald & Sharp, 2003).

Subliminal advertising is “a technique of exposing consumers to product pictures, brand names, or other marketing stimuli without the consumers having conscious awareness” (Trappey, 1996: 517). The rationale behind subliminal advertising is that once a person is unconsciously exposed to this message, the person “is believed to decode the information and act upon it without being able to acknowledge a communication source” (Trappey, 1996: 517). The literature on ‘perception without awareness’ indicates that it is possible that stimuli are perceived even when observers are unaware of the stimuli (Merikle *et al.*, 2001). In other words “stimulus information can be perceived even when there is no awareness of perceiving” (Merikle *et al.*, 2001: 131).

Thus subliminal stimulation is basically the “claim that the presentation of certain stimuli below the level of conscious awareness can influence people’s behavior in a significant way” (McConnell *et al.*, 1958: 229). Literally, subliminal means “below threshold” (Moore, 1982:39). But one debate of subliminal stimulation is where the threshold is. This threshold is different for different people. A subliminal message is such a short one that it goes unnoticed. But what if the message is shown slightly longer, so that it is almost picked up by the conscious mind? McConnell *et al.* (1958: 235) states that “we can state with some assurance that, the closer to the threshold of awareness the stimuli are, the more effect they are likely to have”. However, they continue, “the main difficulty seems to be that thresholds vary so much from subject to subject, and from day to day, that what is subliminal but effective for one person is likely to be subliminal but ineffective for a second, and supraliminal for a third”.

Proponents of subliminal advertising

A study by Karremans *et al.* (2006) is basically a modified version of Vicary's study. They exposed participants in their experiment to subliminal advertising of a branded soda drink (e.g. Coca Cola) and assessed whether this had any effect on brand choice and if it had any effect on a person's feeling of thirst. They concluded that subliminal advertising of a brand increases brand choice and intention to drink that brand, but only for people who were thirsty. So showing subliminal messages that encourage people to drink Coca Cola does not work with people who are not thirsty. For people who are thirsty, it increases the probability that the brand choice will be Coca Cola. Similar results in a different context are obtained by Strahan *et al.* (2002) and Bermeitinger *et al.* (2009). The latter concluded that "the findings confirm that subjects are influenced by subliminally presented stimuli if these stimuli are need-related and if subject are in the matching motivational state".

Another related study is the one by Cooper & Cooper (2002). They showed respondents a TV program with subliminal messages related to thirst. Their results show that people became thirstier after seeing the TV program with subliminal messages, as compared with their pre-exposure ratings and with a control group who watched the TV program without the subliminal messages.

Opponents of subliminal advertising

A majority of academic articles opposes the effectiveness of subliminal advertising. Scientific research (e.g. Greenwald *et al.*, 1991; Moore, 1988; Merikle & Skanes, 1992; Vokey & Read, 1985; Trappey, 1996; Rosen & Singh, 1992; Calvin & Dollenmayer, 1959; DeFleur & Petranoff, 1959) fails to prove that these subliminal messages indeed affect our behavior. For example, Champion & Turner (1959) performed an experiment in which they showed participants a film in which they subliminally flashed a slide of a bowl of rice labeled "wonder rice". After the film, these participants didn't identify the brand name better than the control group.

Trappey (1996) concluded from a meta-analysis of 23 articles on the effectiveness of subliminal advertising that subliminal advertising does not significantly affect behavior. Another example is the study by Saegert (1987), who concludes that subliminal advertising is ineffective as a marketing tool. Moore (1982) explains this by arguing that subliminal stimuli are too weak to be noticed by most people and hence have little effect on behavior.

In a later article, Moore (1988: 311) explains the biggest problem of studies which state that subliminal advertising is effective: "the most pervasive problem with research attempting to demonstrate subliminal effects is that insufficient care has been taken to ensure that the experimental stimuli are appropriately 'subliminal' [...] Consequently, stimuli that are assumed to be subliminal may be either partially available to consciousness at least some of the time, or they may be so far below an objective threshold of awareness that they are operatively nonexistent".

Public awareness and perception

Results by Zanot *et al.* (1983) show that many people are familiar with the notion of subliminal advertising. In their study, 81% of respondents were aware of what subliminal advertising is. In a similar study of public opinion, Rogers & Smith (1993) obtained more or less the same results (74%

public awareness of subliminal advertising), leading them to conclude that “subliminal advertising has become a recognizable part of the culture, despite the lack of scientific evidence that it is practical or even possible”. Furthermore Rogers & Smith (1993) found that 61,5% of respondents believe that advertisers place subliminal messages in their advertisements. But at the same time most people perceive subliminal advertising to be unacceptable, unethical and harmful in the context of advertising (Zanot *et al.*, 1983). The study by Zanot *et al.* (1983) also suggests that if people knew that specific advertisers use subliminal advertising this would affect their buying behavior.

The current state of subliminal advertising

Many scholars have researched the effects of subliminal advertising. The results are mixed, but a majority of articles reports that subliminal advertising does not affect behavior. Moreover, people oppose to the feeling of being manipulated without being aware of it. This resulted in subliminal advertising being legally banned in countries like the United States, the UK and Australia (Karremans *et al.*, 2006: 792). However, George W. Bush used a subliminal message in a promotional video for his 2000 presidential campaign, when he flashed the word ‘rats’ when talking about opponent Al Gore. Thus the notion of subliminal messaging is still used nowadays to secretly influence human decision making. Even when most evidence shows it doesn’t have an influence.

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