

A diagnostic study on Subliminal Communication in advertising as a Definitive Tool to Create or Intensify Purchase Intention

Dr. B. V. Jayanthi,

Associate Professor,
Marketing Management,
Institute for Technology & Management,
Kharghar, Navi Mumbai, India.

Dr. Rajani Chandrashekar,

Associate Professor,
Amity Global Business School,
Panjagutta, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

ABSTRACT

In a world cluttered with a plethora of brands and advertising messages it becomes imperative for the marketers to understand the psyche of the consumers to effectively advertise. It has always been a dire necessity for the marketers to check upon the wastages in ad spends. Advertising expenditure in India is projected to increase by 13% to be pegged at Rs.69,346 crores in the year 2018 over 2017 by WPP-owned media agency GroupM which published its report titled 'This Year Next year'. The study was conducted to identify the kinds of advertisements which capture the attention of today's vibrant consumers and throw light upon the effectiveness of subliminal communication in the advertisements targeting at different age groups and occupations. The study brought out a few surprising revelations about the evergreen effectiveness of the ad messages and their impact on the consumers' mind-sets. The study was conducted from December 2017 to March 2018 involving respondents of age groups 10 to above 55. It also tried to establish relationship between who the respondents were and what their ideas were about the persuasive intent of the subliminal messages for which students, working people, business class and the retired audiences were interacted with.

Keywords: Subliminal communication, stimulus. Out of Home advertising, subliminal persuasion, purchase intention.

INTRODUCTION:

Subliminal messages...are they new to the world of advertising?

Subliminal advertising message is a stimulus presented in subconscious level of the viewer to create an impact without his knowledge. Such messages are interpreted unconsciously in the thought process leading to purchase intention. In the 19th century, scientists started to conduct many experiments using visual and auditory stimuli but they presented differing views. There were many post war trends thriftiness and a shift in the consumption patterns seen among the American citizens after the II world war. The marketers tried many sophisticated tools called Motivational Research.

Subliminal messages started to be tested on the consumers since 1950's when James Vicary tried it for the first time in his movie theatre to advertise popcorn and soda pop. Vicary was a determined, self-made man who discovered an innovative method to motivate the subjects to consume pop corn and soda, potentially without their knowledge. Vicary had installed tachistoscope, a device that displayed an image for a stipulated period of time, in a movie hall in New Jersey. The device was programmed to display two promotional messages during the movie; 'eat popcorn' and 'drink Coca-Cola'. Though the messages were shown for 1/3000th of a second each every 5 seconds, at the end of a six week period, Coca-Cola sales and popcorn sales were up by 18.1% and 57.5% respectively. Vicary considered the results to be unbelievable which caused inexplicable anxiety among the consumers about the marketer's deliberate attempts to influence their consumption patterns subliminally.

The Federal Communications Commission had to intervene as there were many complaints from the public on the subliminal messages through promotional activities, the method which was not in regulation with broadcasting license.

Some researchers tried to throw light upon whether such an experiment ever happened to understand the depth of subliminal messages by Vicary. Stuart Rogers⁽¹⁾ was one such researcher, who in 1993, recalled conducting an extensive study for a term paper on subliminal or subconscious messages. He remembered to have searched the US Patent Office for a solid proof that such a study on subliminal messages was conducted by Vicary but was not successful. This made Stuart conclude that Vicary's so-called movie theatre experiment was just a hoax.

Need for the Study:

A Subliminal Message is a flash of consciously designed input targeting responses below the normal threshold of perception. These messages are reflected in a way the buyers are not consciously aware of them and thereby the ability to select or critically evaluate the product/service is eliminated. When stimulated these responses rise from the unconscious to influence the buyers' conscious buying decision. It is potentially powerful and akin to auto suggestion or hypnosis of the more vulnerable part of the human psyche.

The primary aim of advertising is to encourage and drive consumers to select the product service or brand over an alternative. Choice involves a free will and consciously deliberate decision-making.

There are three ways in which messages are embedded in ads

1. A visual stimulus is presented briefly as in the case of Vicary's experiment
2. Accelerated, high-frequency or low-volume speech embedded in auditory clutter.
3. Images or words are embedded in the pictorial framework.

Two schools of thought pervade the subliminal arena. One school opines that this deliberate attempt of the marketers is restricted to the perception of the peripherals only while the other insists that this unconscious cognition is largely extensive and comprehensive.

This dichotomy assumes an intense overlapping of the conscious and the unconscious. Freud's psychoanalytical theory of personality provides the foundation for the development of Motivational Research. This theory assumes that unconscious needs or drives are at the root of all human motivation and activities. Further, it reflects the Jungian concept of the presence of a racial unconscious archetype in all individuals which is the target area of the advertisers.

This leads us to study about the effectiveness of the subliminal messages in advertisements which targets the unconscious drives of the consumers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

When did subliminal communication and subliminal persuasion begin to capture research attention

Vance Packard⁽²⁾ published his work 'The Hidden Persuaders' in 1957 cited episodes from the New Jersey movie theatre experiments which he called as 'Subthreshold effects'. In his work, Packard warned of psychologists-turned-marketers which resulted in psychosubduction among the American consuming public. Hidden persuaders was the first deliberate attempt to make the public aware about the marketing tactics to enslave the mind without the consumer's knowledge

Zanot, Pincus, and Lamp⁽³⁾ conducted a survey in 1983 where they made 209 telephone calls with random respondents chosen from Washington DC phone book and enquired about their knowledge about 'subliminal advertising'. Out of them 170 respondents said that they knew about subliminal advertising and 101 of them claimed that they could even define the term without external help. 90 of the total respondents expressed concern that the technique always was in use. With this Zanot et al could firmly conclude that the concept of subliminal advertising was frequently used and was quite successful in selling many products.

Gay Talese⁽⁴⁾ discussed about subliminal advertising in New York Times as a painless, odourless, noiseless but sneaky way of capturing audience's responsiveness. Wilson Bryan Key⁽⁵⁾ paid special attention to the fact that the general public has been lured by below the threshold of consciousness perceptions since time immemorial. Special convergence in focus in advertising and merchandising is perhaps of a more recent origin.

Aldous Huxley⁽⁶⁾ in his 'Preface to A Brave New World Revisited' projects a rather grim portrait of the society which he predicted would be controlled by an impersonal force and could manipulate the public enforcing various strategies. One such strategy could be the use of subliminal projection machines transmitting subliminal messages in public places through whispering and other subtle modes. Danzig⁽⁷⁾, later observed that Vicary, who originally introduced the word 'Subliminal' to suggest transmission of perceptions covertly without ostensibly appearing to do so deeply regretted having used a word like subliminal. But the fact cannot be denied that he

not only offered a convenient label but has also paved the path to penetrate into the depths of the human psyche and establish an intense concept for visualising and justifying diverse, multifarious purchase decisions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The study titled ‘A diagnostic study on Subliminal Communication in advertising as a Definitive Tool to Create or Intensify Purchase Intention’ seeks to establish the powerful impact exerted by subliminal communication in consumer purchase decisions

- To examine if the psychological and the perceptive powers help the consumers understand the subliminal messages in the advertisements
- To understand the deliberate initiatives of the marketers to persuade the consumers by appealing to their subconscious response
- To identify the most attractive consumer segment to appeal to, through subliminal messages and the most lucrative advertising media to do so

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research design: Descriptive

Samples: Simple random sampling

No of samples: 102

Respondent profile: on the basis of gender, age and occupation

Data collection: 1. Primary data – through questionnaires, interview and mall intercepts
2. Secondary data – published literature (books, journals, internet pages)

Data collection tool: A structured question with close ended questions

Data analysis tools: Cross tabulation, One-Way ANOVA and Curve fit

DATA ANALYSIS:

Table 1: Relationship between gender and Watching / reading ads on different media

	Do you read/watch Newspapers, Magazines, TV, internet?				Total
	Everyday	Often	sometimes	Not regularly	
Female	15	17	9	3	44
Male	27	22	7	2	58
Total	42	39	16	5	102

Inference: 84% of the males and 72% of the females expressed that they watch advertisements on TV, print media and internet quite often. Out of these sample some said they watched them everyday too.

H0: There is no significant relationship between gender and watching advertisements

H1: There is significant relationship between gender and watching advertisements

Table 2: Relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Different types of Advertisements

The level of observation about TV ads:

Occupation	What is your level of observation about Television ads				Total
	Very high	Reasonably high	Only when it is interesting	Quite low	
Students	15	21	7	2	45
Working class	8	29	8	3	48
Work from home	1	1	0	0	2
Business class	0	1	3	0	4
Retired	0	0	1	1	2
Total	24	52	19	6	101

H0: There is no significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of TV ads

H1: There is significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of TV ads

The level of observation about Newspapers / magazine ads:

Occupation	What is your level of observation about Newspapers/ magazine ads					Total
	Very high	Reasonably high	Only when it is interesting	Quite low	Nil	
Students	1	29	12	3	0	45
Working class	3	28	12	4	1	48
Work from home	0	1	0	1	0	2
Business class	0	2	1	1	0	4
Retired	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total	4	61	26	9	1	101

H0: There is no significant relationship between occupation and the level of Observation of Newspaper / magazine ads

H1: There is significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Newspaper / magazine ads

The level of observation about Digital ads:

Occupation	What is your level of observation about Digital ads					Total
	Very high	Reasonably high	Only when it is interesting	Quite low	Nil	
Students	12	16	11	5	1	45
Working class	5	11	19	13	0	48
Work from home	0	0	0	1	0	1
Business class	1	2	0	2	0	5
Retired	0	0	0	1	1	2
Total	18	29	30	22	2	101

H0: There is no significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Digital ads

H1: There is significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Digital ads

The level of observation about Out of Home ads:

Occupation	What is your level of observation about Out of Home ads					Total
	Very high	Reasonably high	Only when it is interesting	Quite low	Nil	
Students	5	12	16	10	2	45
Working class	3	10	13	20	2	48
Work from home	0	0	1	1	0	2
Business class	0	0	0	4	0	4
Retired	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	8	22	30	37	4	101

H0: There is no significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Out of Home ads

H1: There is significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Out of Home ads

The level of observation about Word of Mouth:

Occupation	What is your level of observation of brand information through Word of Mouth					Total
	Very high	Reasonably high	Only when it is interesting	Quite low	Nil	
Students	9	8	11	14	3	45
Working class	6	8	10	19	5	48
Work from home	0	1	1	0	0	2
Business class	1	1	2	1	0	5
Retired	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	16	18	24	36	8	102

H0: There is no significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation of Word of Mouth

H1: There is significant relationship between occupation and the level of observation Of Word of Mouth

Inference:

Tables 2.1 to 2.5 express the views of the samples on their level of observation of advertisements in different media. The respondents were considered on the basis of their occupation for a better clarity. When around 80% of the students watch TV ads, business class and the retired respondents do not pay much attention to them at all. When 66% and 64% of students and the working class watch print ads, it is again nil from the retired class. Digital advertising attracts the attention of 40% of the students while it is still nil in the case of the retired class. 37% of the students said they observe Out of Home (OOH) advertisements and another 35% said they would observe them when they are quite interesting to grab their alertness. The working class also was quite positive about OOH ads with 27% saying that they would watch if the ads were quite appealing and remarkable. Word of Mouth, a very cost-effective tool, proved futile with this response group as 50% of the working class expressed a firm 'NO' to this way of popularizing a brand's features and 37% of the student class also holding the same view

Table 3: Relationship between age and the belief that advertisements create impact through subliminal messages

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.111	4	1.528	2.098	.087
Within Groups	70.644	97	.728		
Total	76.755	101			

H0: There is no significant relationship between age and the belief that advertisements Create impact through subliminal messages

H1: There is significant relationship between age and the belief that advertisements create impact through subliminal messages

Inference: TV- 2.47, CV – 2.098

H0 is accepted according to the results yielded. There is no relationship between the age of the consumers and their belief that advertisements can impact them through their subliminal messages. 30 respondents of the age group 15 to 25 have expressed that they are absolutely influenced by the subconscious messages sent through advertisements. 25 out of 29 respondents belonging to the age group 26 to 40 have also felt the influence of such ads. 12 out of 18 respondents of 41 to 55 age group also have felt the same

Table 4: Relationship between age and the sense of subliminal advertisement influence

Do you consciously feel influenced by ads while making a purchase?					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	32.689	4	8.172	8.722	.000
Within Groups	90.889	97	.937		
Total	123.578	101			

H0: There is no significant relationship between the age and the sense of subliminal advertisement influence

H1: There is significant relationship between the age and the sense of subliminal advertisement influence

Inference: TV – 2.47, CV – 8.722

According to the results yielded, H1 is accepted. There is a significant relationship between the age of the respondents and their feel of the subliminal advertising influence.

Table 5: Relationship between age and the feeling of deception sensed due to subliminal advertising during the purchase

		Age	Have you ever felt deceived by the subliminal advertising effects the brand had upon you
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	.284**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	102	102
Have you ever felt deceived by the unconscious advertising effects the brand had upon you	Pearson Correlation	.284**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	102	102

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

H0: There is no significant relationship between the age and the feeling of deception Sensed due to subliminal advertising during the purchase

H1: There is significant relationship between the age and the feeling of deception sensed due to subliminal advertising during the purchase

Inference:

While 25% of the 15 -25 and 24% of 26 – 40 age groups have expressed that they felt deceived while purchasing because of the subliminal advertising effects. 0.284 shows low level of correlation between age and the feeling of deception through the subliminal advertising effects while purchasing

Table 6: Curve fit between age and the possibility to have felt better if a positive atmosphere had been created through subliminal advertising before the purchase

Equation	Model Summary					Parameter Estimates	
	R Square	F	df1	df2	Sig.	Constant	b1
Linear	.123	13.994	1	100	.000	2.196	.245

H0: There is no significant relationship between age and the possibility of feeling better in the presence of a positive atmosphere through subliminal advertising before the actual purchase

H1: There is significant relationship between age and the possibility of feeling better in the presence of a positive atmosphere through subliminal advertising before the actual purchase

Inference:

12.3% displays low strength between age and the possibility of feeling better in the presence of a positive atmosphere through subliminal advertising before the actual purchase

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

At the outset, the research turned out to be a surprise as the respondents were quite eager to know if there were subliminal messages still coming from the marketers. Many of them had a desire to check the result of the study so that they could be appraised about the current status of the consumers and the magnitude to which they were subjected to such marketing initiatives where they had hidden message leading to purchase intentions.

1.84% of the males and 72% of the females expressed that they watch advertisements on TV, print media and internet every day or often, as the case may be. According to them it need not be per se the advertisements which are very lucrative which make them watch. Many said that in between an interesting programme or a debate on a few channels, a few ads are being telecast which could not be ignored. That increases the instances of ad watching and not the yearning to acquire brand information. In many cases, the acquisition of brand information is just a by-product

2.80% of the student respondents said watching TV advertisements was very normal and everyday affair whereas the business class and the retired respondents said they were not much into TV ads because of various reasons. One solid reason for this according to these categories of respondents, was that the business class was more into reading about business updates than watching business programmes on TV which made them the second best observers of print ads only next to the students. The retired class, during their interaction with the researcher, said its foremost interest was political and spiritual news for which there are specific channels where ads are minimal

3. Students again were standing the tallest in observing the digital form of advertising with 40% of them voting for this format while it is still nil in the case of the retired class. The retired respondents said the technology used to acquire the digital form of information did not make them feel comfortable. Though many of them had a smart phone which also involved technology to some extent, retrieving news through apps and getting onto the internet on phone to know about things was something which these respondents could not do with ease. Students, the tech-savvy lot expressed a good comfort level in appraising themselves about the brand information on internet-enabled devices
4. When it came to Out of Home (OOH) advertising, 37% of the student category said they observed them regularly. Another 35% of the students expressed that they were attracted to the OOH ads only when they were too good to ignore. 27% of the working class was quite positive about paying attention to such outdoor ads when they were appealing and remarkable
5. Word of Mouth, a very primitive and cost-effective tool, proved futile with the working class as 50% of them expressed a firm 'NO' to this way of popularizing a brand's features and 37% of the student class also holding the same view
6. When it came to the belief of the consumers about the impact of the subliminal messages, not much difference could be established between the different age groups. 30 out of 51 respondents in the 15 to 25 age group, 25 out of 29 respondents of 26 to 40 age group and 12 out of 18 respondents of 41 to 55 age group felt they believed that advertisements can impact them through their subliminal messages. In the interaction in which the researcher had the opportunity to capture the actual ideas of the respondents, it came to light that many of them had a perfect knowledge about the hidden messages sent through the ads by the marketers.
7. While 15 out of 51 respondents of 15-25 age group and 6 out of 29 respondents from 26-40 age group felt that the subliminal messages did influence them while watching or reading advertisements, no respondents belonging to the categories 41-55 and above 55 said they were ever influenced by such hidden persuading messages. This leads us to the conclusion that there is an established relationship between age and the impact created by the subliminal messages through advertisements.
8. When it comes to the question of relationship between age and the feeling of deception because of hidden persuasion through subliminal messages, 1/4th of the 15-25 and 26-40 age groups have expressed that they had been deceived by the subliminal persuasion through the marketing initiatives

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION:

The findings out the study based on the impact of subliminal communication and messages through various advertisement media and strategies have a lot of takeaways for the marketers in terms of the understanding levels of the consumers and their perception about deceiving ad messages. Though the concept originated in the late 1950's, it is still successfully followed by many marketers to grab the audience attention. Though the digital mode of advertising is preferred for its cost-effective property, the study reveals that the significance of the other modes of popularizing brands could not be discounted. The marketers could understand the OOH format of advertising catches the attention of the passers-by if the contents happen to be really striking and notable. The word-of-mouth way of advertising the brands could be successfully implemented with significant messages among the elderly audiences. Of all the categories of respondents, students were found to be the most observant and interested in the hidden ad messages and the way they worked on their mind-sets.

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