

Chapter 5

Subliminal Advertising and its Ethical Dimensions in the Social Media Age

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the research on subliminal advertising. Advertising industry experts always look for methods through which to develop effective advertising strategies and to persuade consumers' choices. This chapter shows that in comparison to the research conducted before the 1990s, and with the recent help of new techniques, there has been a growing body of subliminal influence research that has demonstrated that subliminal priming has an influence on a consumer's choices and behaviors. In this chapter whether subliminal advertising can play a critical role in attracting the customer to the product or service is examined. Whether our decisions can be affected by subliminal messages is also investigated. In addition, one of the purposes of this chapter is to explore whether subliminal messaging might raise ethical issues, and whether these issues can lead to moral corruption in society. What is missing is the lack of research on the ethical dimension of subliminal advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Flashing pictures on my screen; shown too quickly to be seen; does not register in my conscious mind; propaganda of another kind; watching TV I start to cry; for no reason I don't know why; could it be from messages on my TV; which I'm getting subliminally? (Subliminal by Muir, 1993)

Do we generally judge a book by its cover? Initially, the thoughts that arise surrounding the word “advertising” include commercials on TV or the radio, newspaper and magazine ads, billboards, or anything visual in the media, but what if invisible advertising manipulates the mind? Subliminal advertising has

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been a controversial topic since the 1950s. Despite 50 years of controversy regarding the morality and effectiveness of subliminal advertising, it is continually being used in the advertising industry. The results of a meta-analysis by Trappey (1996) showed that subliminal messages have a very small effect; however, this exploration of 33 studies yielded a significant effect of subliminal brand presentation on choice. Veltkamp, Custers and Aarts (2011) found that consumers can be motivated by subliminal conditioning if they were deprived, although in previous research, it was thought that motivation for need-related behaviors might depend on deprivation. Recently, it has been scientifically demonstrated that subliminal messages are secretly attractive to the subconscious mind, especially since words, sounds, and images can be perceived by the human brain without any awareness. Chartrand and Fitzsimons (2011) referred to a number of studies that have shown that consumption behaviors are powerfully affected by factors without people's conscious awareness.

There are some advertising tools where the consequences of which are truly unknown or obviously unethical. Psychoactive advertising, the exploitation of women, subliminal perception, advertising to children, and obtrusive advertising are being used by advertisers to attract people to increase the sales of their products. It is unethical to carelessly or ruthlessly produce such advertisements (Hyman & Tansey, 1990). Advertisers affirm that their products are the best to buy in comparison to other brands. As long as they are honest with consumers, there is no ethical violation. If the communication's aim is to covertly change people's behavior, to get another person to do something against his or her will, or to try to get him/her to do something unfair, then all subliminal communication would constitute insidious and unethical manipulation (Gratz, 1984).

SUBLIMINAL STIMULI AND SUBLIMINAL PERCEPTION

Occasionally, subliminal perception is referred to as "unconscious perception" (Merikle & Reingold, 1992), "perception without awareness" (Bornstein, 1992), or "knowing without knowing" (Masling, 1992), and the research on subliminal perception has a controversial background within academic psychology (Dixon, 1971, 1981; Erdelyi, 1985, 1996, 2004; Eriksen, 1960; Holender, 1986; Merikle, 1992). However, at the present time, it is widely accepted within modern psychology that there exist unconscious mental processes (Kihlstrom, 1987; Greenwald, 1992). The findings suggest that we can be influenced by stimuli without awareness in many different ways, and we are influenced by these elements to an extent that we cannot ignore (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Erdelyi, 1985, 1996; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999; Westen, 1999; as cited in Boag, 2008, p. 118).

"Subliminal perception suggests that people's thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by stimuli that are perceived without any awareness of perceiving" (Merikle, 2000, as cited in Weber, 2010, p. 15). While subliminal stimuli enter our brain unconsciously, supraliminal stimuli enter our brain consciously. For example, viewers are able to consciously see all the details of a visual scene that are completely shown to them, but when a small part of the visual scene is changed, viewers do process the change consciously or unconsciously, depending on where the viewer's attention is focused (Dehaene, Changeux, Naccache, Sackur & Sergent, 2006, as cited in Weber, 2010, p. 15). When people are not aware of the process – or, in other words, when stimuli enter our brain unconsciously – it does not mean that the stimulus is not processed at all (Weber, 2010).

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