

# Psychology of Brand Creation and Management: Subliminal Advertising

Malika Singh, Ruchika Nayyar

**Abstract:** *Subliminal messages are concealed messages that are made to follow up on your intuitive personality. They are an endeavour to influence you to think or need something without you notwithstanding acknowledging it. These shrouded messages can be transmitted by pictures blazing amazingly quick on a screen, in pictures inside pictures, in topics, or even in mottos. This paper discusses the effect of the subliminal messages on the sales of companies and the expanded utilization of this device by the advertisers to build their brand and further manage it. Controversial issue comes up when use of subliminal messages in advertising comes into play. While some advertisers and consumers agree that if subliminal messages are real, they show no effect on consumers; others believe that these messages directly affect sales of certain items being advertised. Research in this area is necessary to find out if subliminal messages are real and ethical to be used in advertising today. The methodology undertaken for this research is secondary and the research design is exploratory.*

**Keywords:** Subliminal Advertising, Marketing, Brand Management

## 1. Introduction

In the vast and diverse environment for marketing of products and services, it's become very challenging to create a brand and thereafter, to manage and safeguard the value of the brand over a prolonged period of time.

In today's world, when markets are saturated and it is increasingly difficult to tell one product or service from another based on quality and inherent features alone, branding is the most effective tool companies can use as they seek to fight off intense competition from their rivals. Branding is a complex process involving the creation of a unique brand image which is perceived as an integrated whole, and which attracts consumers' attention, prompting them to purchase a particular product or service.

Creating a brand is vital because it commands loyalty and it's easier to increase sales as the product's attributes and quality are known to the buyer. In short, a successful brand is one which has a good recall value in the minds of potential customers.

Typically, brands have been developed by marketers by indulging in various promotional techniques such as advertisements, sponsoring of cultural / social event, etc.

Advertisements are the most widely employed techniques for both, brand building and management. Traditionally, the common and direct forms of advertisements are print media, social media, radio, television, etc.

In order to create a distinct identity and a high recall value of a brand, advertising agencies have consistently been seeking and adopting new and innovative ways to be novel

and distinctive for attracting potential customers. With the plethora of brands already available in the market for every conceivable product, the creation of a new brand and its management in such a competitive market is truly a daunting task requiring employment of ingenious methods.

An emerging field of such innovative advertising, which has recently been attracting marketers is Subliminal Advertising.

Subliminal Advertising is the usage of images and sounds to influence consumers' responses without their being consciously aware of it.

Promotional messages the recipient is not aware of, such as those played at very low volume or flashed on a screen for less than a second. Its effectiveness is not supported by scientific evidence, and its use is considered a deceptive business practice in some jurisdictions.

Subliminal Advertising has been around since the 1950's with Coca-Cola being the first to introduce it.

Ever since then, many organizations have adopted this innovative method of advertising their products and services for wooing the audience.

The advantage of such advertising is that customers unknowingly get attracted to the product which translates into their purchasing /consuming the product.

For example, in the epic movie The Lord of the Rings, "The One Ring that Rule Them All" had the words Coca-Cola engraved onto it displaying a subliminal message that Coca-Cola is the key to rule all.



### Objectives of the Study:

- To understand the art behind creating a brand.
- To understand how to manage a brand in the long run.
- To study the effect of various advertising techniques.
- To study the science behind subliminal advertising.

## 2. Literature Review

An in-depth research has been carried out in the subject study to benefits of subliminal advertising in our endeavor to solve the dilemma faced by many advertisers: 'Does subliminal advertising work?'

A number of marketers believe that a person's subconscious mind is very powerful and therefore, these 'hidden' messages in advertisements are addressed to that part of the brain in order to trigger it. Such messages are used to affect and direct the buying decisions of various consumers.

In this paper, a qualitative research had been conducted in the Lebanese market. In Lebanon, whilst marketers disagreed of subliminal messages being used, they unanimously agreed that sex sells and many advertisements are intentionally sexualized in a subtle manner for enticing the consumers into purchasing them.

(Hussin Hejase, 2013)

This paper explains the results of subliminal messages when used in print advertisements. According to the research conducted, it can be inferred that around 81% of the United States population believes that advertising agencies make use of words, sounds, images, etc., to sell their products. However, many companies refrain from using such techniques as they believe that it might not be very effective and moreover, their reputation is on the line and can be tarnished if such an activity gets noticed. Thus, the worry of consumers should not be alarming when it comes to the usage of embedded messages in advertisements as the companies are well aware that such an allegation can have an adverse effect on their company's name.

(Jamie Lynne Wilfong, 2002)

Everyone is aware of the controversies that follow the idea of subliminal advertising, but the results of such advertising

techniques cannot be discarded. Research reveals that the minuscule display (0.03 seconds) of the words 'drink Coca Cola' and 'eat popcorn' during a movie in a cinema substantially increased the sale of the said products.

This paper is aimed at discovering what is known about such subliminal messages and how they impact the behavior of consumers towards a particular brand. Although such advertisements are banned in the UK, Australia and United States, George W. Bush used a subliminal message in a video for his presidential campaign in 2002, wherein the word 'rats' was displayed (for .04 seconds) while talking about bureaucrats. Thus, the inference of the paper suggests that although such messages are looked down upon, they are still being covertly used to influence the human behavior and decision.

(Guilherme Luttkhuizen, 2011)

In this study, the effectiveness of subliminal messages was examined by showing half the sample advertisements with sexual content and the other half were shown as neutral advertisements. The audience was asked to choose the advertisement they liked the most.

The result clearly stated that the images with the subliminal messages were chosen over the neutral images. Thus, it can safely be concluded that sexual innuendos remain embedded in the minds of the general public as they are often drawn to such advertisements and make their decisions accordingly.

(Anna Acuna Canals, 2014)

The said researcher aimed at examining the history, use, legality and the value of subliminal advertising to the marketer. This paper argued the various reasons as to why such advertising is of little or no value to the modern marketers. One of the major reasons was that consumers distort the messages shown blatantly to them and thus, even greater distortions take place with subliminal advertisement and messages.

(Bruce Peckover, 1983)

### 3. Research Methodology

Subliminal Advertising has been a controversial topic from the very beginning and everyone has a different opinion when it comes to where they stand on this particular topic.

Recently, the usage of subliminal messages in advertisements has been banned in many countries including India, United States of America and United Kingdom.

#### Objectives of the Research Paper-

- To understand the art behind creating a brand.
- To understand how to manage a brand in the long run.
- To study the effect of various advertising techniques.
- To study the science behind subliminal advertising.

The research design followed is descriptive as the agenda of my research is to study the implications of subliminal advertising used by various companies and how it impacted their sales and/or profits.

#### Methodology

The methodology undertaken for this study was in line with the following two fundamental issues:

- The manner in which companies have undertaken subliminal advertising.
- Whether or not such subliminal advertising was beneficial for such companies.

In the study that follows, various companies have been chosen and an in-depth analysis has been conducted of their advertisements for arriving at a conclusion whether or not their subliminal advertisements were beneficial or not to generate higher sales.

The idea behind this study is to analyze if there is any significant impact of such advertising onto the minds of potential consumers and whether it is beneficial for

Companies to pursue such advertisements or so they hamper their image / sales.

The companies organizations selected to be analyzed are:

- 1) SFX Magazine
- 2) Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)
- 3) Walt Disney
- 4) Coca-Cola
- 5) AXE Deodorant

### 4. Data Analysis

#### 1) SFX (Magazine):

SFX Magazine is one of the leading magazines circulated in United Kingdom. It covers various topics of fantasy and sci-fi. According to the magazine, the "SF" stands for 'Science Fiction' and the suffix 'X' does not stand for anything in particular. SFX Magazine also hosts SFX Awards which reward the previous year's achievements in Sci-fi and the winners are chosen by popular votes of readers of the SFX Magazine.

This UK science fiction magazine, SFX, has become well known for partly covering up its title letters, such that in the initial few glances the reader is likely to think that the magazine consists of racier content. The enhance the impact, often the bold photograph of a beautiful actress adorns the front cover.

In almost all of their magazine's front covers, pictures are aligned in such a manner that the name of the magazine changes meaning thereby attracting shoppers. This technique, without a doubt attracts eyeballs of the passerby's and makes them give the magazine a look. Usually the letter "F" of SFX is partially hidden such that it appears "E" to the casual customer. Many readers and websites have reported that the logo appears different mostly when the cover consists of a woman. SFX has a circulation of over 26000 copies.



#### Impact:

Although SFX has never revealed an official statement as to whether or not they are subliminally manipulating their readers, almost all of their readers and conspiracy theorists

believe that SFX Magazine greatly uses the power of subliminal messaging to sell their magazines.

According to Huffington Post, along with many other established sources, it can be clearly discerned that in the recent times, sex sells and all the marketers grab the first opportunity to sell their products. Thus, SFX magazine using the same, age-old technique comes as no surprise.

## 2) Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)

Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest fast food chain in America after McDonald's (as measured by sales). Founded by Colonel Harland Sanders at the time of the Great Depression, KFC was the first American fast food restaurant to expand internationally. KFC now operates in a number of countries in Africa, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Europe, Middle East, etc.

In a recent advertisement of a 99¢ burger, KFC cleverly placed a couple of dollar bills in place of lettuce to subtly suggest that this burger saves money while still being delicious.

KFC reportedly claims the dollar bill was placed there as part of a contest, offering \$1 coupons to the first 1000 people who found the note, yet viewers were not even aware of the contest. It was only a ruse to cover for such subliminal advertising.

KFC claims that their advertising is not subliminal as they ask you to find a 'subliminal message' in the advertisement, and if you do, you get a free snacker sandwich.

While no other channel refused their ad, Walt Disney's ABC was the first to refuse the advertisement as they believed that the ad was subliminally manipulating its customers and decided to play the ad without the subliminal clip.



Impact:

Due to their scheme of calling it a 'contest' shot up their advertisement viewing ratings considerably, as people were intrigued by what they were hiding and wanted to be a part of it. However, since the general public was not communicated about this so-called contest, agencies found this to be misleading and a clever way of adding a subliminal technique. Thus, while their advertisement attracted customer eye-balls, it was looked down upon by other advertising agencies.

## 3) The Walt Disney Company:

Founded in 1923 by brothers Walt Disney and Roy Disney, they soon established themselves as a leader in the animation industry and later diversified into film production, television and theme parks. Disney also owns

the broadcast television network, ABC, Disney Channel, ESPN, etc.

Walt Disney has always been a part of the controversies that follow subliminal advertising. Researchers have stated that Walt Disney has been the biggest contributor to such advertising, although Walt Disney denies any such claims.

This includes from using debauched words subtly in their movies, to making the Pirates of The Caribbean poster resemble their logo. They have always been surrounded with allegations of being subliminally influencing their audiences.

The following subliminal message used was simply to promote the Disney Corporation through a movie poster.

Since the Pirates of the Caribbean movies are produced by Walt Disney, they used this poster as an opportunity to hopefully embed the Disney logo into people's mind to boost sales and revenue.

The resemblance between the Dead Man's Chest poster and the Walt Disney logo 'Mickey Mouse' is uncanny and thus, it cannot be denied that this was done unintentionally.



Impact:

Pirates of the Caribbean franchisee has earned over \$3.7 billion in box office sales alone. The resemblance of the logos caught the attention of prospective customers but the benefit gained cannot be quantified. Disney uses subliminal messages very often in their movies and/or shows. Such frequent use of subliminal advertising may have resulted in an increase in the marketing revenues which is unknown to the public and cannot be quantified.

## 4) Coca-Cola

Coke is a well-known carbonated drink manufactured by The Coca-Cola Company. Coke has had its dominance in the soft-drink market since the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has maintained its high market share with the help of constant diversification of its brand into Diet Coke, Caffeine-Free Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola Zero, Coca-Cola Vanilla, etc.

In a recent study, Coca-Cola was declared as being the world's third-most valuable brand (after Apple and Google) in the year 2015.

Coca-Cola was the first to use the technique of subliminal advertising when they showed a clip saying 'Eat Popcorn' and "Drink Coca-Cola" for 0.003 seconds during movies

shows. Reportedly, this marketing stunt increased the popcorn sales by 58% and Coca-Cola sales rose by 18%.

Coca-Cola has often used subliminal messages to attract their customers. Many consumers and researchers argue that the ice forming on top of the Coca-Cola can, resemble the silhouette of a lady and has purposely been done so.



The Coca-Cola Company has never made an official statement agreeing to or denying any such theories which further ignites the speculation that this was done purposely to lure its customers into buying their drink.

#### Impact:

The success of subliminal advertisements can be easily measured with the help of the advertisement campaign conducted by Coca-Cola which resulted in their sales being increased by a whopping 18%, which further gave rise to more such messages being put out by the company.

#### 5) AXE Deodorant

Lynx (known as Axe in the United States and Canada) is a brand of male grooming products, owned by the Anglo-Dutch company Unilever and advertised towards the youthful male statistic. Axe is a cool, notorious brand propelled in India in 1999 with Axe Deodorants. Axe in India has an assortment of male preparing items, for example, Axe antiperspirants, post-shaving moisturizers, shaving creams and body fragrances.

Axe launched their Dark Temptation Deodorant advertisement which caught a lot of attention from the viewers. This deodorant is promoted as a fragrance that is irresistible to women showcased in the form of a 'chocolate man'.

The spot from Unilever begins with a man spraying himself with the Dark Temptation Deodorant and transforms into a walking chocolate figurine as he walks through the day.

As he strolls through the city, women throw themselves at him and finding him irresistible.



#### Impact:

The Indian viewers criticized the advertisement and The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had to discontinue the screening of the ad after receiving several complaints from the public.

Although the advertisement was developed in Argentina and filmed in Los Angeles, the viewers were not impressed with the message that was been conveyed and thus asked to revoke the advertisement from Indian television.

The Indian Government therefore suspended the television advertisement for Axe men's deodorant, made by Mumbai-based Hindustan Unilever Ltd.

This caused a huge setback to the company as the Indian public was aggravated by their intent and the company had to make a public statement of explaining their reasoning behind the advertisement stating that they had conducted a research study involving 3,571 women in 13 different countries asking their opinion on the advertisement and the research showed that women found the advertisement humorous and witty.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Back in 1957 when James M. Vicary first conducted the experiment behind subliminal advertising, it resulted in a substantial increase in the sales volume which further gave rise to speculation to the success of such messages.

Ever since then, many companies have adopted this technique to attract more customers are boost their revenues. However, whilst the benefits of such advertising cannot be under-estimated, the results have not been quantified.

Many psychologists have concluded that out the subconscious mind is very powerful and retains such messages. However, it is still unclear and unknown whether prospective customers actually act upon such subliminal messages.

Many contend that these discoveries in subliminal messages are because of possibility, University College London (2007) has discovered research that demonstrates that subliminal messages really do cause incitement in mind. This does not demonstrate an immediate connection

between subliminal promoting and sales, however it shows that subliminal publicizing has an impact on brain action.

### Observations

- Subliminal Advertising has been around for quite a while now and is here to stay as more and more companies are now making use of such messages.
- In all the above-mentioned cases, we can note that all of the companies have been using such messages, even though the results cannot be quantified.
- Despite subliminal advertising having been banned in a number of countries, yet organizations keep resorting in such activities, which suggests us to arrive at a reasonable conclusion that the benefits reaped are greater than they appear to be.
- When being asked, consumers didn't really notice any such messages being displayed. Nevertheless, they do seem to be attracted to products which contain such messages.

Creating and sustaining a brand is very tough in the modern competitive environment. Thus, marketers should not leave any chance of attracting customers and stealing them from their competitors. However, usage of illegal means can hamper the image of the organization and can lead to customers being driven away on moral grounds. To avoid this, KFC has used a clever technique of calling such messages a 'contest' and eliminating the chance of being frowned upon. But, Disney's ABC did not buy into this idea of a 'contest' and refused the airing of the advertisement.

Whether such advertising is successful or not is still up for debate, but we can conclude without a doubt that such activities are being conducted on a daily basis and we are being exposed to messages that we are not even aware of. Marketers are using new and innovative techniques to create a lasting impression in the minds of their prospective consumers and to lure them into purchasing their products / brands.

### References

- [1] <https://www.muscletalk.co.uk/Pirates-of-the-Caribbean-Subliminal-message-m4451108.aspx>
- [2] <http://subliminaladvertising-caitlin.blogspot.ae/2008/11/disneys-use-of-subliminal-messages-yet.html>
- [3] [http://www.11points.com/Food-Drink/11\\_Hidden\\_Messages\\_In\\_Food\\_Ads\\_and\\_Logos](http://www.11points.com/Food-Drink/11_Hidden_Messages_In_Food_Ads_and_Logos)
- [4] <https://www.popsugar.com/food/KFC-Asks-Customers-Spot-Subliminal-Message-New-Ads-1585378>
- [5] [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/madeline-wahl/why-its-unfortunate-that-sex-sells\\_b\\_5433251.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/madeline-wahl/why-its-unfortunate-that-sex-sells_b_5433251.html)
- [6] <http://subliminalmanipulation.blogspot.ae>
- [7] <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/marlbورو-coke-kfc-used-subliminal-advertising/1383489>
- [8] <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/8/6111847/do-subliminal-messages-work>
- [9] <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/ads-with-subliminal-messages>

- [10] <http://www.businessinsider.com/subliminal-ads-2011-5?IR=T>
- [11] <https://imsynthiachan.wordpress.com/tag/sfx-magazine/>

### Bibliography

- [12] Acuna, Anna., & Herrerias, A.E., (2014, June). Subliminal Advertising: New Experimental Data on the Power of Sexual Embeds. Retrieved from <https://repositori.upf.edu/bitstream/handle/10230/22687/subliminaladvertising-adrianaescobarannaacuA±a.pdf?sequence=1>
- [13] Hejase, H.J., & Beyruti, Nouri., (2013, July). Subliminal Marketing: An Exploratory Research in Lebanon. Centre of Excellence for Scientific & Research Journalism, Vol. 1, No. 3.
- [14] L., Guilherme., (2011, December). An essay on Subliminal Advertising. Retrieved from <http://www.glds.nl/Portfolio/SubliminalAdvertising.pdf>
- [15] Peckover, Bruce., (1983, February). The Value of Subliminal Advertising to the Modern Marketer. Honors Theses, Paper 397
- [16] W.L., Jamie., (2002, November). The Effects of Subliminal Messages in Print Advertisements. Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection. 61.