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Abstract	Subliminal advertising represents one of the most intriguing and controversial intersections of psychology, marketing, and ethics. This study explores the evolution, perception, and ethical implications of subliminal messaging in the advertising industry, with a focus on its presence in the Indian context. By reviewing seminal works and empirical studies, from James Vicary's 1957 experiment to twenty-first-century neuromarketing developments, the paper traces how subliminal techniques transitioned from experimental psychology to digital persuasion mechanisms embedded within visual, auditory, and algorithmic interfaces. The study also investigates the Indian advertising industry's stance toward subliminal communication—highlighting its regulatory vacuum, the absence of standardized ethical frameworks, and the increasing incorporation of subconscious messaging through product placements, music, and symbolic cues in digital and cinematic advertising. A comparative discussion illustrates global attitudes toward subliminal persuasion, particularly within U.S. and European advertising ethics codes. The findings emphasize the duality of subliminal advertising: while it has the potential to strengthen brand recall and emotional engagement, it also raises serious ethical questions about manipulation, autonomy, and informed consent. The study concludes by envisioning the future of subliminal advertising in an AI-driven media environment—where biometric data, neuromarketing analytics, and micro-targeting may render subliminal influence both more potent and less transparent.
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Introduction

Subliminal advertising presents the audience with brand entities like images, logos, or other marketing materials without the consumers being conscious about it. When exposed to such subconscious stimuli, the consumer is trusted to acknowledge the information and follow up on it without recognizing a communication source.

Subliminal Advertising adds another element to the marketing efforts as it does not interrupt the activities of the consumer and allows for a simultaneous product or service promotion as people have a shorter attention span and a busy lifestyle these days; this style of advertising seems intriguing.

The primary concern of Subliminal Advertising is whether it can be effective in changing the buying behavior of the consumers in the longer term and provide advertisers a ground to effectively advertise the product or services directly to the unconscious mind of the consumer, without getting them even to realize, hence not necessarily addressing the defenses of the conscious mind of the consumer.

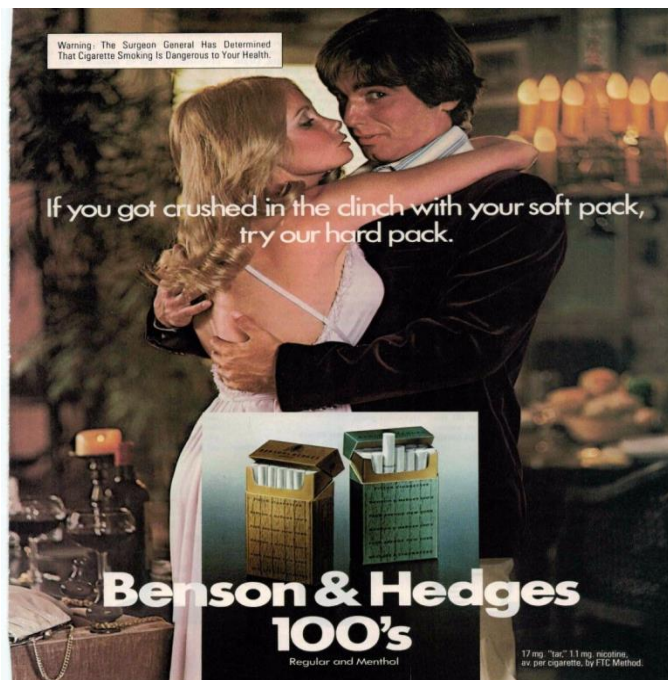
This article is organized into three sections. The first section summarizes the famous research and studies done in the past and trends in subliminal advertising, which is the primary source of the discussion done in the paper. The second section discusses in detail the Indian advertising industry's stance on Subliminal Advertising with references to some advertisements which have incorporated subliminal messages directly or indirectly on an Indian advertising landscape, the latter part of the section talks about Subliminal Advertising in a global and Indian context comparatively, also, talks about Subliminal Advertising through the lens of a brand, an advertiser and a consumer through my understanding of the role of subliminal advertising. The third and the ultimate section of this paper discuss the future scope of Subliminal Advertising and the conclusion.

Understanding How Subliminal Advertising Unfolded

The first time when Subliminal Advertising came into the limelight was in 1957 when James Vicary did a controversial experiment where he alleged that he encouraged moviegoers to eat popcorn and drink Coca-Cola by showing a brief, 0.03 seconds of subliminal messages when the movie was played, he said that this increased the sales of popcorn and Coca-Cola considerably. The exposure time of the letters was so less to be acknowledged by the conscious mind, but it was considered that it had influenced the unconscious mind. Later, Vicary's study was never published; the entire thing was only for publicity, a hoax. However, it successfully triggered the talks around it; there was a significant outcry in public concerning the manipulation tricks that the advertisers can play to trick consumers psychologically without their permission.

There has been a lot of controversy due to the misuse of the word; the definition says that it should be anything below the level of a person's consciousness; the problem is that awareness and consciousness are often used interchangeably [1]. In 2000, Grays summed up subliminal in a way that inferred that it does not pass the test as subliminal if you can see it. Subliminal as a word has been very exploited in a lot of different ways; it has been misused to mean sensual, In a few books by Wilson Bryan Key called *Subliminal seduction* (1972), *Media Sexploitation* (1976), and *The Clam-plate Orgy* (1980), Key has gathered attention to the way sensual or arousing

stimuli has been embedded into the photographs; however, there is no claim that such embeds are used to sell products [2]. Then after some time, there was a book written by August Bullock, called *The secret sales pitch: An Overview of Subliminal Advertising* in 2004, which triggered the calm sea and Subliminal Advertising was again brought into notice; Bullock had no credentials in advertising but was fascinated by the book called *Subliminal Seduction* by Wilson Bryan Key, Bullock's book was entirely based on his interpretations. There was one advertisement * which Bullock analyzed in which a woman in an evening dress is close to a man and the copy attached was: "If you got crushed in the clinch with your soft pack, try our hard pack." The document had an explicit sensual theme but subliminal, however on the backbone of the lady, he argued that an image of a penis is embedded, which is undoubtedly subliminal, even hard to figure out on a conscious level. Bullock said further that subtle prompts of this sort had been generally utilized in all media types throughout; we can imply that advertisers are embedding such subliminal messages in advertisements consciously. However, there is no solid proof.



*This is the advertisement being talked about

Source: [http://www.subliminalsex.com/chapter%20one%20\(2\)pg2.htm](http://www.subliminalsex.com/chapter%20one%20(2)pg2.htm)

Bullock, however, did not seek permission or talk to the agencies or brands whose advertisements he used as references; he made it crystal clear that whatever is written in his book is opinion pieces, and no facts are backing it up.

While relying on the book on his opinions, he addressed the study of [3], which mentioned that, albeit subconscious observation exists, the subliminal stimuli are so frail that other contending impulses effortlessly invalidate potential impacts. Bullock refutes this by saying that the embed could have been done poorly, i.e., the embed could have been insignificant or unemotional. He denied other studies that spoke against the subliminal messaging and its existence as deceptive or flawed methodologies. The back of Bullock's book mentions how he is

an attorney. The book is written as he would present the evidence of Subliminal Advertising to a jury and that he won't disappoint even a skeptical reader.

The content was sherry logical, more like a gut talk, and not proven, so it could not prove Subliminal Advertising to be factual.

Some marketers trust that Subliminal Advertising adds a new dimension altogether to the traditional messaging overall in the opinion of [4], "Advertisers often have been accused of using techniques which manipulate and control the behavior of consumers and hence violate their autonomy." There are many techniques; one of them is Subliminal Advertising.

There are many issues with subliminal advertising; one of the issues that come with Subliminal Advertising is to fathom the effectiveness of Subliminal Advertising to influence people to act upon the message in the desired fashion and know if it worked in the intended direction [5]. Supporters of the effectiveness of Subliminal Advertising advocate that Subliminal Advertising can direct the behavior of the people and build accidental brand awareness through the subconscious mind, which is the indicator of the effectiveness of advertising [6].

The available researches on 'perception without awareness' suggests, it is undoubtedly possible that stimuli are perceived when onlookers are uninformed about the subliminal message they are consuming [7]. Hence we can conclude that a person can perceive a message without the knowledge of perceiving the message. There have been many studies around the threshold of the human mind about what constitutes subconscious and where the subliminal lie, subliminal means "below threshold" [8]. As subconscious stimulation happens at the threshold point, one might argue that this limit is diverse for various individuals. Considering that a subconscious prompt is so short-lived that it goes unnoticed [9]. Be that as it may, imagine a scenario in which the conscious mind almost picks up the message for a long time? [10].

Another study by [11] in which they did a similar analysis to that of Vicary's study, in which they showed members of the experimental group a Subliminal Advertising of a carbonated soft drink and evaluated whether this had any impact on the brand decision while purchasing and if it affected the people's feeling of being thirsty. [12] The conclusion was that showing subliminal messages that motivate people to drink a carbonated soft drink did not fetch results with the people who were not thirsty. For the thirsty people, it could just nudge them in a direction to prefer the shown brand. Similarly, in two studies, one by [13] fetched similar results, concluding that subliminally presented stimuli can help to nudge the buyer in the desired direction but only if they are motivated in the first place.

There is a study by [14] in which they exposed the participants to a television program that had embedded subliminal messages related to thirst; the results showed that the audience did become thirstier after watching the schedule as opposed to their initial ratings, which were taken before the exposure to the subliminal message and with the control group who were not exposed to the subliminal messages [15]. According to research [16], the general public and the scholarly community has seen subliminal messages as a medium that influences the behavior by indirectly creating an "antisocial behavior such as early sex stimulation in children, the difference in the value system of an individual, cultural change, suicidal acts and drug use."

However, there is a lot of literature that denies the effectiveness of subliminal advertising. Scientific researches like the ones by [17] and more fail to prove that subliminal messages effectively influence a person's behavior. One such researcher is research conducted. They worked on an experiment in which the audience was shown a sub visual image of a bowl of "wonder rice," post the film, the experimental group did not acknowledge the brand name any better than the control one.

An article by explained the most concerning issue of studies which express that Subliminal Advertising is effective because inadequate consideration has been taken to guarantee that the stimuli in the experiments are adequately "Subliminal."

Analyzed articles on the effectiveness of Subliminal Advertising and concluded that subliminal messages do not significantly affect behavior, did another study with a similar conclusion [18].

Numerous researchers have investigated the impacts of Subliminal Advertising. It is safe to say that the outcomes are blended. Still, it weighs slightly heavier on the side of Subliminal Advertising not affecting behavior, mainly due to the majority of the research stating so. I believe the people are against the usage of subliminal messages to influence their preferences without them being aware. Subliminal Advertising has been prohibited in many countries like the United States, the UK, and Australia [19]. However, George W. Bush incorporated subliminal messages into his promotional film for the 2000 presidential elections when he used the sub visual images of the word "Rats" while talking about the rival Al Gore.

We can agree that subliminal messages still exist in the advertising landscape while they might have been placed knowingly or unknowingly in one way or another.

In the Indian context, Subliminal Advertising as a concept has been explored very little, but it does not mean that Subliminal Advertising has been dormant in the Indian advertising landscape; there have been instances where Subliminal Advertising has been incorporated in the advertisements to influence the buying decisions of the consumers very subtly and without even them realizing [20].

The legal Indian stance on Subliminal Advertising is that no laws prohibit or even define Subliminal Advertising; vaguely "misleading" advertisements are restricted [21]. Amidst the blurred guidelines, advertisers and brands feel free to use subliminal messages in their advertisements as and when they wish, not thinking that these efforts could be less fruit-bearing; however, sometimes these subliminal messages are the brainchild of the audience rather than the advertisers [22].

In a universal context, consumers in the western countries are relevantly more aware of subconscious messaging; hence they are more likely to be cautious of the advertisements they watch, mainly when new research or experiment is in talks; otherwise, the idea of subconscious messaging itself goes into the backside of the mind. The advertisers are, in return, more aware of the stir it may cause, so they make sure that the advertising is to a level that does not creep out the audience and is still effective [23]. The brand focuses on the return on the investment and wants to try various marketing techniques to see which bears the best results. In contrast, when talking about India, the Subliminal Advertising in India, and the general audience is relatively unaware of subliminal advertising, the few who are aware are ignorant to its existence, due to a lack of effective regulation; advertisers freely use the subliminal marketing techniques to its advantage [24]. Currently, there is a lack of two things in the Indian context. One is the lack of intense research based on India, and the other is the lack of proper regulations for Subliminal Advertising. Advertisers have been using subliminal messages in many forms; however, they might be unsure of its effectiveness; the advertisers in India leave no chance to incorporate subliminal messages in their advertisements, especially when they want to use the sensual theme. The brands are primarily focused on catching the attention on the go, and sometimes subliminal messages are what they resort to. Incorporating subliminal messages in an advertisement requires a lot of attention to the details and keenness as there is an excellent line between the statements that the conscious and the subconscious can perceive [25].

There have been some apparent instances of Subliminal Advertising wherein in the advertisements; one brand becomes a free ride on another brand, which means that, for example, on a TVC, apart from the lead brand being advertised, another brand is subtly incorporated into the advertisement; the presence is usually so minute, that it goes unnoticed consciously, but subconsciously the message gets stored. According to an imminent figure in the

Indian advertising industry has mentioned in an interview that it is not an easy task to incorporate multiple brands in a 30-second TVC subtly [26]. In his words, "For two brands, with one subliminal to ride on the main brand, doesn't seem feasible, especially when we see that the communication needs to have the clear message of the brand character. On most occasions, the personality of one brand remains different from that of the other, and mixing them may not be a good idea," his take on whether Indian Advertisers might take this route more often or not was that, since advertising is a creative field, such a concept might gain popularity [27]. Another known figure from the Indian advertising industry, mentioned in an interview that was subliminally incorporating another brand into an advertisement of a major brand is a concept which does not show a great future as it might be ignored. However, if it is being done, it should be made that the two brands sink well together. Another industry expert, [28], mentioned how mostly Subliminal Advertising happens by chance and not essentially by choice; according to him, sometimes these relationships are even faked by the primary marketers. He thinks that when another brand is subliminally placed in a TVC of another brand, it might be more effective in the consumer's minds than dedicated advertising. It does not take anything away from the leading brand; after all, the second brand is placed subliminally [29].

Sex is one of the most selling appeals in advertising; Subliminal Advertisements have not been shy to use sensual messages in India. Some subliminal advertisements in India have taken the route of sensual subliminal messaging to catch the attention without letting the audiences even realize the subtle sensual message. For example, there is an advertisement from [Annexure I] in which the entire experience of drinking coca-cola from their famous shaped glass bottle is fantasized. The advertisement film is set in a grocery store; the film opens on an attractive male customer, played by brand ambassador Sidharth Malhotra, who grabs the eye of a female clerk. He stops to refresh himself with a super cold Coca-Cola, which goes about as an ice breaker and makes the second extraordinary moment between the two [30]. This film is an Indian version of the initiative, Korean Coca Cola advertisement. While the guy refreshes himself by drinking coca-cola, the female cashier stalks him and gets too comfortable, and stimulations take over; when the guy returns to the store counter with dripping sweat all over his shoulders, she carefully places another bottle of coca-cola right in front of his crotch.

The way the bottle is put in front of him makes it look like a penis.

Colgate is another brand that used the sensual bit of Subliminal Advertising [Annexure II]. In an advertisement film which was aired in 2017. The brand ambassador, Ranveer Singh, is shown all energetic and peppy after he brushed his teeth with Colgate max fresh, the product being advertised in the movie. In comparison, the guy is dancing on the top of vehicles like buses and transforming the entire monotonous traffic jam into a fun place. In a change of sequence, we can find the girl dancing in the cars with the guy; in a scene, the girl, while dancing right in front of the actor, bends in the front and takes her hand closer to Ranveer's crotch and makes a sensual move and blows a flying kiss taking a bow, which looks like the girl embraces the penis of the male lead for a moment. Other brands like Axe in India also use a sensual route subliminally.

Subliminal advertisements in India have not shied away to use the tricks of psychology either; some ads have used subliminal messages to associate the brand with happiness and cast a spell of better consumer satisfaction; one such advertisement was rolled out in 2020 by a famous detergent brand in India called Ghadi also incorporated subliminal messages in a newly formed brand swoosh [Annexure III]. Since its inception, the brand has used a clock ghadi detergent logo set to 10:10, which makes a smiley face that makes people link it with happiness and higher consumer satisfaction. The brand actors in the ads also make a U shape to influence people subliminally to associate it with joy. The brand's primary objective has been to build the brand image by instilling a sense of quality and trust within the product. They have successfully used a subliminal brand swoosh that associates itself with a smiley face to boost the brand's image with the emotion of happiness and trigger the positive image of the product in the audience's minds and make them buy it.

There have been many instances where subliminal messages have been incorporated into the advertisements and served to the audience in India without them knowing about it. It happens so subtly that the audience, which is

unrelated to the advertising industry, does not even realize that something like a subliminal message exists and can be embedded into the advertisement, which might be effective in changing the buying behavior of a customer.

It can be comprehended that there is a possibility that more Subliminal Advertising is being seen these days due to a lack of time and awareness among the consumers about the brands, in an overcrowded market to grab the attention consciously is brutal as there are many defenses which are into action but while using sub visual or sub auditory messages their reasons are put off guard. It becomes comparatively easier to embed a message in the head of the consumer. It is crucial to assess the effectiveness of subliminal messages in a society like India, which relies heavily on advertising in both direct and indirect ways to make their purchase decisions and being the country where the government does not heavily regulate subliminal advertisements.

Future Of Subliminal Advertising

The talks around Subliminal Advertising have taken a back seat and moved to the research archives in recent years. It is safe to say that Subliminal Advertising was never used widely across the world; sometimes, it gets difficult to get a message across consciously; subliminal messages can come to the rescue, but there is not enough proof that it is effective. Subliminal messaging has not yet been declared a viable option for marketing a brand altogether; partially, for example, for recall purposes, it can still be considered but making it the mainstream communication method for a brand will make its charm go.

Defining subliminal messages from a consumer perspective remains difficult without the intervention of the advertising party as it is difficult to comprehend what the unconscious understands. It is rare to expect an advertisement to be "obviously" subliminal because if it is evident, then it cannot be subliminal.

In the current age of social media, there are two prevalent things; firstly, the openness and acceptance in societies like the Indian society have increased exponentially, which provides the brands a platform to experiment with various advertising techniques at a lower investment level and gives the creative freedom to go overboard. Secondly, it would look like a hoax if caught too soon because the information in the social media age spreads like fire.

It is difficult to say if and when it emerges full-fledged, will it be a seasonal trend or a strategic tool to stay. Moreover, subliminal messages in an advertisement might become more of a PR stunt than an actual message embedded to influence a customer.

Conclusion

Subliminal Advertising has evolved from being existent to being the hot talk of the town, from having gone to the backside of the mind of consumers while still existing. The landscape of Subliminal Advertising has some evidence to infer that its effect on the buyer's decision is negligible; primarily, at its full potential, it can help to nudge the consumer in a direction in which he has already headed consciously or unconsciously. People have a short attention span, more concise than ever, now the average attention span of a person has shrunk dramatically, and when a message is introduced at a conscious level to the person, many defenses come into play, making the person skeptical in perceiving the message. In contrast, similar statements are introduced subconsciously; then, it becomes easy to catch the consumer off guard.

In the Indian landscape, the laws regarding Subliminal Advertising are unclear; currently, no law prohibits the usage of "Subliminal advertising directly," and even the definition of Subliminal Advertising is not set in stone, making it easier to misuse. The studies regarding Subliminal Advertising are the bare minimum in the Indian context, which has humongous ground and potential.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach rooted in secondary research and content analysis. Academic literature, historical experiments, and digital-era advertising case studies were reviewed to construct a chronological and conceptual map of subliminal advertising. Sources include books, peer-reviewed articles, journal archives, and advertising regulations from India and international authorities. The study also integrates elements of comparative analysis by contrasting Indian advertising practices with global standards.

The research design follows three stages:

1. Historical Review – tracing the origins and milestones in subliminal advertising, from Vicary's 1957 experiment to contemporary debates.
2. Comparative Analysis – examining the Indian industry's perception and regulatory environment vis-à-vis international norms.
3. Interpretative Synthesis – exploring the ethical, psychological, and technological implications of subliminal advertising in the context of neuromarketing and digital persuasion.

No human participants or primary data collection were involved, making the research fully non-experimental and literature-based.

Novelty and Significance

The novelty of this paper lies in its integrated exploration of subliminal advertising through psychological, ethical, and cultural lenses, particularly within the Indian advertising ecosystem. While prior studies have analyzed subliminal communication largely from Western perspectives, this research contextualizes the phenomenon in the Indian socio-cultural and regulatory framework. It also connects traditional subliminal mechanisms (sub-visual and sub-audible messages) with emerging AI-based and algorithmic marketing tools that influence consumers subconsciously through personalization and predictive analytics.

The study contributes to the discourse on ethical advertising by arguing for a code of conduct on subconscious persuasion, balancing creativity with consumer protection.

Ethical Considerations

This research is based exclusively on publicly available academic and media sources and does not involve any human or animal experimentation. All referenced materials are properly cited according to APA 7th edition standards. Ethical principles of transparency, honesty, and intellectual integrity were maintained throughout the study. No personal or confidential data were used.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and no commercial or institutional influence affected the study design, interpretation, or conclusions.

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Annexure I

Stills from the Coca Cola 2016 advertisement.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mip2i22Csw>





Annexure II

Stills from 2017 Colgate Advertisement.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dIuxbnlUPQ>





Annexure III

Stills from 2020 Ghadi Advertisement.

Source:<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=488767108742642&extid=3bTxAtlCR5c4yqNy>



