

A Study of Factors of Subliminal Advertising and its Influence on Consumer Buying Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements have become an integral part of any organization's marketing strategy. Advertisers use many tactics in order to persuade the consumers, one of which is subliminal advertising. Subliminal is about creating subconscious impact on consumer's purchasing behavior. Not many studies have been done with regard to consumer awareness of such manipulative strategy and also the way in which every individual interprets the same image in a different way depending upon their attitudes, behavior, feelings, persona and psyche in the Indian context. 20 respondents were selected randomly for this research paper. Research being exploratory in nature, qualitative research approach was adopted wherein concept of thematic analysis was applied in order to interpret the responses of individuals into the themes which best reflects their thoughts and imagination. As there are different factors and stimuli which impacts the way each individual interprets the message embedded in an subliminal advertisement is while some respondents appreciated this kind of advertising and some did not want to use the product again.

Keywords: Subliminal advertising, Subconscious, persona, attitude, psyche.

INTRODUCTION:

Advertising:

Advertising from the Latin reclaim, "evoke" in business is a form of marketing communication, which aims to encourage, persuade, or in some cases even manipulate the audience (viewers, readers or listeners, etc.) to take or continue to take an action. Philip Kotler defined it as "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services from the sponsor evident by the print media (newspapers and magazines), telecommunications (radio and television), network communications (telephone, cable, satellite, wireless), electronic media (audiotape, videotape, videodisk, CD-ROM, web page), and display media (billboards, signs, posters)"^{viii}. It is an impersonal form of mass communication, which offers a high degree of control of those responsible for the preparation and implementation of promotional messages.

Subliminal Advertising and Modern Day Brain-Washing:

But there is a flip side to advertising as well which is outside the purview of just selling and persuading. The marketers are manipulating the consumers in buying something they do not need by triggering an unconscious need by exposing the consumers to product pictures, brand names and other marketing stimuli which is referred to subliminal advertising. 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. Subliminal means "below threshold". This threshold is different for different people. A subliminal message is such a short one that it goes unnoticed. Advertisers use subliminal techniques to influence the second and third level of consciousness. They target the consumer's fears and desires, manipulating them in ways never thought possible. On the other hand, advertisers present to the

consumer on the conscious level a safe, neutral, naturally appealing ad to pacify the consumer's resistance to subliminal advertising. While glancing through an ad, the average consumer block-reads paragraphs and barely notices an ad that they have seen many times. This is prime time in subliminal reception because the conscious mind is uninterested in the potentially offensive subliminal material. Marketer James Vicary came up with the concept of subliminal advertising in 1957. Vicary showed a short (0.03 seconds) subliminal advertisement of "drink Coca Cola" and "eat popcorn" during a movie in a cinema, which substantially increased sales of these products. This exposure time was not enough to be registered by the conscious mind but supposedly it influenced the consumer's unconscious mind and the decisions they made later.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

This review is conducted to explore the various sources through which a consumer gets manipulated or influenced by a concept called subliminal advertising. However as not much literature is available in the context of the same in India, reviews have been on the research done internationally in the context of studying the psychology and perception of consumers to subliminal advertising, facts and methodologies been adopted, its effect on consumer's buying intention. Some elements of literature do not give a holistic perspective, nevertheless all elements have been considered to get a 360 degree unbiased view on the subject.

Studies related to Key Drivers for the Advertisers:

Espley, Savitsky & Kachelski(1990) identified factors that a "Skeptical Inquirer" must keep in mind about the different types of hidden messages used in an advertisement which in turn influence the sub-conscious mind of consumers which results them in reacting differently in their choices, attitudes and actions. Marketers use two kinds of tactics: 1) Subliminal Perception (Perception of stimuli and lie below the threshold of unconscious mind) 2) Subliminal Persuasion (Requires stimulus presented subliminally to have some effort to drive a consumer's behavior, judgment in a particular way)

This paper focus on the subliminal visual priming techniques where the advertisers make use of a pattern mask, namely, geometric shapes or letters to have an unsaid impact on consumer's judgments and reactions. It has been done due the mere casual determinant of behavior i.e. consumers do not really know the cause behind their actions and the fact they are very poor in articulating the facts around them as it focus their unconscious mind. The researchers conducted a numerous number of experiments for the skeptical Inquirers benefit which gave them the following insights about the behavior:

- 1) Reliability of the exposure effect even when its outside the bounds of one's conscious awareness.
- 2) Likability of the object exposed to skeptic consumers, even when its beneath their conscious awareness
- 3) Subliminal Exposure to words relating to personality traits can influence how people judge others around them.
- 4) Subliminally presented stimuli can also affect the judgment about self.

Kelly(1979) elucidates on a focus group discussion which was held by the marketers to understand the effectiveness of the subliminal advertising on brand recall. Author said that consumers who are made aware of such advertisement believe it to exist while others do not. This paper studied two aspects:

- 1) Whether these kinds of ads were intentionally put in by advertisers and agencies?
- 2) Do these techniques stimulate the consumer's behavior towards a product?

The first question could not be answered satisfactorily but it was observed that these techniques do not stimulate the consumer's behavior and they act in the same way as to a normal ad due to the mere fact of not being able to see such stimulators in the advertisement. It also concludes the reason for the fact being the very nature of measurement. Maybe the brand recall does not measure what the subject has learned. Also, visual advertisements are more effective than print and media as its able to penetrate the subconscious through the rapid, glance like attention.

Wiklik(2000), explains advertising is neither good or bad by nature, but it's a tool that can be used well or badly. She refers to sexual, moral and religions taboos that being highlighted time and again in advertisements in order to make it visible in the minds of the consumer. Also, she states people responsible for its content should be morally responsible for the advertising strategies which persuade the people in a certain way. Author further states that there are three controversial themes through which consumers are being persuaded:

- Erotic theme: Eg-Calvin Klien, Dolyce-Gabbana, Sisley
- Death theme
- Violence theme

Also, the brand is necessarily be positioned as positive one. For some, even negative advertising works as it makes it more visible for consumers and more so because times been changing. What may appeal to younger

generation may not appeal to older generation, what is offensive to one culture may not be offensive to other. Atrass (2012), studies the effectiveness of subliminal messages on brand design. He suggested subliminal message enriches the aesthetic and functional values of the brand. It makes the brand design look more innovative and smart to attract the consumer, catch his mind and leave an internal impression. Also it could improve the effectiveness of his loyalty toward the brand and its products. The study was done in two parts:

- Firstly, explore the concept of subliminal message in brand design, and its role to improve the aesthetic and functional values of brand design.
- Secondly, awareness's extent of brand designers.

The results were as following:

- Many brand designers haven't enough awareness of subliminal messages and its effect on consumer behavior.
- Subliminal messages can create familiarity with brand.
- The use of subliminal messages in brand design can leave a positive internal impression on the consumer.
- Subliminal messages enrich the aesthetic values of the brand.
- Subliminal messages enrich the communication and persuasion functions of brand design.
- The subliminal messages in brand design leave a different impression to the consumer as a result of subconscious influence of brand elements.

Studies related to Awareness of the Consumers:

Zanot, Pincus & Lamp(1989), did not focus on the effectiveness or the awareness of subliminal advertising but the public perception of it. The researchers wanted to understand that essence of it to the very core because people do not really act on reality but everyone has their own perception of reality which makes them act in the way they do. Authors interviewed 209 respondents picked at random through calling them by trained interviewers. The questions were segmented into two parts: 1) Demographics (Age, Gender, Income) 2) Psychographic (Thought, Feeling, Behavior, Attitude)

Researchers found almost 78% of the respondents being aware of the term subliminal advertising, also respondents feel this kind of advertising plays a very major role in influencing an individual's decision in buying a product and consider it to be not only unethical but also a harmful technique in influencing the minds of the consumers.

Hussin, Bassam, George, Roula & Nouri (2013), conducted an exploratory research through survey and as well as through in depth literature review to find out the awareness of the consumer about subliminal advertising. They came to a conclusion that only 47% of the consumers were about such a concept being used by the advertisers. Also, they conducted a study in order to find out the attitude of consumers towards a particular advertisement. They found out that for about 27% of the respondents were attracted to females in an advertisement. Also, celebrity endorsement plays a vital role as 71% of the respondents were attracted to the same. They came to the conclusion that effectiveness of subliminal messages used in ads on consumers' behavior is still not substantiated with parametric research.

Studies related Key Drivers for Consumer's Purchase Intention:

Hanzaee, Behboudi, Khah, Monsefi & Maneshi(2011) elaborate on Advertising being a paid form of making consumers aware of a products presence in the market at the same time persuading them to buy which can be done through various tactics. One of them is Intangible advertising where an advertiser focus on the subconscious mind of the consumer and creates messages which are below the subjective threshold of buyers. The unconscious can be influenced through a number of environmental factors like smell, taste, sound, etc which not only results in buying decision but also creates a desire for the product.

The study says that intangible advertisements can be categorized into three dimensions:

- 1) It helps in increasing the brand influence/Image.
- 2) Offered a structural Equation model explaining the variables of Intangible advertising (Ad type, Product type, media & demographic variables)
- 3) It also leads to ad effectiveness (Brand recall, Attitude, Brand Position, Buying Intention)

In order to prove that, the respondents were asked to choose a particular brand from a set of brands given to them, and they chose the brand which involved intangible advertising.

Nelson(2006)explains the concept through a book called 'Hidden Persuaders' by Vance Packard. This book is about all kinds of techniques an advertiser use to showcase consumer's inner urges and fantasies in order to entice them towards their product. It also highlights a thin line between subliminal advertising and supraliminal advertising.

Subliminal Advertising is present where an object, namely a word or a picture is embedded in advertisements

which are almost below the consumer's conscious threshold. Whereas supraliminal, is where an object is embedded in advertisements which an individual is fully aware about. This can be done by in depth research and interviews by the marketer. The goal is to get consumer musing absentmindedly about his/her joys, frustrations, urges, pleasures etc.

In the book, it starts with explaining that how important it is for consumers to be consciously aware and for the marketers to not take undue advantage of it and sell ethically rather than just manipulating them so as it act in a certain way. But, later it also highlight that's it the very nature of subliminal that triggers a need in consumers mind and in turn makes them purchase a product. It had also been shown that purchase decision and falling for such tactics also depends on the degree of education an individual withhold. Also, it throws some light on how consumers are okay with such projections and how they don't mind the mental processing and recognition which they do not have an access to. The use of sophisticated technology has also made cognitive processing easier for consumer researches through MRI technology.

Bratu(2010)discusses various researchers' work towards the impact of symbols, words, jingles in affecting the consumer's buying intention through image manipulation. One explains it to be a rhetorical work in any visual and verbal communication that applies rhetorical principles to enhance audience processing and persuasion. One also explains subliminal priming in image manipulation results in increasing a feeling temporary like feeling of thirst as soon as a consumer looks at the product. Some researchers say consumer behavior is less influenced by strategic thinking and more by virtual choice behavior.

Praktanis & Aronson(1991)explains the usage of subliminal influence tactics have not been demonstrated to be effective always, but still advertisers happen to use them in persuasion process. It initially talks about the influence of media in making it perceive as something subliminal but later on it also says that subliminal messages distracts the consumer from the substantive issue related to the product.

Reichert(2002)explains the use of sex in the advertising for the mere purpose of persuasion purpose. Sex in advertising refers to the use of sexual information like in the form of nudity, sexual imagery, innuendos and double entendre are employed in the promotional messages for a product. Researcher was concerned with studying the two aspects:

- The distraction caused by sexual imagery in ads
- The influence of emotional to sexual information on the evaluation of the ad, brand and purchase intention.
- The researcher came out with 3 broad variables for the study of the above:
- Product Relevance
- Respondents sex
- Personality

Parpis(2003)elucidates in an article that in order to sell a product, the major focus is on distracting the target from the core product. Also, involving the customers in the product's advertisements had also done wonders for their brand. For instance, when Chivas advertisement came out, it just had an image of three ice cubes in a glass of Whiskey. With a hope to get a little more attention, the picture of naked women were present in the ice cubes. Once the customer notices that, it cannot ignore it and the advertisement recall stays with him. The advertisers also played a little game where they wanted customers to identify the hidden objects in the advertisement so as to let consumers participate in the product.

Cannals, Adriana(2014)attempts to study the effectiveness of subliminal advertising through sexual objects. The experiment showed seven advertisements of different brands and were played at the same time and asked the respondents to recall the best one. Also, they were asked. The results suggested that sexual embeds work if the individual are predisposed to sex. In other words, when an individual is sexually aroused, subliminal advertising has an effect more on an aroused one than a non aroused person.

Rasmussen, Tryclova, Vachnadze, Ynill, Molvig, (2014)studied the impact of subliminal advertising in movies on the consumers. The researchers came out with a belief that consumers relate with celebrities much more than any unknown person endorsing the product and therefore consumers intend to buy it because they think that even a celebrity is using it. For instance, when consumers see James Bond driving a Porche or Rolyce Royce, consumers feel like buying it not because of the attributes but because of the very person driving it without they realizing the intent for the same.

Emsenhembur (2010) analysed the impact of scent marketing on the consumers in through subliminal advertising messages. He believes that store chains and service provider beguile customers with a pleasant shopping atmosphere by installing scent diffusers to evaporate overwhelming fragrance. This paper studies the psychological background of scent marketing in customer involvement. For instance, when consumers are purchasing products like Lip Balm, detergent, Mosquito Repellent etc where the core features are to moisturize

the lips and to remove the dirt and not to smell good because eventually it would not matter. But it has been observed that customers buy the product because of the smell and the olfactory function and not because of its main attribute because it manipulates the mood behavior and recalls often forgotten memories.

Studies related to concept: Facts & Methodologies:

Moore(1992)highlights the importance of Subliminal Perception and the kinds of facts and fallacies attached to it. It starts with explaining the meaning of awareness and if consumers are aware about a stimulus and is able to report it then he is supposed to above the stimulus threshold otherwise below it. The researcher explains there are two methods of defining consciousness, Subjective and Objective. Subjective threshold holds true when the visibility level of the stimulus is very high and each individual has their own definition and explanation to the exposed object. When a stimulus lie below the subjective threshold of an individual's mind is called, Subliminal Perception, which thereby influence his actions, behaviors, judgments, etc. Researcher further explains the different effects of advertising and the presence of embedded objects like words, symbols etc in advertisements which kind of give a different meaning to it altogether but at the same time it becomes almost invisible to the naked eye and go unnoticed. So sometimes the viewers might be aware of the stimulus but not might be aware of their responses is directly depended on the stimuli. He also explains the concept of subliminal self help tapes that are present not only auditory domain but also in visual domain as well, advertisements ranging from radio to television to magazines etc. He states that in Auditory domain, the target message is low in volume and which gets superimposed by the hidden meaning so as to make consumers act in a certain way.

Kiran & Kishore(2013)highlights the importance of the term 'Subliminal Advertising' and also to create a sense of awareness in the minds of consumers, if not created yet, and thereby make them smart not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of shopping and shaping their perception in a different light. He further explains it through the first experiment that was conducted in 1950s stating to 'Eat Popcorn' and 'Drink Cola-Cola' with such less exposure time that it was short enough to be aware about it but long enough to act upon it.

Further the use of word "SEX" as well as use of phallic symbols (tongue, lips, genitals) in the advertisements of products like Cigarettes, perfume, candies etc are very common. These words and symbols are carefully embedded in illustrations that it becomes almost invisible to the human eye but it has an impact on the subconscious mind. Advertisers make use of all sorts of concepts: Smell, Sight, Sound, Taste, which has a major impact on consumer's buying patterns and decisions. Therefore, they came to the conclusion that subliminal messages triggers somewhere in consumers brain to act in a certain way. Also, it tries to create not only a mood but also a familiarity with the product which is not been seen before which in turn effect the purchase decision.

Broyles(2006)discusses the numerous works done by researchers and the different methodologies they adopted to understand the consumer's psychology. Different researchers had their own way of studying the behavior, one used the concept of controlled object and uncontrolled object whereas one used the not so secret sales pitching technique and found out that consumers do react to subliminal advertising especially concerning to beverage products as looking at the posters make them thirsty and persuades them to act in a certain way.

The researcher realized that it is important as it defines the credibility of the advertisement and the consumer acts not on the reality but their own perception of reality which being valid or not is comprised in these advertisements in one way or the other. Also, it tries to scare the consumers into believing into something which is not been seen before. This has also been seen as manipulating the decision aspect of the individuals as they react on something they have not been fully been aware of.

Lantos(2006)suggests that marketers in communicating a simple message to the consumers embed tactics which consumer should be aware such as advertising tactics which are in a way seducing consumers into act in a certain way and also categorizes the subliminal advertising into three parts:

- 1) Flashing a visual stimulus too quickly
- 2) By using sub audible messages
- 3) By use of embedded stimuli: words, pictures etc.

This paper goes on discussing about 'if the subliminal advertising actually exists' and if yes then 'does it really work' and if yes then 'should it not be illegal to do so'. These ads must be banned, they say but no confirmation has been received from state or central government but these kinds have been removed from radio and television due to the concept of deceptive advertising. The researchers come to a conclusion that intangible advertising exits for the mere purpose of persuading the consumer in the products like beverages, cigarettes, perfumes, soaps etc and kind of kind of entice them in buying the product.

Moore(1982)believes that more intense stimuli have a greater influence on the consumer behavior than a weaker one. Author further talks about the one advertising tactic called 'Subliminal Advertising' which not only

makes a consumer unaware of the ad being displayed but are also oblivious to the fact that they are being stimulated by marketers. Therefore consumers think to be behaving in a certain way due to some different attribute. Another problem being discussed in this paper is the concept of selective attention i.e. the capacity or process of reacting to a certain stimuli selectively when several occur simultaneously which means a consumer concentrates to only the hidden persuaders without being aware about it, where at the same time other stimulus are also present like celebrity, color, package, price, brand recall etc.

As the effects of subliminal advertising is so subtle that even a consumer is not able to comprehend it, the research also could not come up with a evidence that if this particular technique influences the behavior and also if it will affect the behavior if subliminal advertising would have been stronger(Moore, 1982)

Research Gap:

Empirical studies have identified that advertisers and marketer rely on consumer’s psychology and their perception, which probes unconscious needs and desires in manipulating an unsuspecting public into buying products. Also at the same time, it becomes quite difficult for the consumer to comprehend the true cause of their action. However there has been not much study that probes the factors of interpretation that influences consumers when they get exposed to subliminal advertisements and whether the buying intention is only because of their likeness towards that brand or it was more to do with some relation to the subliminal hints given in the advertisements. Every advertiser and consumer have different perception about subliminal communication, some believe it is not real and some believe it affects the sales of certain category of items. As not many studies have been done in India about consumer awareness of subliminal advertising this research in this area becomes quite necessary in finding out if subliminal is even ethical in advertising today. Endeavour is to study if consumers are aware about such a concept as used by marketers to influence them to buy it without the need for it. If yes, then if they are being exposed to such a concept, would they feel influenced by such bold ads and would they continue to buy the product as the main objective of such a presence is to persuade the unconscious mind of the innocent consumers. This paper also tries to understand the consumer’s thoughts while looking at the subliminal print advertisements so as to know what all they interpret as and when they get exposed to it. It also helps in understanding if consumers are able to identify the hidden persuaders in print or television advertisement.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Lack of awareness at the consumers end and also the inability of the consumers to interpret the right meaning of the advertisements when been exposed to can impact the behaviour. There is a probability of company’s image or their brand name being affected due to the use of such advertisements and hence it is crucial to garner consumer insights.

Variables Under Investigation:

Variables Defining Subliminal Advertising

Relevant Variables for the Study	
Independent Variables	Impact on the Psyche
Virtual Choice Behavior	Enhances the Product Attractiveness
Brief Exposure	Enhances the Product Attractiveness
Distraction	Enhances the Product Attractiveness
Hidden Persuaders	Enhances the Product Attractiveness
Association: Product & Desire	Enhances the Product Attractiveness
Subconscious Familiarity	Product Recall
Psychological Manipulation	Product Recall

Variables Defining the Impact on Consumer’s Purchase Intention

Relevant Variables for the Study	
Independent Variables	Impact
Media	Influence the Consumer Behaviour
Type of Advertisement	Influence the Consumer Behaviour

Relevant Variables for the Study	
Independent Variables	Impact
Demographics	Influence the Consumer Behaviour
Phallic Symbols/Words	Influence the Consumer Behaviour
Product Type	Influence the Consumer Behaviour
Celebrity Endorsement	Influence the Consumer Behaviour
Psychographics	Influence the Consumer Behaviour

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

In order to bridge the gaps revealed in the various research papers, this particular study tried to target some aspects related to subliminal advertising which had some effect on the end consumers. The study tries to understand the following aspects:

- To determine consumers awareness about subliminal marketing.
- To understand the impact of subliminal advertising on consumers ability to interpret the subliminal message of advertisements
- To analyse consumers response after being exposed to hidden persuaders.

Sample Size for the Study:

The following research study would be conducted on 20 consumers picked at random, as this research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, and the sample size belongs to diverse demographics in order to capture a result that is free of any prejudice.

Tools Adopted for the Study:

A detailed qualitative and exploratory research framework, discussion guide line was created for the two categories of customers in order to understand the depth of the study. However, the structure of the questions was such that it captured all the key variables and elements required for the perfect qualitative study. Insights was taken from each response in order to understand the depth of the study.

DATA COLLECTION:

Primary Data:

Primary data collected through qualitative research designed for the consumers. 20 Interviews were taken consisting of 10 Male respondents and 10 Female Respondents.

Secondary Data:

Journals, newspaper reports & articles and different internet sources were referred for collecting secondary data.

Tools used for the study:

Thematic Analysis in order to interpret the results of the study .

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

Qualitative study serves a number of purposes and is able to bring out the in depth understanding of the consumer regarding the topic. But it leads to some limitations as well.

The sample size was limited to only two demographic i.e. college goers and the working class people and therefore it could not completely capture the true understanding of all age groups.

Discussion Guide:

The discussion guide is an overview of the interview pattern that will be conducted with the consumers. The objective, discussion flow, instructions with the interview questions related to the study are listed below:

Objective:

To study the impact of subliminal advertising on consumer's message interpretation

Discussion Flow:

- Understanding Consumer Context
- Understanding the advertising pattern
- Different Advertising Interpretation of consumers

Instructions with the Moderator:

- Only three people i.e. interviewer, interviewee and moderator.
- Make sure the recorder, laptop, paper and pencil are at place.
- Also to ensure that there is clarity in voice while recording.

Overview of the Interview:

Section 1: Understanding of Consumer Context

- Name of the consumer
- Consumer's Profession
- Consumer's Age
- About consumer
- Consumer's shopping behavior

Section 2: Understanding of the Advertising Consumption Pattern of Individuals

- Consumer's advertisement consumption behavior.
- Consumer's feelings towards a particular type of media vehicle.
- Advertisements impact on consumer's buying behavior.
- Type of media and its impact on consumer's buying behavior
- Celebrity endorsement and its impact on consumer's buying behavior.
- Which product's advertisement induces a consumer to buy a product.
- Sexual or phallic symbols and its impact on consumer's buying behavior.

Section 3: Understanding of Advertisement Specific Interpretation

- Impact of different advertisements on consumer's buying behavior.
- Interpretation of the advertisements by the consumers
- Virtual choice behavior related with the beverage advertisements
- Association between product and desire while buying a product.
- Any content which offends the consumer in any way.
- The kind of advertisement a consumer will prefer for a particular product.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS:

Overview of Analysis:

Research methodology entailed qualitative research design in a form of thematic representation in order to identify the factors which induces a consumer to buy a particular product also the way subliminal advertisements affect a consumer's buying behavior through hidden persuaders. This research design has been divided into three stages:

First stage was to understand more about the consumer, mainly their interest, motivation/passion in life, their daily timeline and also their shopping behavior in leisure time.

Second stage was to seek answers to questions relating to advertisement consumption pattern of individuals and their buying behavior mainly on kind of media, kind of advertisement, celebrity endorsements, product type etc.

Third stage was to conduct an in-depth analysis by exposing consumer's to different subliminal advertisements in order to understand their interpretation and what goes on in consumers mind when they buy a product.

On the basis of the above three stages, the consumer's responses were divided into different themes which will help in analyzing the consumer behavior even better.

Thematic Analysis:

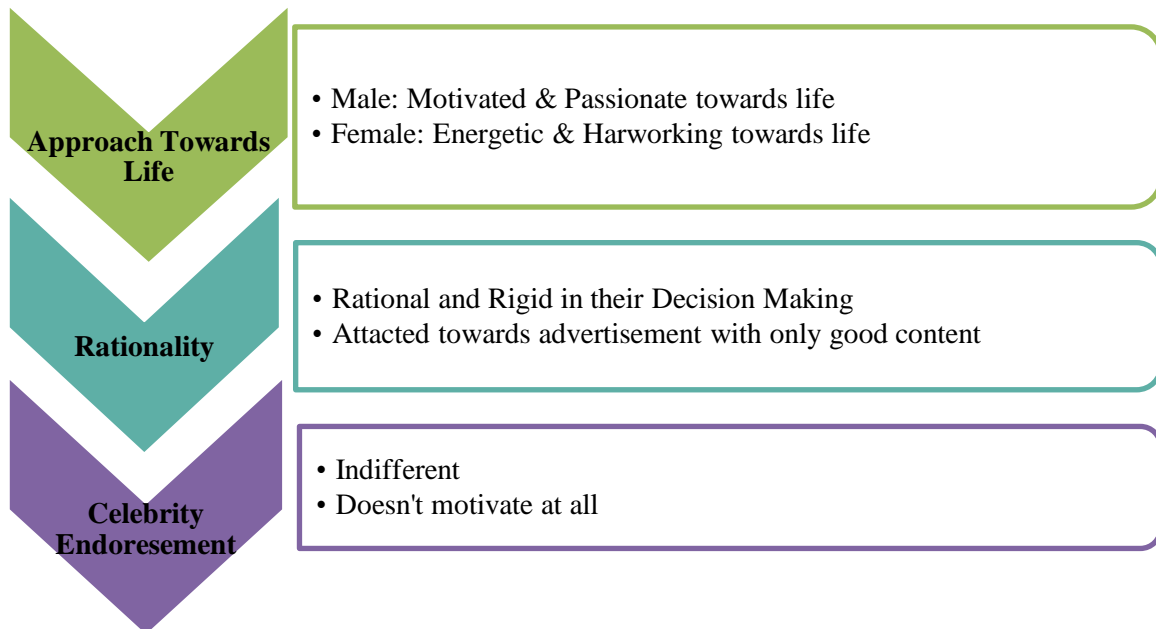
Thematic Analysis is one of the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data. Themes are patterns across data sets

that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. In this particular research design, the themes were as follows:

- Attitudinal
- Behavioral
- Feelings
- Persona
- Psyche

Attitudinal Theme:

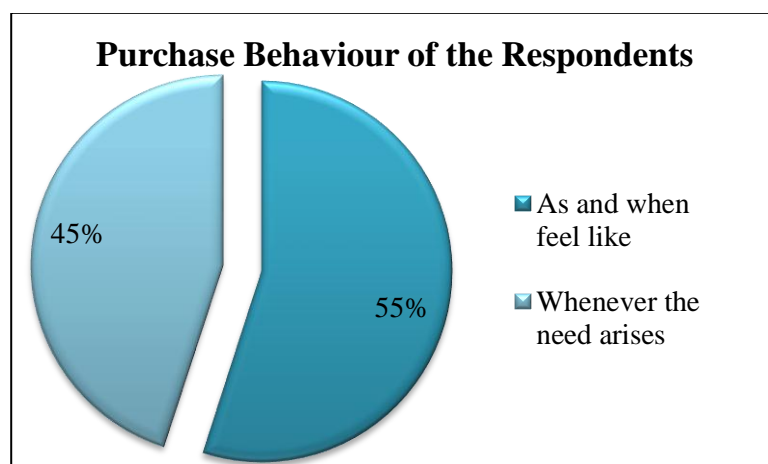
This particular theme reflects the attitude of consumers towards life which emerged as follows:



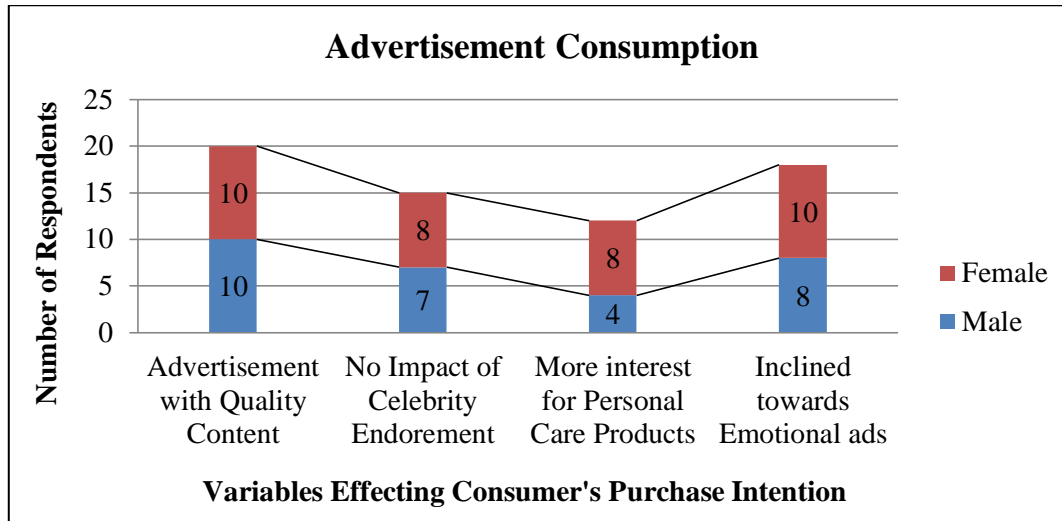
When it comes to the approach to life, female respondents are more self motivated, energetic and are hardworking in life whereas Male respondents are more positive and focused and passionate about their work and work is like their main motivation in life. Respondents are mainly not interested in watching ads as they feel it to be boring and lack good content.If the respondents are loyal towards a product, say toothpaste, no advertisement will be able to convince them to buy a brand of toothpaste. The respondents are rational and they are rigid in their decision making. Respondents attitude towards celebrities are very indifferent and that does not help in shaping their purchase behavior due to the mere fact of it being transactional for the celebrities.

Behavioural Theme:

This theme helps in understanding the consumer’s behavior towards various aspects mainly shopping and advertisements.



When it comes to shopping, 8/10 female respondents shop whenever they feel like and especially in their leisure time. Whereas, in case of male respondents, 9/10 of them shop only when the need arises. There was no difference between the responses of college goers and the working class people. Females are more inclined towards shopping whenever they feel like whereas male responses are merely focused on fulfilling their utility as and when the need arises.



Respondents are interested in watching advertisements only if they are creative, interesting and contains good content.

Female respondents are interested in watching advertisements on social media mainly as its convenient and followed by television and print advertisement whereas for male respondents the most attract form of media is television followed by print and social media.

Respondents were interested in watching emotional advertisements and also the ads which are interesting irrespective of them being informational, emotional or sexual. Anything which keeps them interested which in term helps them in buying a particular product. Mostly all the respondents said advertisements does not have an impact on their decision making as they are vague and lack creativity.

Respondents, be it male or female, highly depend on advertisements when they are looking for personal care products.

Celebrity endorsement does not affect any respondent in shaping their buying decision.

Feelings:

This theme takes into consideration the feelings attached with consumers while shopping, or being exposed to different types of advertisements.



Happiness



Objectifying Women



A Task



Emotional Touch

When quizzed about shopping, female respondents felt happy/great after shopping in their leisure time whereas, male respondents felt like they have achieved something after devoting their time to shopping. For one it is a happy moment on the other hand for one it is a task.

Respondents feel the emotional touch to be very important aspect in order to keep them attracted towards advertisements as that makes them connected to it and which in terms helps in enhancing the recall value for the product. Also female respondents feel the ads should not be very sexual and there is no need to objectify women in any way to sell a product whereas on the other hand, male respondents like advertisements being showcased in a sexual way.

Respondents feel the advertisements are vague and advertisers are doing almost anything in order to get ahead of their competitors even if that means being silly and making no sense.

Respondents feel the celebrities are doing their job and it's purely a transactional gain for them. Also more than glamour it's the utility of the product that matters.

Persona:

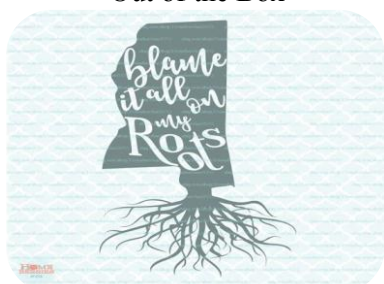
This theme represents the aspect of a consumer's character perceived by others through the answers they gave during the interview.



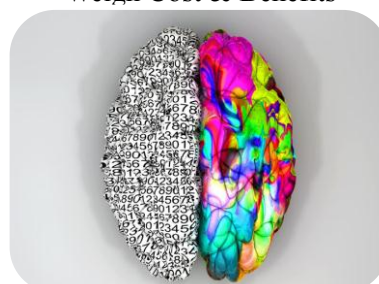
Out of the Box



Weigh Cost & Benefits



Traditional Roots Intact



Rational Beings

While interviewing the female respondents they appeared to be very enthusiastic about shopping and being very dedicated in life whereas male respondents are quite laid back when it comes to shopping and they just see it as a necessity and nothing more.

The respondents were rational in general and thought celebrities do not believe in the product they are endorsing. Respondents try to weigh both the cost and the benefits attached to the product.

Respondents are looking for a change and they like seeing something that is unconventional. They watch ads which are creative and out of the box.

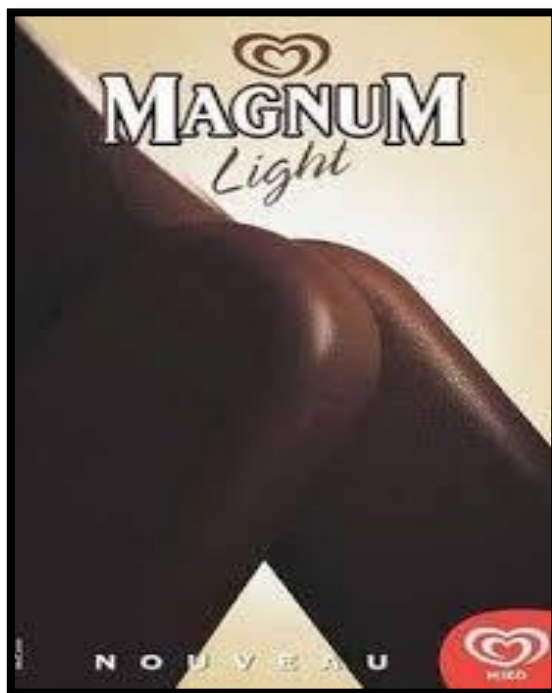
Respondents are more attached and connected to their traditional roots and values and look forward to watching emotional ads.

INTERPRETATION OF SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISEMENTS:

Psyche:

This theme would represent what all that goes on in consumer's mind when they look at an advertisement. This theme was studied in two parts i.e. Female psyche and the male psyche. As both of them are built differently and have different opinions and thoughts about the same advertisements.

Advertisement 1: Magnum, Quality Walls



Female Psyche:

Out of 10 respondents, 6 females responded this advertisement to be tempting enough to make them buy it from the store and interpreted it as a premium brand, quality of the ice cream being rich and the word 'Light' just means something which would not be thick on your tummy, especially for the chocolate lovers whereas, remaining 4 respondents felt gross and disgusted after looking at the advertisement and it did not look edible to them at all and for them it was mere selling by sexualizing the product which is of no relevance in a product category like ice cream.

Male Psyche:

Out of 10 respondents, 5 of the male respondents figured what this advertisement was trying to say subliminally. They interpreted it in many ways. Some said it to be showing a female's posterior. One thought this ad to be racist, as showing a black women's body through an ice cream product. Two people said it looked like two chocolate bars kissing each other. One said he would not like to purchase it if this image is printed on the wrapper. This interpretation also conveys that such subliminal advertisements can also tarnish the entire brand image of the product. And also, if they were not able to see the correct message, it did affect their subconscious mind, as the respondents were looking at the right direction.

Advertisement 2: Heineken Beer



Female Psyche:

All the respondents figured the subliminal message in the picture given above. Some important interpretations that came out:

They felt they were trying to associate the product with a man's sexual desire.

They feel it's okay for advertisers to take women's body for granted and treat it like an object in order to sell the product.

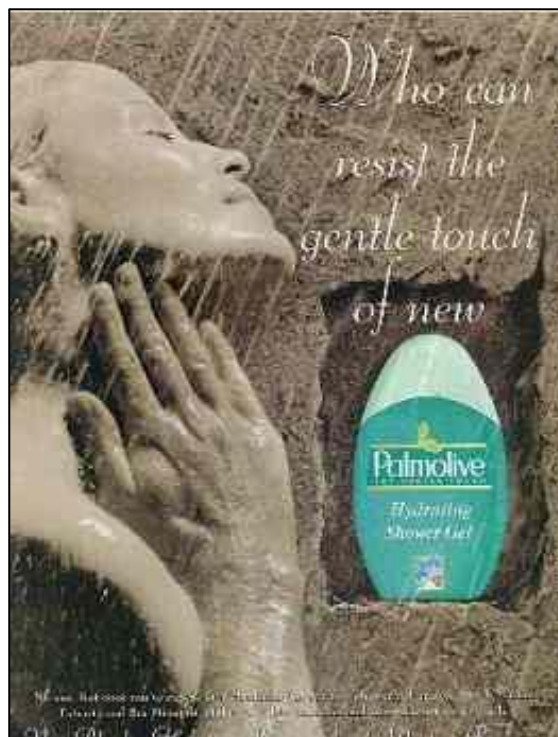
They making the bottle look sexual and desirable.

Mostly all the respondents did not mind purchasing the product, but for one respondent this advertisement created a negative picture of the product in her mind and also for the consumer segment which do not consume beer at all.

Male Psyche:

All the respondents here figured the subliminal message in this advertisement. Every respondent had a different interpretation to the message with the round women's butt in common. Some said, it would be embarrassing for them to buy this particular brand in a social circle had this been the only advertisement on the other hand some were very loyal to this brand because it's the number one imported lager brand in the world.

Advertisement 3: Palmolive Shower Gel



*This print advertisement was only meant for female respondents

Female Psyche:

For the above print advertisement, no respondent could figure the subliminal message conveyed i.e. a man's hand on women's body. The respondents interpreted the message as following:

Even the stone could not resist the gentle touch of Palmolive.

The message has not being conveyed properly and not attractive enough.

The print style was medieval age and 2 bottles of Palmolive were awkwardly placed in the print.

The above advertisement did not attract the consumers as they felt for the personal care category, price point is something which is very important and also some colorful and vibrant ads would attract them the most to ads like these in order to make them buy from store and rather word of mouth would be beneficial in shaping their purchase decision.

The entire motive of using the man's hand was lost as nobody even looked at it and even their responses could not bring out their subconscious familiarity with the advertisement present to them.

Advertisement 4: Axe Shampoo



This print advertisement was only meant for male respondents

Male Psyche:

For the above print advertisement, no respondent could figure the subliminal message conveyed i.e. symbol ‘s’ after ‘e’ in each of the product shown above, at least not explicitly. The respondents interpreted the message as following:

This picture gives you a SKU width for the consumer to look from.

Each bottle looks like a man’s genital

Would be easier to choose a shampoo and the hair gel to go with it.

Also, this ad was able to create a subconscious familiarity of the consumer with the product as 4 out of 10 consumers liked the subtle and simple colors on each bottle, which in turn attracted the consumers to the product. Therefore it can be said, the consumers were looking at the subliminal message but was not able to register it consciously.

It can also be said, that symbol being presented in different colors and shapes would not only make consumer attracted to it but also at the same time manipulate them in buying the product as bright colors stay in consumer’s mind.

Advertisement 5: Coca-Cola



Female & Male Psyche:

There was no difference in both the demographic interpretation. All the respondents here could figure out the subliminal message in the right picture. The left one went unnoticed which is located at the opening edge of the can's picture in the vending machine.

Respondents said the following:

Mostly for all, the left picture made them thirsty as it has been projected as something chilled i.e. coca-cola is the answer to the hot summer months.

Also the right image made the female respondents angry as it again sexualizes women as an object.

They also feel both the ads have been made desirable, where in one breasts are strategically placed on the can as condensation droplets and in other 'who's your daddy' being written on the top right corner of the picture.

From the responses, the messages are not so subliminal in nature and the true meaning is coming across very explicitly as compared to the other and therefore respondents tried to find subliminal hints at all the wrong places.

POST IMPACT ON CONSUMERS:

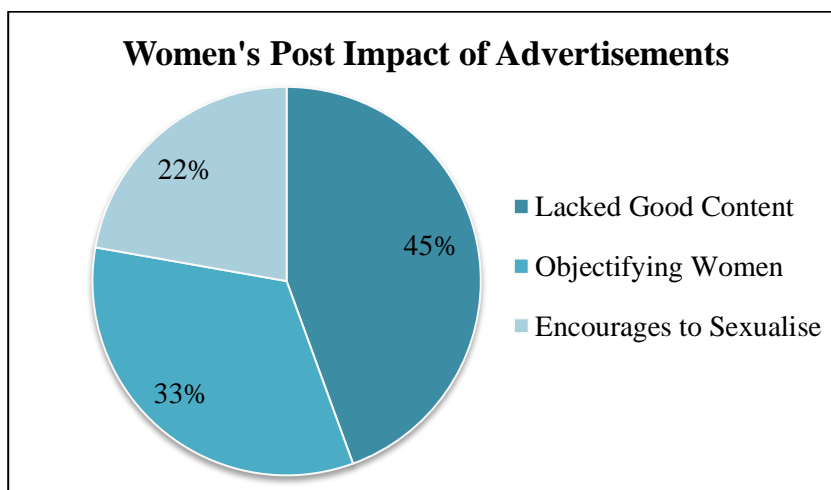
From the above interpretations of consumers, the impact of consumer decision making will differ on the basis of as to whether consumers are able to identify the hidden persuaders or not. This can be deduced from the following parameters.

Consumer's Expectations from Advertisements:

Irrespective of the gender of the respondent, the expectations are plenty and numerous but some reasons differentiated one ad copy from that of the other. Consumer expects the advertisement to be informational as they get a clear picture of the products features and attributes at the same time they want the advertisement to have creative and catchy content. Also, the consumers have gone rational and no celebrity would induce them to buy a product and therefore advertisers must endorse a person who genuinely believes and resonates with the product. And lastly, emotional ads are the way of getting into consumer's heart and mind as they are still very much intact with their traditional roots and therefore those ads immediately induces them to buy.

Post Viewing Impact:

Since the advertisements listed above were creative and had a good content but still knowledge of hidden persuaders have a different impacts on male and females.



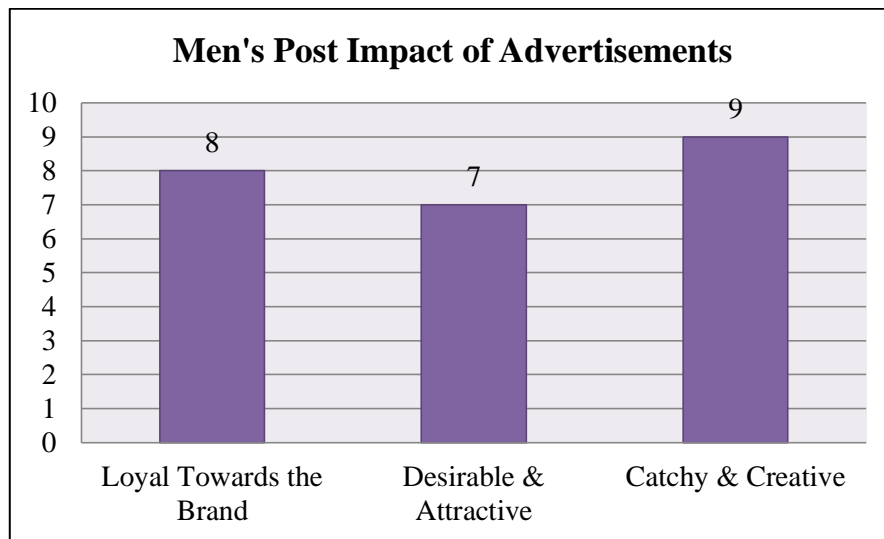
Since female respondents identified the subtlety of advertisements like Magnum, Heineken and Coca-Cola, they got offended and annoyed from the print advertisers due to three reasons:

- 45% of the respondent felt it lacked good content
- Whereas 33% of the respondents feel, objectifying women is not the only way to sell.
- Which in turn make 22% of the respondents feel such a thing acts in encouraging others to use such a tactic as they think it sells.

And therefore they would desist from buying the product in future as they believe in equality and they do not want to be considered like an object for the betterment of company's future. If they want to advertise, either use

subtleties which consumers are not able to notice or to not use it at all.

But men respondents gave a set of mix reviews. Some respondents had a problem with it and would be embarrassed and not buy the product in a social setting especially in front of women provided this print ad is on the product.



But some men liked the ads after noticing the hidden persuaders and were still ready to buy the product because:

- 80% of the men respondent were loyal to the brand and therefore would not like to switch no matter what
- Whereas, 70% of the respondents found the sexual advertisements desirable and catchy and want to continue using it.
- Also, sexual advertising made it catchy and creative too for 90% of the respondents.

Therefore, these reasons would not only attract them to the print advertisement but also help in shaping their purchase decision.

CONCLUSION OF THE FINDINGS:

From the above study it can be said subliminal advertising plays a very important aspect in both making the consumer attracted towards the product if done properly and very subtly and can also tarnish the brand image of the product if product being negatively projected even towards one demographic. The consumer buying behavior is not only limited to the internal attributes of the product but also the external factors relating to it mainly the type of advertisement, the advertising medium, product type, presence of celebrities etc. Also women and men are different in their approach to advertisements and hence female respondents are more sensitive to sexual advertisements whereas on the other hand men respondents were attracted to felt as it seemed desirable. Also, every individual is different in their personality and traits they exhibit and therefore it becomes quite difficult to study every individual and group them into one theme.

Managerial Implications of the Study:

The study highlights a severe need for good advertising techniques. Organizations incur heavy expenditure on advertisements and if went wrong, it can affect the entire brand image of the product. Subliminal advertising is used by the advertising agencies in print and television advertisements in order to target the subconscious mind of the consumers in order to get them attracted to the product. But like seen above in the findings, women respondent are very sensitive to phallic symbols being used in the print ads which make not only results in disliking the brand but also negative marketing of the brand which can cost a lot to the organization.

The advertising message must be made keeping in mind the demographic an organization is dealing with. Subliminal advertising is said only to be successful if the subliminal message hits the unconscious cord of human's mind which was not the case in any advertisement used above except for Palmolive and axe. Subtlety is not only important for capturing the target market but also at the same time it's important to not hurt the sentiments of the individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Separate techniques can be created in order to induce a customer in buying the product rather than focusing on the subconscious mind.

Subtlety is the key to such a technique but if captured by the conscious mind then it gets difficult for the consumer to forget the brand which can work both ways. It can result in negative marketing making the product popular and building a recall value for the product and can also result in negative word of mouth advertising which will not only tarnish the brand image of the brand but also of the organization as a whole.

Organizations can use such tactics when product focuses the need of only one demographic. For example axe, they are very clear in the market they want to target and female reluctance and hatred will not result in decline in sales volume.

Rather than using a sexual approach, the advertisers can invest in projecting an emotional touch to the advertisements because that what connects the consumers with the image of the product.

The advertisers must invest in making simple yet sensible ads as the consumers have become rational and are more interested in advertisements which are real and genuine and are also in any way related to current affairs.

Contribution to the Knowledge and Understanding:

This study is confined to only one kind of advertising technique and its influence on consumer buying behavior and therefore this study would be useful to only those organizations that use this technique in order to capture more and more consumers by targeting on their sub-conscious level. They should realize this kind of advertisement has a flip side to it as well.

Scope for Further Research:

This study is only limited to the responses of 20 consumers with limited number of advertisement from a range of product categories i.e. ice cream brands, perfume brand, personal care brand and beverage brand. Further research could be taking an in depth analysis of one product type with variety of print ads relating to that item and studying the consumer behavior. This study can also be used as an extension to study if consumers feel manipulated or cheated in any way if being exposed to the subliminal messages present in their favorite brands.

CONCLUSION:

The overall conclusion of the study is every individual is different in their opinions, behavior, personality traits etc and has different interpretations for the same object given to them. Their buying behavior is also affected in the same way where not only the internal factors but the external factors drive them towards a product. The most important driver being the advertisement part where advertisers use different techniques where subliminal is a part of it and tries to capture the market by triggering the needs in their sub-conscious minds. It works for the organizations if the consumers are not able to get the subliminal message and is only captures in their subconscious mind and does the complete opposite if it gets captured consciously.

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