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Subliminal Messaging: How Effective Is It?

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Subliminal messaging is a popular tactic used by businesses and politicians in advertising in an attempt to alter one's beliefs, feelings, and actions. Subliminal messaging is defined as an idea that consumers can be influenced by messages we do not consciously detect. Often, subliminal messaging consists of information given in a hidden manner for an average of .003 seconds, which is just long enough for viewers to digest it subconsciously (Zimmerman, 2014). Conversely, individuals in the scientific community question if it is truly a persuasive strategy and are even frightened by the thought that it could be. Controversy is often sparked by this invasive marketing tactic, which resulted in numerous studies to provide demographics resulting in the true effectiveness of subliminal messaging.

Many consumers and buyers fear subliminal messaging because they do not want to be controlled or influenced to do something they do not actually want to do. James Vicary and Frances Thayer conducted a study in which the words "Eat popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" were presented subliminally. The study revealed that these hidden messages increased popcorn sales by 58% and Coca-Cola sales by 18% (Zimmerman, 2014). When this study was published, people became weary of subliminal messaging and feared what it could make them do. However, after further research was conducted it was determined that subliminal messages influence viewers very minimally. For instance, Anthony Pratkanis conducted a study to test the effectiveness of subliminal messaging on a large group of subjects. Pratkanis played tapes of calming sounds with subliminal messages hidden within them. The tapes claimed to enhance memory and self-esteem, however, Pratkanis reported otherwise (Onion, 2018). He argued that "There was absolutely no changes in the scores, but we also found that people thought they were effective." The study revealed that statistically, the subliminal messages hidden in the audio

tapes had zero effect on the volunteers, but it was found that if the volunteers went into the study thinking they were going to come out with better memory and confidence, they did. This study concurs that subliminal messaging is effective minimally, if even at all.

Given its controversies, I argue that subliminal messaging does work in a subtle way, however, that does not excuse the encroachment of companies and sellers' to persuade individuals thoughts and actions without their consent. There is evidence that shows subliminal stimuli can slightly alter your actions later on, but not immediately. There also must be an underlying want or need for the product or action being digested subconsciously. Zimmerman states that "Psychologists are now aware that to be effective subliminal stimuli must appeal to current needs and goals. For example, subliminally presenting thirst related words led people to drink more, *when* they were already thirsty" (Zimmerman, 2014). Moreover, he continues to say that individuals watching a message or seeing an advertisement containing subliminal stimuli must not be aware of the attempt to influence their actions. There are limitations to subliminal messaging, but it is effective in minimal ways if it is presented correctly in advertisement. Despite being slightly persuasive to consumers and individuals, I do not believe that it is enough to completely alter one's actions or previous beliefs towards a product or campaign.

Due to the controversy of the invasiveness of privacy and rights of viewers of subliminal messaging, laws have been made to restrict businesses and promoters from using subliminal stimuli excessively or even at all. The Federal Communications Commission, or FCC, and the Federal Trade Commission, or FTC, have enforced laws prohibiting this persuasive technique in an attempt to protect individuals against encroachment. The general public felt safer knowing that watching advertisements would not influence them to do something they might not have

initially intended on doing. Despite these laws, some companies and campaigners are still able to get away with utilizing subliminal stimuli because it is very hard for victims to prove that they were genuinely affected by the stimuli in the shown advertisement. For instance, according to Psychologist World,

During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, a television ad campaigning for Republican candidate George W. Bush showed words (and parts thereof) scaling from the foreground to the background on a television screen. When the word BUREAUCRATS flashed on the screen, one frame showed only the last part, RATS. (Psychologist World [APA], n.d.)

The Democratic party requested that the FCC penalize Bush, but after reviewing the advertisement, no repercussions were addressed to the Republican party. This political campaign demonstrates how difficult it is to win the case against subliminal messaging despite the rules and regulations set by the FCC and FTC.

Personally, I believe that the regulations that the FCC and FTC have put into place eliminating this advertising tactic are at an acceptable level of strictness. As a consumer, I agree that there should be reinforcement to protect consumers rights and privacy, but advertisers have to get their point across to the public in some intriguing way. Additionally, because there is such little evidence of subliminal messaging actually affecting an individual's actions and beliefs, I do not believe that it is a direct threat to the general public. However, many members of society feel the same as the press in the Saturday Review when they stated,

The subconscious mind is the most delicate part of the most delicate apparatus in the entire universe. It is not to be smudged, sullied, or twisted in order to boost the sales of popcorn or anything else. Nothing is more difficult in the modern world than to protect the privacy of the human soul. (Smudging the Subconscious, Saturday Rev., Oct. 5, 1957)

This is an understandable point of view that was considered when the FCC and FTC created the regulations to protect the rights of consumers in the first place. When a consumer is exposed to subliminal messaging without their knowledge or consent, they are deprived of their constitutional right to choose whether or not they want to listen to what is being presented (Progressive Awareness Research, Inc. [APA], n.d.). The tactic is a good idea in the sense that it was initially created to boost sales or sway a voters for a political campaign in a certain way, but it is still an unethical practice.

Overall, subliminal messaging is shown to be genuinely effective in very few cases, though many consumers believe it has the power to completely transform their initial thoughts, actions, or beliefs. Through numerous studies, it has been proven that adding subliminal stimuli to advertisements actually has a minuscule effect on the listeners or watchers actions. However, despite ultimately being an inefficient tactic, the FCC and FTC have created regulations that prohibits such strategies from being used because of the invasive properties it holds. I think that subliminal messaging has minimal effects on individuals, but it is enough to continue enforcing the laws created by the FCC and FTC. In the modern age of media and technology, the

constitutional rights of citizens should play a larger role in protecting consumers from invasive techniques used in advertising and campaigning.

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