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Protect your Brains, Subliminal Messaging is Everywhere

Product placement, also known as *embedded marketing* is a form of advertising, where branded products are placed in a context like advertisements, movies, television shows, and news programs. As advertisers of the branded products, advertisers would like viewers to notice their products. Advertisers pay big bucks to make sure viewers can spot their branded products. In order to understand why advertisers routinely use product placement in advertisements, movies, television shows, and news programs, one must understand *subliminal* and *supraliminal* processing. Subliminal and supraliminal processing is a tactic that advertisers use on consumers for persuasion.

The word subliminal literally means below the threshold of human consciousness. Thus, a subliminal stimulus is one that is processed without conscious awareness. This is in contrast to supraliminal messages that are consciously processed. An example of a subliminal message is an image that is flashed so quickly that a person cannot consciously register the message. An image that is momentary, yet easily recognized to the naked eye and can be consciously registered, is supraliminal. This dissimilarity is very significant to advertisers because advertisers regularly use product placements in movies and television shows. The practice of “planting products within advertising, shows, movies, etc, however, involves supraliminal processing” (Gass). This is because advertisers *want* you to notice their products (supraliminal advertising). Advertisers pay big bucks for the integration of their branded products in programming to make sure viewers can spot them. Product placement in movies and television “is a 3 billion dollar per year business and that product placement within reality television shows are the most effective. (Baran)

The public uproar of subliminal advertising took place over two key periods. The first uproar in subliminal advertising dates back to the 1950's. In 1958, James Vicary claimed to have used subliminal messages as an advertising tactic in a movie theater to raise sales at the concession stand. Over a period of six weeks, James Vicary tested subliminal messaging on movie goers. James Vicary claimed to have found dramatic "increases in the sales of Coca-Cola and popcorn when he flashed the phrases "Drink Coca-Cola" and "Eat popcorn" for 1/2000 of a second during a movie. The statistics showed an increase in popcorn sales by fifty eight percent, with an increase in Coca-Cola sales by eighteen percent." (The roots of...) In truth, James Vicary never achieved the results to that he had claimed. His experiment on subliminal messages was commonly described as a publicity stunt. His conducted experiment had many flaws; one of his flaws was that he had no control group of movie patrons who weren't exposed to the subliminal messages and the effects. His experiment however did achieve mass hysteria into the influence of subliminal messaging and subliminal advertising. The second uproar occurred in the 1970's and 1980s. During this time, Brain Wilson Key heightened public curiosity in subliminal persuasion in advertising with his popular book *Subliminal Seduction*. Brain Wilson Key claimed to have found "phallic symbols hidden in print ads for Tanqueray gin and Chivas Regal scotch, and female genitalia on a box of Betty Crocker cake mix, and the word "Sex" backed into Ritz Crackers" (Gass).

From the mid-1970's through the mid 1990's ongoing investigations were carried out on the effects of subliminal messaging and its influence on consumers. Many of these studies focused on embedded images, or, images that are buried or concealed within an advertisement. Many individuals claimed that the embedment of images in an

advertisement could promote individuals to want to purchase things without their awareness. In one study during the year 1985 by Don Read and John Vokey, found that ads with the word “sex” embedded in them were no more effective than ads containing other syllables.

Through a method called *priming*, researchers demonstrated that “subliminal stimuli can actually influence an individual’s attitude, emotions and behavior” (Gass). The method of priming established and presented that an individual can be influenced into certain beliefs, attitudes and behaviors without be consciously aware of it. The public became so “afraid of the power of subliminal messaging in advertising by the 1970’s, that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) banned the use of subliminal messaging in advertisements” (Ellis-Christensen). The Federal Communications Commission ban however was only enforced for subliminal advertisements and did not affect subliminal messaging in film, and other forms of media including music and radio.

Subliminal messaging that occurs in music and audio recording is known as *backward masking*. It is important to realize the difference between *reverse speech* and *backward masking*. Backward masking refers to the act of hiding messages in sound recordings that are only audible when the recording is played backward and are “deliberately superimposed messages” (Oates) . Reverse speech however is the natural occurrence of messages that are created by playing it backward. An example of reverse speech is the word “evil”. The word “evil” backwards is “live”. Backward masking has been a controversy “sense the late sixties, when backward masking was found on some Beatles albums that hinted that Paul McCartney had died.”(Oates) The controversies of backward masking in music continued through the hippy years of the seventies and eighties when

religious fundamentalists claimed that the devil himself possessed the minds of singers, causing them to insert messages to the public. Backwards masking in lyrics has been blamed for persuading or driving individuals to commit suicide. In one case, a father “filed a lawsuit against Ozzy Osbourne’s record label, claiming that backward-masked lyrics on the *Blizzard of Oz* album drove his son to commit suicide. A similar suit was filed but the parents of two teens who committed suicide after listening to backward-masked lyrics on Judas Priest’s *Stained Class* album. In both cases, the judges ruled in favor of the defendants, citing the lack of any causal connection between the reversed lyrics and the teen’s death.”(Gass) Studies however concluded that backward masking and the embedment of



messages in audio recordings have failed to demonstrate any effects on listeners.

Recently, Disney had become under fire for its use of subliminal messaging in its movies. For example, on the Disney cover of the *Little Mermaid*, what seems to be an embedded penis in the kingdom is pictured. This is now removed on the recent covers on the

illustration. Another and perhaps the most popular occurred in the *Lion King*. In one scene, the word “sex” might have been embedded in a dust of wind. The “film animators stated however that the word that is embedded is not the word “sex” but “SFX” (a common abbreviation of special effects)” (Snopes). There is still controversy among the public of

the message that is seen. It only takes a few isolated cases, like the Disney example mentioned, to convince people that subliminal messages are everywhere.

As described above advertisers are not really interested in subliminal and subaudible messaging. Advertisers are not interested in subliminal and subaudible messaging because consumers are unconsciously aware of what is being advertised to them in the message. Instead advertisers depend on supraliminal messages that can be consciously processed by the consumer. Advertisers use product placement, which involves supraliminal processing, to persuade consumers.

So why precisely does the public have a fascination on subliminal messages? The reason is because many individuals find conspiracy theories interesting and attractive to study and detect. It is also because one feels a sense of accomplishment when a subliminal message is discovered and the message usually resonates in the individuals mind. Despite the public fascination in subliminal messaging, embedding of images and recordings in advertising and just in general, it is still unclear of the persuasive power that each is said to hold on the public domain. But in conclusion, an individual feels smarter when they find subliminal messages in any type of context, whether being advertisement, television, radio, music, etc, and they seem to achieve a sense of achievement when they are discovered. Do you the reader feel smart? This is asked because this paper contains a “subliminal” message. Did you see it? Did it consciously register? Did the message work and give an effect... Hopefully yes. If you didn't see the subliminal message please read the paper again until you do.

If you need a hint: it is at the top of page 3, if your unable to read the fine print, get a magnify glass.

Works Cited

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