

Subliminal Messaging in Advertising: Can Hidden Meaning Impact Consumer Behaviour?

Marinković, Natali

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Natali Marinković

Subliminal Messaging in Advertising: Can Hidden Meaning Impact Consumer Behaviour?

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English
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Rijeka

Supervisor:

dr. sc. Marija Brala Vukanović

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this B.A. thesis is to delve into the intriguing realm of subliminal messages in advertising with an emphasis on exploring their overall presence and their potential impact on consumer behaviour. Due to the ever-growing importance of advertisements in terms of influencing consumers' purchasing habits and decision making, advertisers are constantly seeking innovative methods to present their product or brand. Subliminal messages, i.e. messages which are hidden below the threshold of conscious perception, have become one such method of interest for advertisers in the last few decades. In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, I will first discuss the origins of subliminal messages in advertising and the empirical studies which were conducted in an attempt to prove their effectiveness, or lack thereof. After a brief discussion regarding the different kinds of subliminal messages which exist, a series of example advertisements will be presented and analysed with the objective of determining the presence of subliminal stimuli. In order to achieve a clearer and more concise analysis, the example advertisements will be divided into a couple of distinct categories. The first group will regard advertisements which feature hidden messages of a sexual nature, and the second one will regard purely language based advertisements with a focus on those which appear in the field of tourism. These examples were pulled from various media platforms, such as television advertisements, magazine covers, and political campaigns. The purpose of these analyses is not only to determine the presence of subliminal stimuli, but also to show how these hidden messages are supposed to influence the minds of consumers.

Keywords: subliminal messages, subliminal advertising, subliminal stimuli, sexual embedding, consumer behaviour, marketing, tourism, personification

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1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the most essential elements that comprises the world of marketing (Briesch, Sethuraman & Tellis, 2011). In the modern world, companies have seemingly become dependent on advertising as a foundation for their success, just as advertising itself seems to have become an indispensable component of business which directly influences not only how consumers perceive certain brands, but it can also influence and shape consumer behaviour and their ultimate decision of whether or not to purchase a product, good or service. However, despite how effective advertisements may be, advertisers are always looking to find innovative ways to capture the attention of consumers, to evoke specific emotions and to ultimately get them to purchase whatever it is that they are trying to sell.

One such approach that has been sparking curiosity and controversy ever since its debut in the mid-twentieth century is the use of subliminal messages in advertising. The adjective *subliminal* is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as something that is not recognized or understood by the conscious mind, but still has an influence on it, and that is exactly what subliminal advertising strives to do. Subliminal advertising is defined as the use of stimuli that are presented outside of awareness with the intention to influence consumer behaviour, and as such, it takes the form of a brand name or persuasive message presented in such a way that consumers are unable to consciously notice it (Verwijmeren, 2014).

The objective of my thesis is to delve deeper into the world of subliminal messages in advertising in order to critically examine their purported effectiveness. By analysing existing literature, empirical studies, and real-world examples, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for consumers, marketers, and society as a whole. To achieve this objective, I will first provide an overview of the origins of subliminal messages in advertising along with exploring the empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of subliminal messages in influencing consumer behaviour. Next, I will put forward a conceptual framework to define and differentiate various forms of subliminal messages, discussing both visual and auditory stimuli employed in advertising. This will be followed by a series of examples which I will analyse in order to evaluate the extent to which subliminal stimuli might be able to shape attitudes, preferences, and purchasing decisions.

To conclude my thesis I will provide a final overview of my observations gathered by analysing the aforementioned examples of advertisements which utilise subliminal messages as a marketing technique.

2. THE HISTORY OF SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING

This section of the paper will attempt to provide a historical overview of subliminal messages and their first appearances in the world of marketing and advertisements. Also discussed will be certain empirical studies which attempted to prove the effectiveness of subliminal stimuli on the human mind.

2.1. The origins of subliminal advertising

The notion of subliminal influence in advertising gained widespread attention in 1957 when a psychologist and marketing researcher named James M. Vicary claimed to have conducted an experiment on unknowing moviegoers at a movie theatre in Fort Lee, New Jersey, and then proceeded to share his findings. The experiment involved six weeks of testing, during which he had implemented two phrases into the showing of the movie *Picnic*. The phrases in question were *Eat popcorn* and *Drink Coca-Cola*, and they would flash on screen every five seconds for such a brief amount of time, specifically one three thousandths of a second, that the moviegoers could not possibly be aware of their presence. However, according to Vicary, the phrases did influence those watching the movie because popcorn and Coca Cola sales increased by 57.7% and 18.1% respectively. Interestingly enough, Vicary never published the so-called study in a scientific journal, nor did he have a control group to support his experiment, but after the supposed results were reported in various news stories a public outrage ensued (Broyles, 2006). Namely, people were paranoid, and, moreover, they were concerned about being psychologically manipulated into unknowingly purchasing products. Needless to say, Vicary became famous overnight for being *the inventor of subliminal advertising*. However, in an interview in 1962, he admitted to fabricating the results of his study in order to save his marketing firm from going bankrupt. Unfortunately though, this backtracking done by Vicary did not receive nearly as much attention as his original findings did, and thus the idea of subliminally influencing consumers through advertising has remained in the public eye ever since.

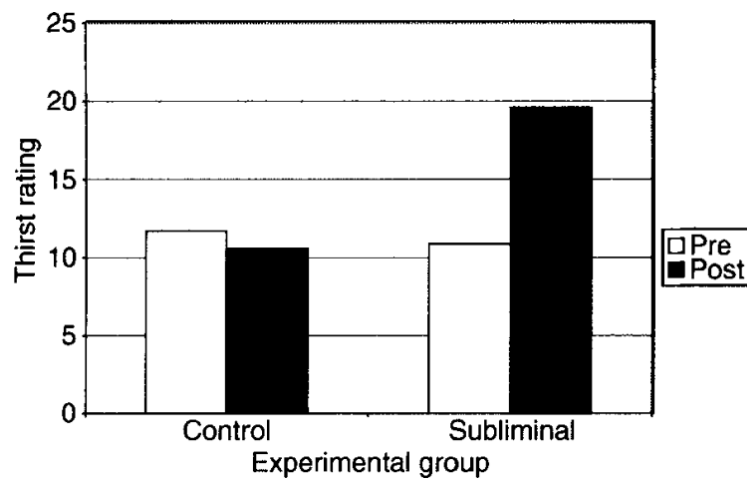
Decades of research have since attempted to shed light on this intriguing phenomenon, exploring its effectiveness and ethical implications, and even though subliminal advertising is widely considered to be ineffective, a lot of people strongly believe that their behaviour is being influenced unconsciously, and many researchers strive to prove this as well.

2.2. Empirical studies regarding subliminal messaging

Subsequently to James Vicary's experiment, numerous researchers attempted to replicate his findings by conducting their own studies in similar manners. For example, in 1959 a pair of researchers by the names of Calvin and Dollemayer strived to produce the same results by doing an experiment with identical circles. The participants were flashed with two different phrases, either *Choose left* or *Choose right*, following which they had to choose between one of two identical circles. In the end, the participants showed no signs of having been influenced by these flashing messages, except for those who were actually able to read the flashing messages. Hence, the two of them concluded that subliminal messages had no influence on human cognition (Verwijmeren, 2014).

However, various researchers continued to delve deeper into the field of subliminal messaging and sometimes their results did, in fact, garner a positive response. For example, two such experiments regarding self-assessed thirst levels were performed by Cooper and Cooper (2002). The first experiment involved 80 participants which were divided into two different age groups with an equal number of members, and they were exposed to an 18 minute long episode of the famous animated television show *The Simpsons* which was interlaced with 24 subliminally charged frames lasting 33 milliseconds. Of the 24 frames, twelve were images showing cans of *Coca-Cola*, while the other twelve were images of the word *thirsty*. The control group was made to watch the same exact episode but with blank frames lasting 33 milliseconds and occurring at the same time as those with subliminally charged messages that were shown to the other group of participants. The results were gathered by having the participants take a questionnaire directly before and immediately after having seen the episode of *The Simpsons*. The questions regarded their current state with focus on how happy, comfortable, thirsty and hungry they felt, along with a few other control questions. Interestingly, the group that was exposed to subliminal messages reported a much higher level of thirst than the one reported before having seen the episode with subliminal messages.

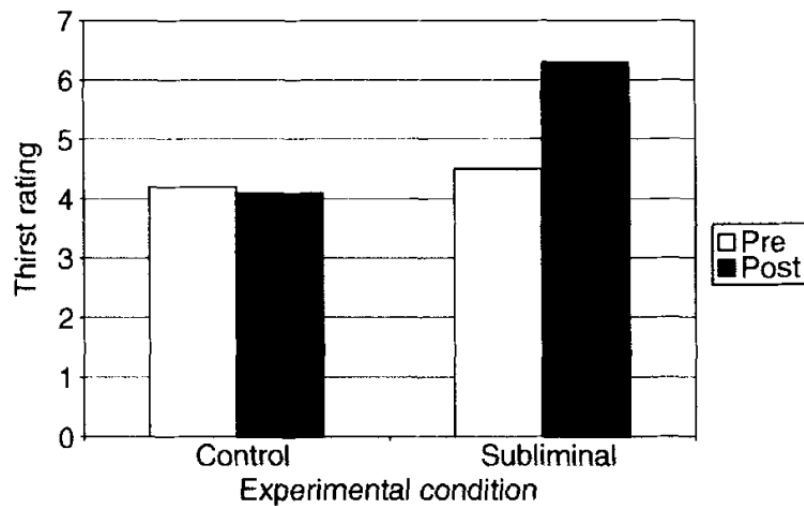
Figure 1 – Participants' Ratings of Thirst Before and After Being Exposed to Subliminal Messages: Experiment 1 (Cooper and Cooper, 2002)



The participants were not informed about the presence of subliminal stimuli before the experiment, but they were asked if they recall seeing any after having gone through with the experiment and not a single individual reported seeing stimuli embedded in the television show. Following this, ten participants from the group were pulled and made to press a button each time they thought they might have seen subliminal stimuli. Of the 24 frames, the button was only pressed 63 times by the ten individuals and only two of those were within five seconds of a subliminal frame. The results of the experiment showed that the group that was exposed to subliminal stimuli rated themselves 8.6 point thirstier than they had rated themselves on the 31 point scale before having watched the episode of *The Simpsons*, while the control group rated themselves only slightly less thirsty than before, but essentially a negligible amount. Therefore, the results ultimately showed that exposure to thirst related subliminal stimuli, such as the word *thirsty* and an image of a *Coca-Cola* can, caused participants to rate themselves as thirstier than they had been prior to the exposure to the stimuli.

Cooper and Cooper (2002) followed up with another experiment which involved a group of 45 participants to watch a different episode of *The Simpsons*, this time replacing the word *thirsty* with an image of a thirsty individual. More specifically, the image was taken from the cover of the magazine *Sports Illustrated* and it portrayed a sweaty Sugar Ray Leonard after his boxing match against Roberto Duran, which he had won. Both the two experiments and their findings were largely similar.

Figure 2 – *Participants’ Ratings of Thirst Before and After Being Exposed to Subliminal Messages: Experiment 2 (Cooper and Cooper, 2002)*

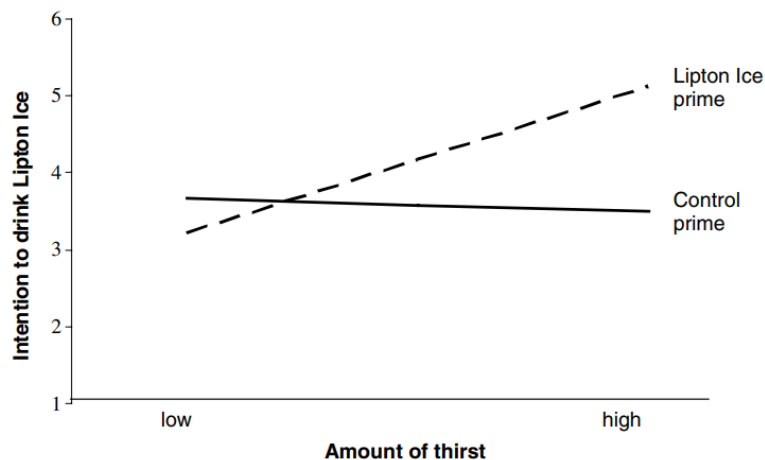


Once more, the thirst level of the participants within the group exposed to subliminal stimuli had increased significantly, while that of the participants within the control group had trivially lowered. It is important to note that, once again, none of the participants was able to recall having been exposed to any subliminal messages, which is a significant piece of information in terms of the experiment as it indicates that the messages were truly not being perceived actively by the participants. Thus, Cooper and Cooper had actually come out with a study that showed how subliminal messages were actually capable of influencing individuals despite being perceived only at a passive, subliminal level.

On the other hand, Karremans, Stroebe and Claus (2006) took it upon themselves to test whether or not people’s drink choices could be affected through the process of subliminal priming. Their study involved 61 participants, and its goal was to determine if the participants’ intention to drink *Lipton Ice* would increase after having been exposed to the words *Lipton Ice* on a subliminal, unperceivable level. To begin with, the participants were tested in order to determine whether or not they could identify a prime if it was flashed on screen for 23 milliseconds. In order to do so, the participants were asked to identify the lowercase letter *b* among a string consisting of the uppercase letter *B*. Allegedly to help the participants focus, they were first exposed to a string consisting of the uppercase letter *X* for 500 milliseconds. This string was both preceded and followed by the prime *Lipton Ice* for 23 milliseconds, or a control word consisting of the same letters, i.e. *Npeic Tol*, in the case of the control group. The prime was then followed up with the

same string consisting of the letter *X* before flashing the string consisting of the letter *B* for 300 milliseconds. This was done 25 times, but the participants were asked to indicate how many strings of letters had contained the lowercase letter *b* after every five presentations of the uppercase letter *B* string. Following this, the participants were debriefed, and it was determined that none of them identified the presence of the primes in between the sequences of letters. Then, 20 participants were pulled from the group and tested even further. Namely, they were informed that words would flash on screen between the letter sequences, and their task was to guess the flashed words. Once more, none of the participants were able to guess the correct prime, i.e. *Lipton Ice*. The second part of the study involved giving participants the choice between two different brands of drinks, one of which was the prime, i.e. *Lipton Ice*, and the other of which was *Spa Rood*, a popular brand of mineral water in the Netherlands. Subsequently, participants were also asked to indicate their thirst level.

Figure 3 – *Intention to Drink Lipton Ice After Subliminal Priming Relative to Amount of Thirst* (Karremans, Stroebe & Claus, 2006)



As can be seen in **Figure 3**, the results showed that the intention to drink *Lipton Ice* was, in fact, higher among thirsty participants who were exposed to the prime on a subliminal level. Thus, Karremans, Stroebe and Claus had concluded that priming individuals with a certain brand of beverage has a likelihood of increasing their intention to drink said brand; however, this is only valid for individuals who report a higher level of thirst.

The aforementioned studies serve to prove that subliminal messages can, in fact, impact the human mind without having even been perceived. Studies such as these ones are important markers within

the historical background of subliminal messages in advertising, proving that the presence of subliminal stimuli in advertisements might have an impact on consumer behaviour.

3. SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES IN ADVERTISING

3.1. Types of subliminal messages

To be able to fully comprehend how subliminal messages are used in advertising, it is best to begin with a brief overview of the main types of these messages. Experts usually divide them into three categories: sub-audible messages, sub-visual messages, and backmasking. It is important to make a distinction between these three types of messages because each of them serve a slightly different purpose, i.e. one type of message might be better suited to advertising on radio, whereas another might be best suited to advertising on television. Sub-audible messages refer to audio content that is inserted into another piece of audio, distinct from the first. An example of a sub-audible message might be a voice recording that is inserted into a song at a very low volume, one that is too subtle to be actively perceived and therefore if they are registered by the listener they get stored within the subconscious. On the other hand, sub-visual messages refer to visual cues that can appear in print, on television, on social media or other similar visual media. Sub-visual messages can be hidden in logos of companies, therefore making them always present but almost never actively perceived. Another type of sub-visual message is the one that was introduced by James Vicary, i.e. flashing a phrase, image or logo very briefly on screen so that it is nearly impossible to actively perceive. The last notable type of subliminal message is referred to as backmasking, and it once again indicates subliminal messaging in audio; however, backmasking occurs when a recording is played in reverse (West, 2022). This type of subliminal messaging is believed to be found in many popular songs, and it is possibly the most controversial of the three types as many people conspire about it, and it even resulted in a notable lawsuit. The lawsuit in question involved the popular band Judas Priest and it was filed against them by the families of two young men who shot themselves resulting in the death of one of them. Allegedly they wanted to commit suicide because of subliminal messages hidden in Judas Priest's album *Stained Class*. However, the case was eventually dismissed by the judge (Taysom, 2020). This paper will focus primarily on sub-visual messages and what kind of effect they strive to achieve, along with an analysis of their effectiveness upon being translated into a different language.

3.2. Sexual embedding in advertising

One specific category of sub-visual messages that can be found or seen in advertising is that which can be described as sexual in nature, and it is known usually referred to as *sexual embedding*. The

term *sexual embedding* in advertising refers to the use of sexual imagery, suggestive content, or sexual innuendos in advertisements to capture the attention of consumers in order to promote products or services. It involves incorporating sexual elements into the advertisement in a subtle manner, with the aim of creating an association between the product and sexual desire, attractiveness, or appeal which is then supposed to have a positive influence on product sales. Various techniques are used in advertisements to communicate sexual messages, including provocative images, sensual poses, or sexually suggestive words and phrases. These tactics are employed across different media channels, including print, television, online platforms, and nowadays across social media as well.

EXAMPLE 1

Figure 4 – An Example of Sexual Embedding on the Cover of SFX Magazine



(Image retrieved from: <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/ads-with-subliminal-messages>)

According to their own Twitter profile's description (<https://twitter.com/SFXmagazine>), SFX magazine is *the world's number one sci-fi, fantasy & horror magazine which has been welcoming fans, geeks and aficionados since 1995*. However, SFX magazine is particularly interesting whilst on the topic of sexual embedding in advertising because of their cover design. It is probably fair to say that the cover of a magazine is its best advertisement, because it is precisely the feature of the magazine that is designed to capture a consumer's attention and entice them to buy it. In the case of SFX magazine, it seems as though the magazine's covers do not shy away from sexual

imagery, such as including the seemingly nude bodies of the stars of the multibillion dollar grossing film series *Twilight*, Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, as visible on the far left example in **Figure 4**. However, aside from certain more obvious sexual elements, SFX magazine can be seen taking advantage of the interesting predicament that they find themselves in, in terms of the magazine's name being awfully similar to the word *sex*. Thus, what happens often in the case of SFX magazine's covers is tactical camouflage of the bottom part of the letter *F* within the abbreviation *SFX* which, of course, stands for *special effects*. In fact, in the aforementioned description of the magazine's Twitter profile, they themselves state: *Yep, we know it looks a bit like SEX* (<https://twitter.com/SFXmagazine>). Despite the condescending tone of the message and the seemingly annoyed emoji that they used afterward their sentiment, it seems as though the cover designers take no issue when it comes to utilising the (un)fortunate similarity between the magazine's name and the word *sex*, a happenstance that one might observe as being that of sexual embedding, in order to attract potential buyers and persuade them into purchasing a copy of their magazine.

The notion of sexual embedding itself has been around for quite a while, and it can be traced back to Wilson Key who became a best-selling author by writing several books about sexual embedding back in the 1970s (Verwijmeren, 2014). The underlying principle behind sexual embedding in advertising is that sexual content can evoke strong emotions and desires in individuals, which in turn can influence their attitudes and behaviours towards a particular brand or product. By associating their offerings with sexuality, advertisers seemingly hope to create a positive emotional response, generate intrigue, and increase brand recall. The following examples which will be analysed also illustrate the phenomenon of sexual embedding.

EXAMPLE 2

Figure 5 – *Burger King Advertisement with Sexual Embedding*



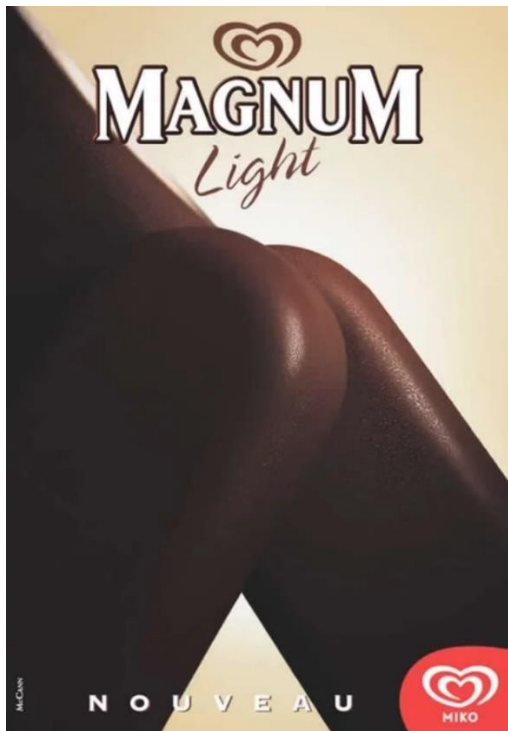
(Image retrieved from: <https://ignitevisibility.com/7-examples-effective-subliminal-advertising/>)

American founded fast food restaurant chain Burger King is the second largest hamburger chain in the United States, second only to McDonald's, but it is also one of the most successful fast food chains worldwide (Lewis, 2023). However, its popularity does not make it exempt from controversial attempts at advertising their products. One such attempt can be seen in **Figure 5**, which features an advertisement for Burger King's *Super Seven Incher* hamburger. The advertisement is ridden with sexual innuendos. To begin with, it shows the side profile of a woman's face with her mouth wide open and a somewhat shocked facial expression as she faces the *Super Seven Incher*. Then, beneath the image of the woman is a phrase written in eye-catching all capital letters which reads *IT'LL BLOW YOUR MIND AWAY*, but it does not stop there. Written in a much smaller font in the bottom right corner of the advertisement there is a message which reads *Fill your desire for something long, juicy and flame-grilled with the NEW BK SUPER SEVEN INCHER. Yearn for more after you taste the mind-blowing burger that comes with a*

single beef patty, topped with American cheese, crispy onions and the A.I. Thick & Hearty Steak Sauce. Burger King's advertising team seems to have gone all out on the sexual embedding in this advertisement. The hamburger itself is clearly being used as a metaphor for a phallus, while the entire image represents the act of giving oral sex, followed by the use of suggestive wording ranging from adjectives to verbs which would typically be used to describe sexual organs or acts. It is important to note that, however, the advertisement has no explicitly sexual content, therefore making this another case of sexual embedding which is supposed to entice customers to purchase a product based on subliminal messages.

EXAMPLE 3

Figure 6 – An Advertisement for Magnum Ice Cream Which Features Sexual Embedding



(Image retrieved from: <https://www.mdirector.com/en/blog/examples-marketing-subliminal-messages/>)

According to their manufacturer's website (<https://www.hul.co.in/brands/ice-cream/magnum/>), Magnum is one of the world's leading ice cream brands which sells billions of units annually worldwide. Once again, despite the brand's undeniable success, it seems to have dabbled in suggestive messages within their advertisements. The advertisement seen in **Figure 6** shows three

ice cream bars arranged in such a way that they resemble a naked human body, specifically the backside. This kind of sexual embedding seems to be much more subtle than the kind used by Burger King, so it makes an even stronger case for subliminal messages being used as a common tactic within advertising. Although it is seemingly not uncommon for ice cream brands to rely on adjectives with hints of sexual connotation such as *pleasure*, for example the first sentence on the website of Magnum's manufacturer, Unilever, reads as follows: *From the first crack of thick chocolate to the last mouthful of smooth vanilla ice cream, Magnum is the ultimate experience for pure pleasure seekers* (<https://www.hul.co.in/brands/ice-cream/magnum/>). The case could also be made for Magnum that their homonymy with Magnum preservatives from the Trojan Condoms company allows them to use it to their advantage, though there is no concrete proof of such an occurrence.

EXAMPLE 4

Figure 7 – Hidden Sexual Message in Gilbey's Gin Advertisement



(Image retrieved from: <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/10/24/subliminal-advertising>)

Unlike in the cases of Burger King and Magnum, Gilbey's Gin is certainly not one of the most famous brands of this alcoholic beverage, preceded by many others such as Beefeater and Tanqueray. However, its name certainly got around after this controversial advertisement came out in the 1970s. Namely, the advertisement depicts a seemingly innocent bottle of Gilbey's Gin

next to a glass carefully decorated with ice, a straw and a slice of lime. But, upon further inspection, those with a keen eye managed to decipher a subliminal message hidden within the ice in the gin-filled glass which simply reads *sex*. According to Heath (2012) recent experiments have shown that words exposed at a subliminal level can be conceptualized despite not being perceived and can therefore cause us to manifest the same feelings as would be created if those words were exposed at regular levels. Hence, the appearance of the word *sex* in this advertisement, even though it is not meant to be actively perceived, it is meant to rouse the same sort of emotional response as one would experience upon active exposure to the word *sex*. However, Heath states that there is a distinct difference between active and passive perception of words, and thus the response which subliminal messaging in advertising should receive from a consumer is much weaker than the one garnered by active perception. Therefore, since the word *sex* tends to have positive connotations, it seems as though advertisers are willing to insert it into advertisements at this level of subliminal perception, presumably with the hope of even the slightest positive reaction from the consumer which could, in turn, increase sales. The producers of this advertisement for Gilbey's Gin seemingly agree with this sentiment.

However, with all of this in mind, one can argue that sexual embedding can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, lead to objectification of individuals, and contribute to general sexualization of society. Such advertising tactics may reinforce gender roles, promote unrealistic body standards, and exploit sexuality for commercial gains. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and debate about the ethical implications of sexual embedding in advertising. Some regulatory bodies and advocacy groups have implemented guidelines and restrictions on the use of explicit sexual content in advertising to protect vulnerable audiences, promote gender equality, and ensure responsible marketing practices.

3.3. Linguistic subliminal messages in advertising

Another category subliminal messages which can be found in advertising is one of a purely linguistic nature, i.e. one that is not necessarily based on visual perception, and is rather primarily based on language. An analysis of various examples will ensue in order to demonstrate this kind of subliminal messaging in advertising. The first example which will be analysed in this section regards one specific category of advertising, i.e. that which is used in political campaigns by presidential parties during an election year. This example will show that, when done wrong,

subliminal messages in advertising can also have a negative result or one which is opposite of the originally desired result.

EXAMPLE 1

Figure 8 – *Subliminal Message in George W. Bush’s Presidential Campaign Advertisement (2000)*



(Image retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV2F150_e8A)

According to Klimov (2003) political campaigns are the ideal environment for subliminal pollution. As such, what can be seen in **Figure 8** is a screen capture of a video advertisement for George W. Bush’s presidential campaign from the year 2000, during which he was campaigning against Al Gore. The advertisement itself was tackling a controversial domestic topic at the time, i.e. the provision of prescription drugs for senior citizens of the United States. The frame visible in **Figure 8** appears at the end of the video very briefly just as the slogan is showing up on screen. The slogan itself reads *The Gore prescription plan – bureaucrats decide. The Bush prescription plan – seniors choose*. It seems as though the word *rats*, which happens to be part of the word *bureaucrats*, is specifically isolated in order to manipulate the minds of eligible voters. However, the advertisement failed to achieve this goal due to the isolated frame being noticed by a large amount of people. In this instance, one can observe how the public might react upon finding out that their minds are being manipulated, as there was quite large public outrage, and the advertisement ended up being pulled from the media in order to prevent further negative effects on the campaign (Klimov, 2003).

3.3.1. Subliminal advertising in tourism

The following section of the paper will regard language based subliminal messages in advertisements which are specific to the field of tourism. To begin with, marketing can be described as a crucial feature of tourism, as it has a fundamental role in promoting destinations, attracting visitors, and ensuring the overall success of business in countries which thrive off of tourism in the economic sense. Effective marketing can create awareness about tourist destinations and attractions, and in doing so it can help potential travellers learn about the unique experiences a destination can offer, encouraging them to consider visiting. Marketing can also aid in establishing a destination's brand which can help differentiate one specific location from hundreds and thousands of others through highlighting its unique characteristics. However, in order for advertisers to achieve the best possible results from their marketing campaigns they can sometimes resort to alternative advertising techniques such as subliminal messaging. In terms of tourism oriented advertisements, it seems as though a significant number of advertisers turn to methods such as personification based metaphors in order to attract the attention of potential tourists.

However, advertisers that work in the field of tourism face a specific challenge related to the fact that they are attempting to market a location rather than a product. Products and brands can be much easier to personify and sell to potential consumers when they are based on visual personifications.

Figure 9 – *A Gatorade advertisement which features a visual based example of personification*



(Image retrieved from: <https://naldzgraphics.net/30-creative-personification-ads-in-advertising/>)

An example of visual based personification of a product can be seen in **figure 9** which features a *Gatorade* bottle donning boxing gloves in a boxing ring, matched up against a plastic bottle that is not labelled or branded. The text on the image reads *GATORADE ALWAYS WINS!* and the advertisement's use of personification is immediately obvious. The situation is clear, the *Gatorade* bottle has won a boxing match against the nonbranded plastic bottle. An advertisement such as this one might appeal to potential consumers because it might evoke feelings of strength and power, and it might make the consumer liken themselves to the *Gatorade* bottle and make them think of themselves as somebody who always wins.

Figure 10 – *An example of brand personification*



(Image retrieved from: <https://elementthree.com/blog/5-successful-examples-of-brand-personification/>)

Similarly, an example of visual based personification of a brand can be seen in **figure 10** which shows Smokey Bear, a beloved advertising icon of the U.S. Forest Service in the Wildfire Prevention Campaign. This anthropomorphised bear has had such a large impact on the citizens of the United States that the number of forest fires has significantly dropped since his introduction in 1944 (<https://smokeybear.com/en/smokeys-history/story-of-smokey>).

On the other hand, the situation is somewhat different for advertisers who are attempting to market cities and countries because they are much harder to visually personify. This is why they might turn to so-called text-personification. In a study conducted by Letheren, Martin and Jin (2017) it was found that text-personification can influence destination attitudes making them one possible alternative for encouraging anthropomorphism aside from visual personification. Anthropomorphism, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, is the showing or treating of animals, gods, and objects as if they are human in appearance, character, or behaviour. Specifically, Letheren, Martin and Jin (2017) state that text-personification strategies are beneficial for destination attitudes and travel intentions when the individual consumers' anthropomorphic tendency is high. Their findings suggest that when tourists have high levels of anthropomorphic tendency, personified-text is an appropriate strategy for humanizing the destination and increasing the chances of positive impressions and intentions being formed. Therefore, they suggest that tourism practitioners wishing to communicate effectively with high anthropomorphic tendency consumers can embed personification into tourism communications. Advertisers have, in fact, begun to utilise this method of marketing travel destinations as can be seen in the examples which are about to be analysed.

EXAMPLE 2 – An Example of Personification Being Used as a Method on the Official Visit Luxembourg Website

Whether in the countryside, indoors, in the open air, or in special places, Luxembourg beckons you. (Retrieved from: <https://www.visitluxembourg.com/get-to-know-luxembourg>)

Before moving further it might be useful to define personification for a clearer and more concise understanding of the advertisers' intentions in terms of using it to promote a specific location. According to Cambridge dictionary, personification is the act of giving a human quality or characteristic to something which is not human. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in **example 2** above, in which the action of beckoning is attributed to Luxembourg. This small European country does not, in fact, possess the ability to beckon, as it is inanimate. Yet, the advertisers opted to use this human-specific term in order to market it to potential visitors. According to Delbaere, McQuarrie and Phillips (2013), the reason that personification can be comprehended by consumers is because of anthropomorphism, i.e. the cognitive bias by which people are prone to attribute human characteristics to things, or in this case to the country of

Luxembourg. Anthropomorphism strategies can thus be utilized by tourism practitioners to create more welcoming and authentic destination personalities (Letheren, Martin & Jin, 2017). The reason why advertisers might lean towards this marketing approach is because the act personifying a country, which is somewhat of an abstract concept, allows people to perceive it with more ease. As established by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), personification allows people to perceive phenomena from the real world in human terms, i.e. terms that can be understood on the basis of human motivations, goals, actions, and characteristics.

EXAMPLE 3 – An Example of Personification Which Features a Gendered Pronoun

Saint Lucia – Let Her Inspire You (Retrieved from: <https://www.stlucia.org/en/>)

Another example of this phenomenon in advertising can be seen in **example 3** in which Saint Lucia, a small island country located in the eastern Caribbean, is being personified. The principle remains the same, i.e. a country has been given the power to inspire its potential visitors; however, the interesting aspect of this advertisement is the fact that the advertisers have attributed a specific gender to Saint Lucia, as can be seen through the use of the female personal pronoun *her*. This is not a rare occurrence as countries are often referred to in the female voice due to their names often stemming from Latin, but it seems as though doing this in advertising results in an added bonus in terms of appealing to tourists. This might be because referring to countries in this manner can make them out to seem almost motherlike, since a country can be seen as a mother to all of *her* citizens. The outcomes of personification might include increased emotional connections with what is being advertised (Delbaere, McQuarrie & Phillips, 2013). In this example, on a subliminal level, likening Saint Lucia to a woman, or more precisely to a mother, can arouse feelings of comfort and result in an inviting presence for tourists.

EXAMPLE 4 – An Example of Personification Appearing in an Advertisement for Latvia

Latvia, the land that sings (Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWEODQylXs0>)

Example 4 is somewhat different from the previous two in terms of the fact that the attribute that has been given to Latvia, i.e. the ability to sing, isn't meant to directly impact the consumer. Unlike Luxembourg which is meant to beckon its visitors, or Saint Lucia which is meant to inspire them, Latvia is not given such a manipulative talent. However, personification is once again used as the subliminal prime of choice in order to appeal to potential tourists and travellers. The reason why

Latvia is known as *the land that sings* hides behind the fact that one of the longest existing and most important cultural events in the country is known as *The Song and Dance Festival* (<https://www.dziesmusvetki.lv/en/about-the-celebration/the-song-and-dance-celebration/>).

Therefore, by advertising Latvia as *the land that sings*, aside from being subliminally influenced by assigning the country with human characteristics and, therefore, arousing positive emotions, potential tourists are also subtly exposed to a culturally significant aspect of the country which might lure them in to look deeper into the idea of visiting. This idea is supported by Letheren, Martin and Jin (2017) who found in their study that when a person with high anthropomorphic tendencies sees a personified message, they will feel positive emotions, and these positive emotions will then transfer to the associated destination outcomes.

EXAMPLE 5 – *A More Intimate Example of Personification in Tourism Advertising*

A Date with Tokyo (Retrieved from: <https://www.wtravelmagazine.com/a-date-with-tokyo/>)

The final example provided of using personification as a subliminal marketing method regards a rather intimate situation, or to be precise, a date. In order to attract readers, the author has specifically titled this *World Travel Magazine* article *A Date with Tokyo*. The principle of the advertisement remains the same as before. That is to say, a tourist destination, although in this scenario a city instead of a country, is given human attributes in order to appear more appealing to potential visitors. However, this particular example might, on a subliminal level, appeal even more to solo travellers, i.e. those who prefer to travel alone rather than in the company of friends or family. Namely, personifying the capital city of Japan in this manner makes it seem quite intimate, almost like it is waiting specifically for the one specific individual who is reading the article. This is also the reason why an advertisement such as this one might appeal more to people who are not in romantic relationships. This sense of intimacy might have a higher chance of attracting such tourists.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this B.A. thesis was to delve deeper into the realm of subliminal messages in advertising and explore their overall presence and their potential impact on consumer behaviour. To conclude this paper I would like to provide an overview of my observations which I have gathered by analysing examples of advertisements which utilise subliminal messages as a marketing technique. Before going further, it might be useful to reiterate that the adjective *subliminal* refers to something that is not recognized or understood by the conscious mind, and yet it still has an influence on it. Thus, advertising that uses subliminal messages as a technique to increase the sales of their brand, product or service can be defined as subliminal advertising. This kind of advertising utilises stimuli that are presented outside of awareness with the intention to influence consumer behaviour. Subliminal messages began to appear in advertisements in the second half of the twentieth century, and their presence has since only increased due to the widespread need amongst advertisers for their advertisements to stand out among a myriad of others who are trying to achieve the same goal, i.e. market their brand in such a way that it receives more purchases.

In order to achieve a clear and concise analysis of subliminal messages in advertising I selected a number of examples which were divided into two distinct categories. The first group consisted of advertisements which comprised hidden messages of a sexual nature, and the second one consisted of language based advertisements taken from the field of tourism. After having read empirical studies regarding the topic, followed by having analysed the aforementioned examples, I have come to the conclusion that many advertisers do, in fact, utilise hidden messages in their advertisements with the scope of influencing consumers on a subliminal level. The analysed examples were pulled from various media platforms, which points to the conclusion that subliminal messaging transcends specific platforms, and is rather able to be used in any given media in order to advertise any given brand, product or service. It might be important to note that sexual messages seem to be more common than other kinds of messages, although it would be interesting to see future research examine this further. On the topic of subliminal messages in advertisements which are found in the field of tourism, it can be noted that a common technique used among advertisers is metaphor based on personification. It is hoped that the observations made within this paper will guide others to further explore this area of research. In terms of effectiveness, it seems as though subliminal advertising is, indeed, able to impact consumer behaviour. However, it should be noted that testing its effectiveness is somewhat complicated due

to the fact that consumers are not supposed to actively perceive any subliminal stimuli. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how this area of research might develop in the future, as it might become less challenging to study in tandem with developments in neurotechnology.

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