Consumer Perception and Behavioural Outcomes of Subliminal Advertising

Dr. Nilesh T. Waghmare

Assistant Professor, Department of Accountancy and Costing, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Senapati Bapat Road, Pune – 411004.

ABSTRACT

This study analyses how subliminal advertising affects customer behaviour by examining the psychological impacts on attitudes and purchase decisions. Through hidden messages in print, television, and online media, subliminal advertising quietly reaches the subconscious. The study examines the impact of subliminal cues on decision-making, customer preferences, and brand loyalty across a range of demographic groups. Although its overall impact is like that of general advertising, a survey with 100–120 respondents found that subliminal advertising does affect behaviour, particularly among younger people. The study emphasizes the value of openness in marketing and the moral ramifications of employing subliminal tactics. Marketing professionals are advised to align their techniques with ethical standards and keep researching the long-term impacts of these tactics on consumer trust and behaviour.

Keywords: Subliminal advertising, consumer behaviour, subconscious influence, brand loyalty, ethical marketing, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Subliminal advertising usually influences the subconscious mind through print, online, and television media. It creates positive associations with products by using emotional triggers like short noises or images. Consumer behaviour and decision-making are subtly impacted by this. Taking age, gender, and socioeconomic status into consideration, the study looks at the psychological consequences on attitudes, behaviours, and purchasing decisions. The study emphasizes the moral need for transparency to avoid manipulation, even though it may boost sales, engagement, and brand loyalty. To build long-lasting brand relationships free from dishonesty, marketers are encouraged to align these methods with the values of their target audience.

NEED OF THE STUDY:

This study explores how marketers use brief messages or concealed imagery to gently impact consumer attitudes and preferences, highlighting the growing significance of subliminal advertising as traditional tactics become less effective. Subliminal signals' psychological impacts on customer perceptions and behaviour, including the formation of brand loyalty and purchasing decisions, are examined through the analysis of case studies and theoretical frameworks. By determining the best circumstances for these strategies and the demographic variables that impact consumer susceptibility, the study hopes to offer marketers moral standards for influencing behaviour in a constructive way while upholding openness and confidence.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE:

Geovani Agnesia Somantry (October 2014), researched the Effect of Subliminal Advertisement on Consumer Attitude and Buying Intention. The study examines the impact of subliminal advertising (product placement) in the movie "Little Nicky." A questionnaire was used to analyse the impact of brand awareness and consumer attitude on purchasing intentions. The study found that higher brand awareness, positive attitude and script integration increase product recall and buying intention.

Bargh, J. A. and Chartrand, T. L. (July 1999), conducted research on The Unbearable Automaticity of Being. This study highlighted the power of automatic processes and the automated nature of unconscious processing.

This research has profoundly influenced the understanding of subliminal advertising and its potential impact on consumer behaviour. His work on automatic processes and unconscious priming provides valuable insights into how subtle cues can affect decision-making. Their findings highlight that much of our behaviour is driven by automatic, often unnoticed cues in our environment, challenging traditional notions of conscious control and intentionality.

Charles Trappey (August 1996), conducted research on A meta-analysis of consumer choice and subliminal advertising. This study aims to determine the effectiveness of subliminal advertising in influencing consumer choice behaviour through a meta-analysis. A comprehensive analysis of past studies using effect size measures and statistical models to evaluate subliminal advertising's influence on consumer decisions. The meta-analysis showed a very small effect size (r = 0.0585), indicating that subliminal advertising has minimal impact on consumer choices.

Kathryn T. Theus (May/June 1994), conducted research on Subliminal advertising and the psychology of processing unconscious stimuli: A review of research. This study reviews progress to date on research on the effects of subliminal stimulation on subject populations and potential applications to persuasive communications. The review synthesises findings from various studies on subliminal cues, focusing on experimental results and theoretical frameworks related to unconscious processing. The article identifies several fruitful areas for continued research and experimentation, especially in areas of social marketing research.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Subliminal advertising, which embeds subtle, subconscious cues in marketing, has been a controversial strategy with unclear effects on consumer behaviour. While it is believed to influence consumer decisions, its actual impact on purchasing patterns and mindset remains underexplored. This research seeks to examine how subliminal advertising affects consumer buying behaviour, analyse the psychological mechanisms behind its influence, and assess the broader implications of its use in shaping consumer perceptions and decision-making processes.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the subliminal advertising strategy.
2. To understand and analyse the influence of subliminal advertising on the mindset of people.
3. To evaluate the impact of subliminal advertising technique/strategy on buying behaviour of consumers.
4. To provide suggestions on effective use of subliminal strategy and to create a positive influence on consumer buying behaviour.

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES:

1. **H0:** Subliminal Advertising influences Consumer Buying behaviour.
2. **H1:** The consumer buying behaviour is greatly affected by subliminal advertising strategy than general advertising.

WORKING DEFINITIONS OF THE TERMS USED:

1. **Subliminal Advertising:** Subliminal advertising is a marketing technique that uses subtle messages to influence a target audience without their conscious awareness. The goal is to get people to purchase a product or service by affecting their mindset.
2. **Consumer Attitude:** Consumer attitude is the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and all the activities associated with the purchase, use and disposal of goods and services. Consumer attitude consists of how the consumer's emotions, attitudes, and preferences affect buying behaviour.
3. **Purchasing intention:** Purchasing intention is a customer's likelihood to buy a product or service within a specific time frame.
4. **General Advertising:** General advertising is a type of advertising that aims to build brand awareness and reputation across a wide audience.

UNIVERSE/POPULATION AND SAMPLING:

1. **Sample Size-** We circulated a questionnaire containing 12 questions from a varied set of individuals and managed to get around 120 responses.
2. **Sample Units-** The selected questionnaire was circulated 120 people who were of different age groups, ranging from 18 and above.
3. **Sampling Procedure -** We used a Random sampling technique to collect responses. Random sampling means Samples are chosen from a population randomly, that is, without keeping any criteria in mind.
4. **Sampling Method -** The sampling method was through an online questionnaire.
5. **Sampling Area** – The samples collected were across India.
6. **Population-** The respondents are mostly researchers' friends, family, strangers, and social network.

METHODS AND SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION:

1. **Primary Data:** The research is conducted using primary data. The primary data was collected by circulating Google Forms.
2. **Secondary Data:** To research secondary data from various e-portals and research reports has been used.

TOOLS USED TO CONDUCT THE DATA ANALYSIS:

Non-Doctrinal: This research will use empirical data collected (using Google Forms) to answer the research questions mentioned.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

The researchers used Google Forms to collect primary data through a 12-question survey about subliminal advertising's influence on consumer behaviour. They employed tables and graphs to represent and interpret the raw data, aiding in drawing logical conclusions.

1. **Familiarity of Respondents with Subliminal Advertising Strategy:**
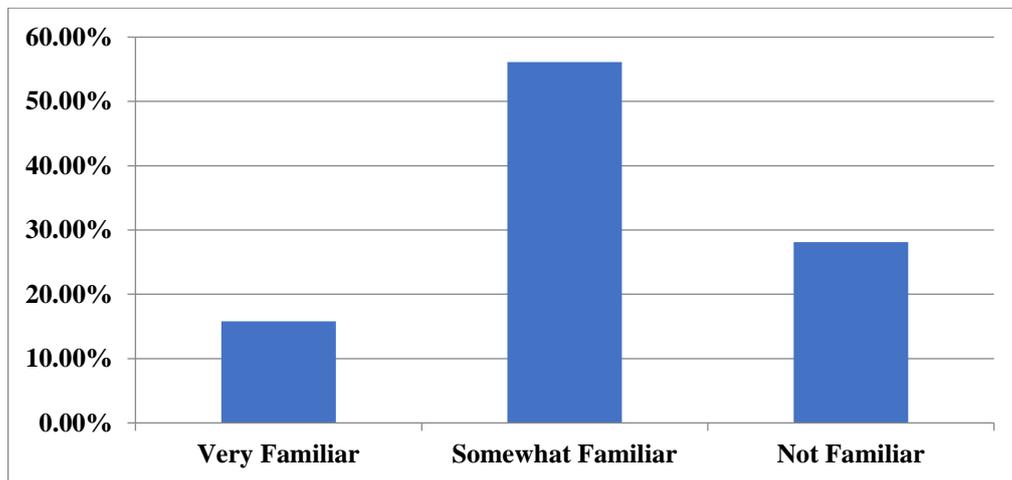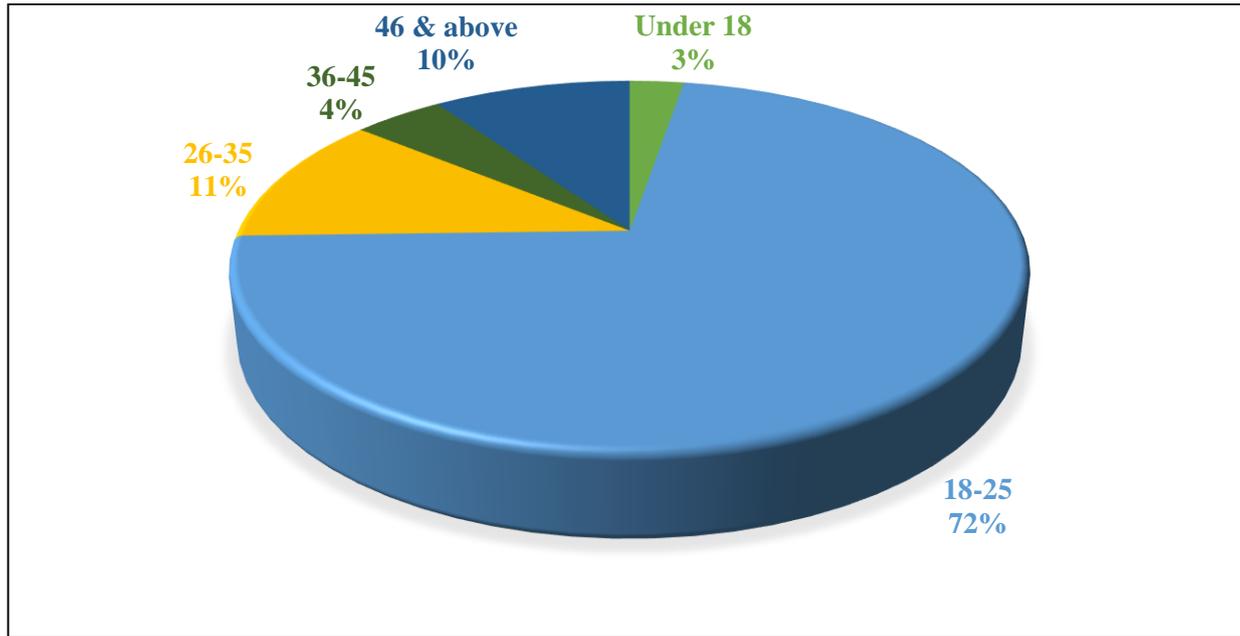

15.80% of respondents are confidently aware about subliminal advertising strategy, 56.10% of respondents are somewhat aware, 28.10% of the respondents were not aware at all.

2. **Age Group of Respondents:**

| AGE	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
Under 18	3	2.6%
18-25	82	71.9%
26-35	13	11.4%
36-45	5	4.4%
46 & above	11	9.6%

Age Group of Respondents

The majority, 71.9% (82 respondents), are aged 18-25., Smaller groups include 11.4% (13 respondents) in the 26-35 age range, 9.6% (11 respondents) aged 46 and above, 4.4% (5 respondents) aged 36-45, 2.6% (3 respondents) under 18, Overall, the data shows a significant concentration of younger respondents, particularly in the 18-25 age group.

3. Occupation Of the Respondents:

Occupation	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Student	72	63.2%
Working Professional	28	24.6%
Entrepreneur	2	1.8%
Unemployed	10	8.8%
Other	2	1.8%

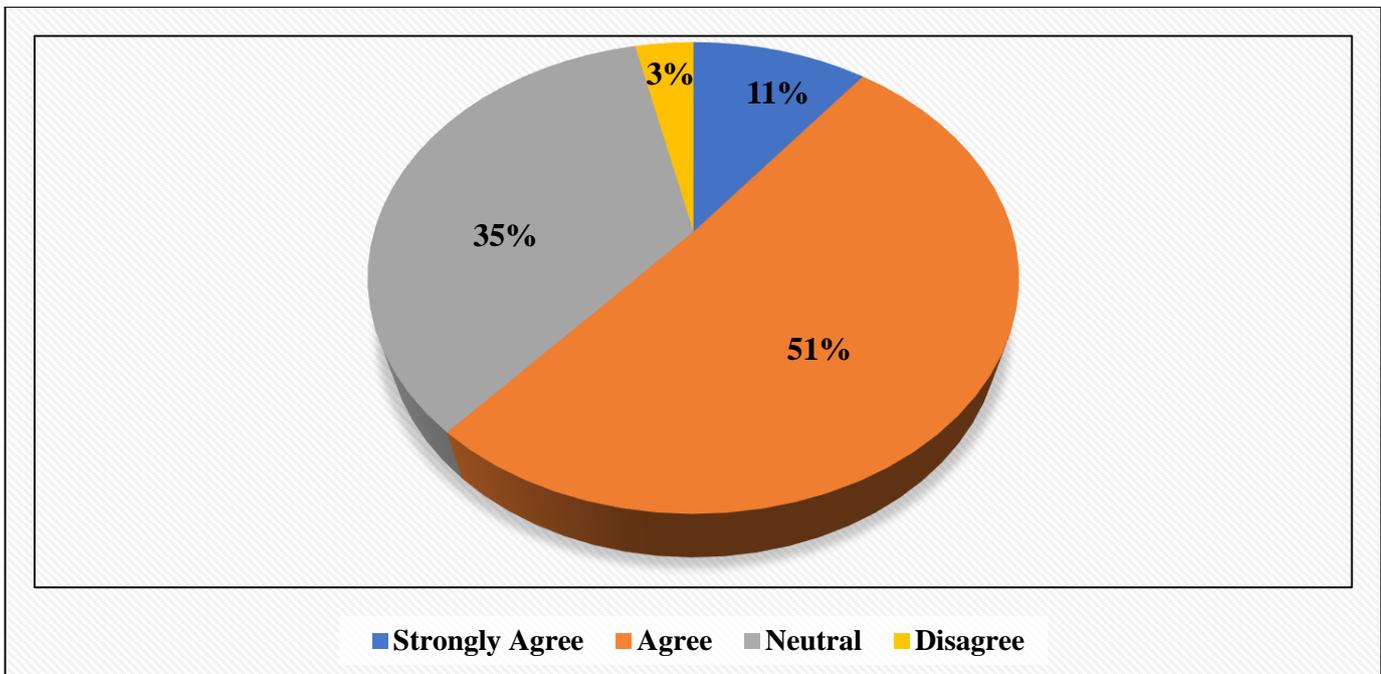**Occupation of Respondents**
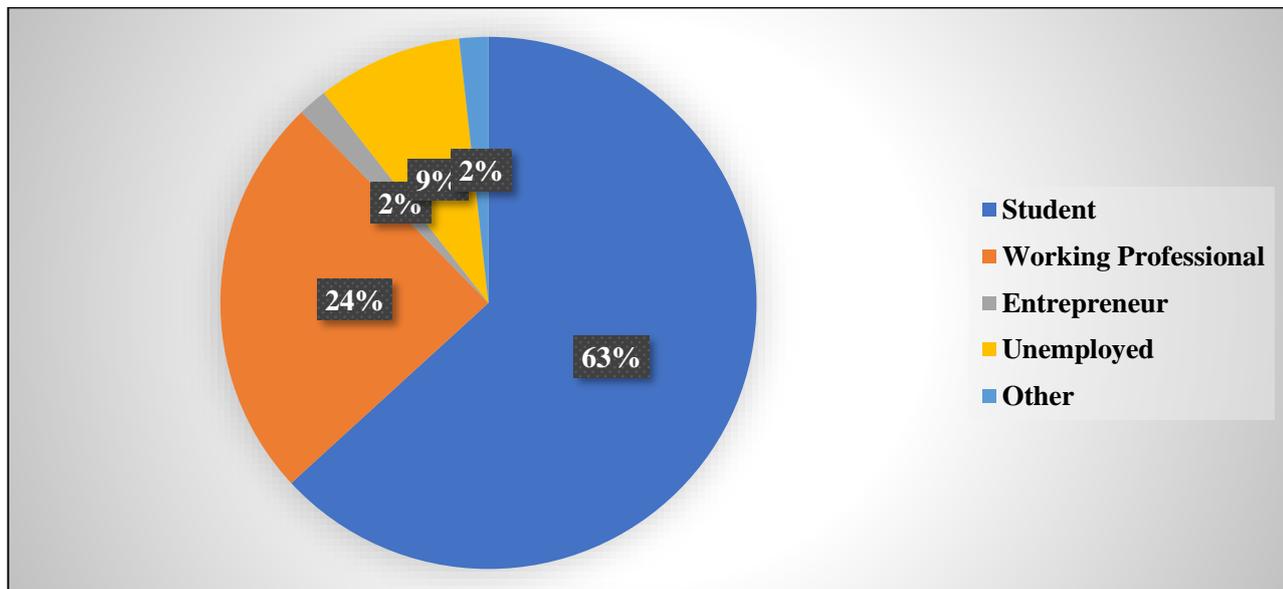
63.2% (72 respondents), are students, working professionals make up 24.6% (28 respondents), 8.8% (10 respondents) are unemployed, Entrepreneurs and others each account for 1.8% (2 respondents).

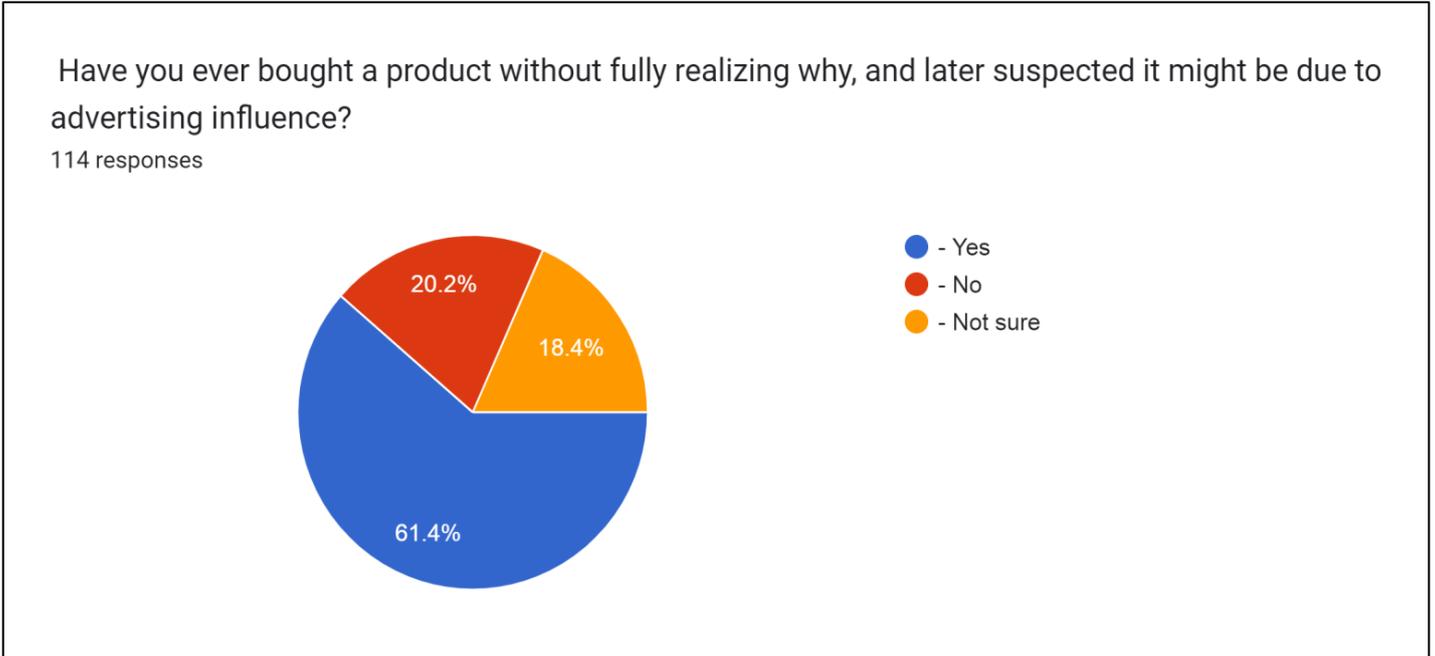### 4. Areas Where Respondents Noticed Subliminal Advertising:
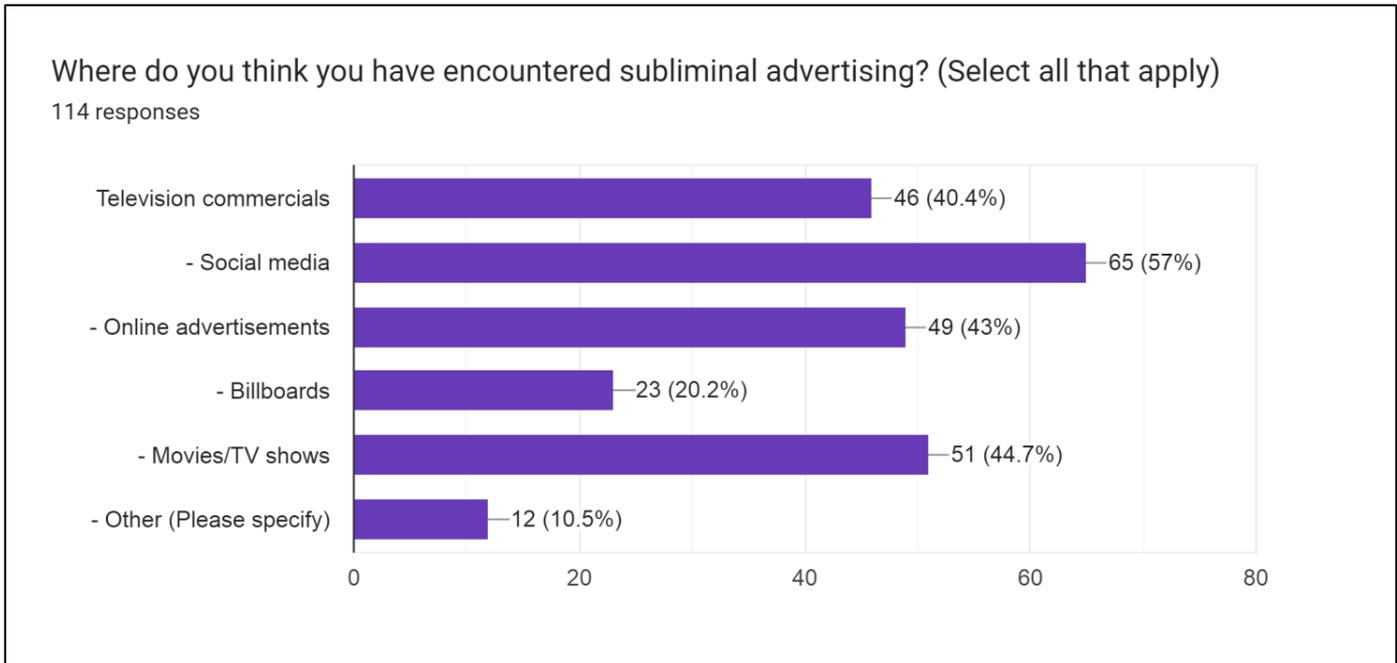
Social media: 65 respondents (57%) believe they have encountered subliminal advertising here, making it the most selected option, Movies/TV shows: 51 respondents (44.7%) selected this option, Online advertisements: 49 respondents (43%) think they have encountered subliminal ads in this category, Television commercials: 46 respondents (40.4%) identified this medium, Billboards: 23 respondents (20.2%) selected this as a potential source of subliminal advertising, Other: 12 respondents (10.5%) chose this option, possibly directing towards alternative sources.

5. Does Subliminal Advertisement Influence Consumer Behaviour?

Agree: 50.9% (largest portion of the chart) believe that subliminal messages in ads can influence their behaviour, **Neutral:** 35.1% of respondents remain undecided, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, **strongly agree:** 10.5% strongly believe subliminal messages can have an influence, **disagree:** 2.6% (green section) disagree with the idea that subliminal messages can influence behaviour, **Strongly disagree:** There is no representation for strongly disagree (purple).
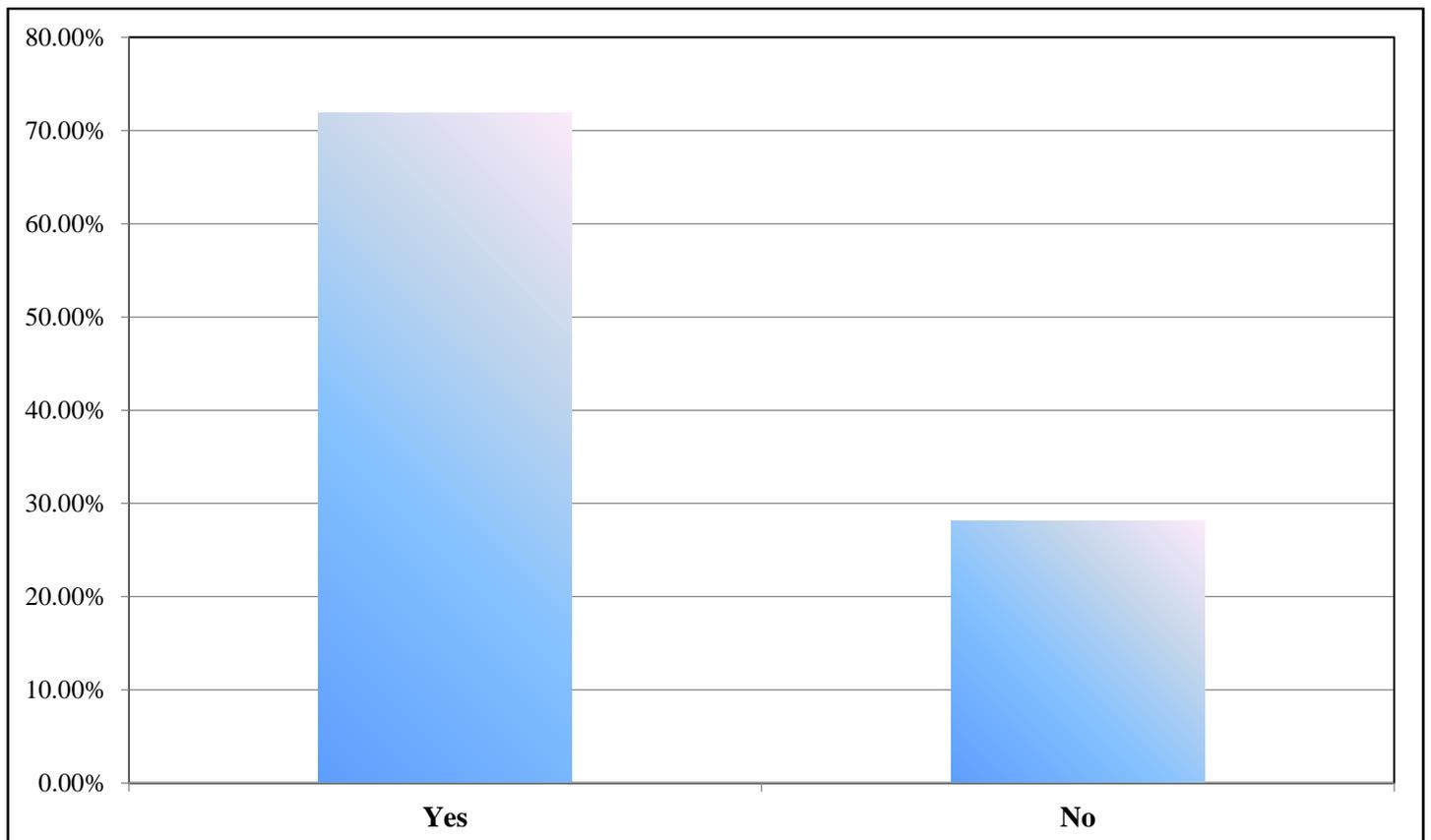
6. The Impact of Advertising on Unconscious Purchasing Decisions

Have you ever bought a product without fully realizing why, and later suspected it might be due to advertising influence?

114 responses
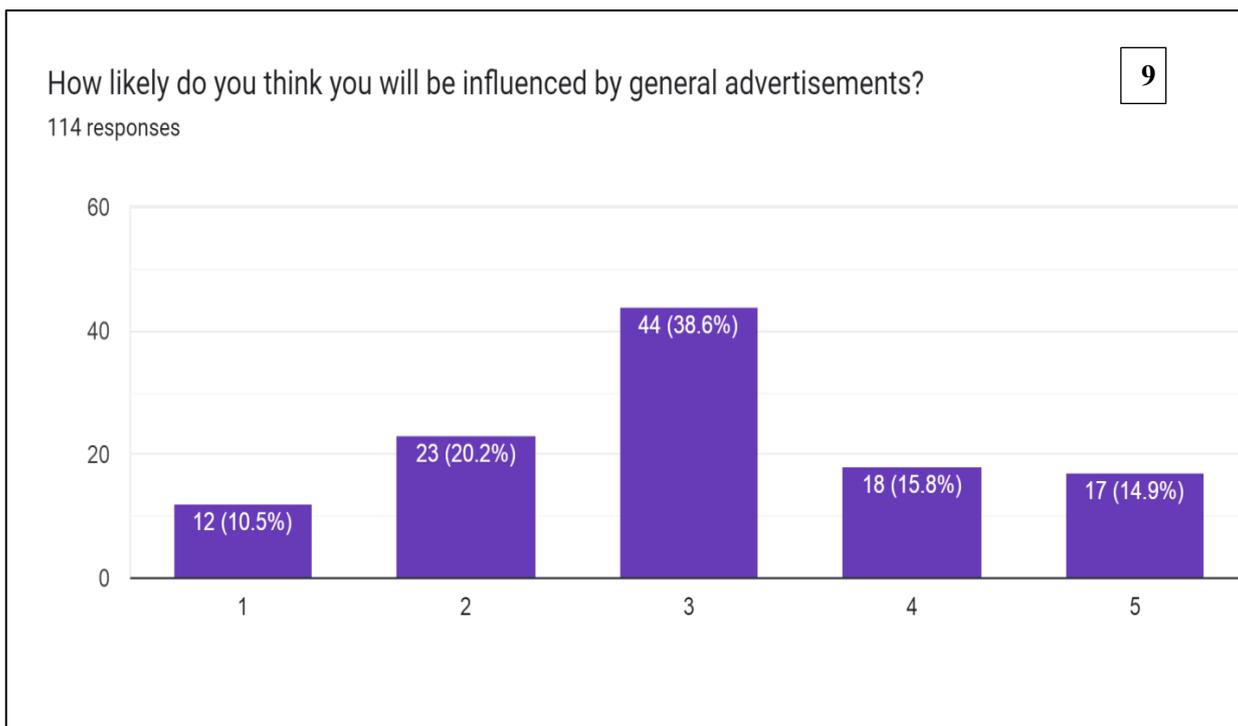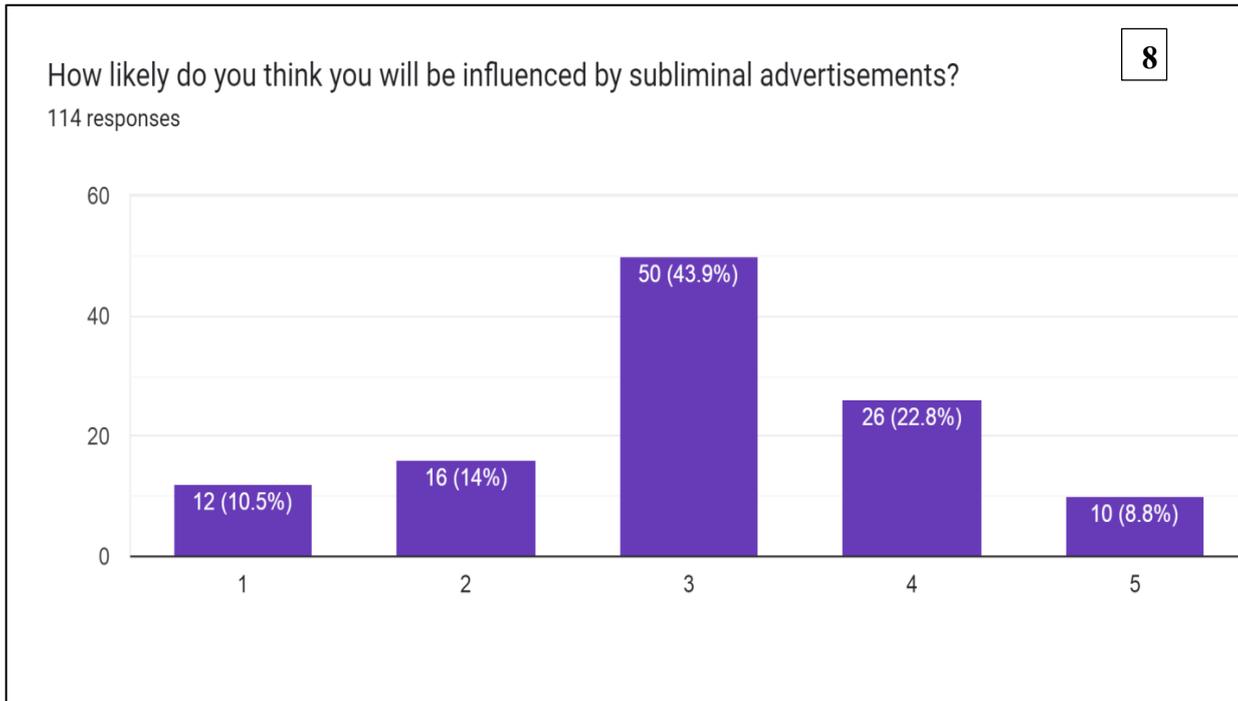
- Yes
- No
- Not sure

61.4%
20.2%
18.4%

Yes: 61.4% of respondents indicated that they have bought a product and later suspected that advertising might have influenced their decision, **No:** 20.2% of respondents do not believe that advertising influenced their purchasing decisions, **Not sure:** 18.4% of respondents were uncertain about whether advertising influenced their buying behaviour.

7. Unconscious Emotional Associations with Brands:

Subsequently, the researchers inquired if the participants had ever experienced a strong emotional bond with a brand without knowing why. The reaction that was recorded is mentioned below.

8. Subliminal Advertising vs. General Advertising

How likely do you think you will be influenced by subliminal advertisements?

114 responses

How likely do you think you will be influenced by general advertisements?

114 responses

With reference to graph 8 and 9, i.e. the data collected on the influence of different advertising strategies used a scale from 1 (not influenced at all) to 5 (highly influenced). The responses for both strategies turned out to be neutral on average, meaning participants did not strongly lean towards either extreme.

9. The Strategy Which Claimed Greater Impact on Respondents

Lastly the respondents were asked to categorize which advertising strategy/technique is more impactful with respect to their opinion. The responses received are as follows

Strategy	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Subliminal Advertising	61	53.50%
General Advertising	53	46.50%
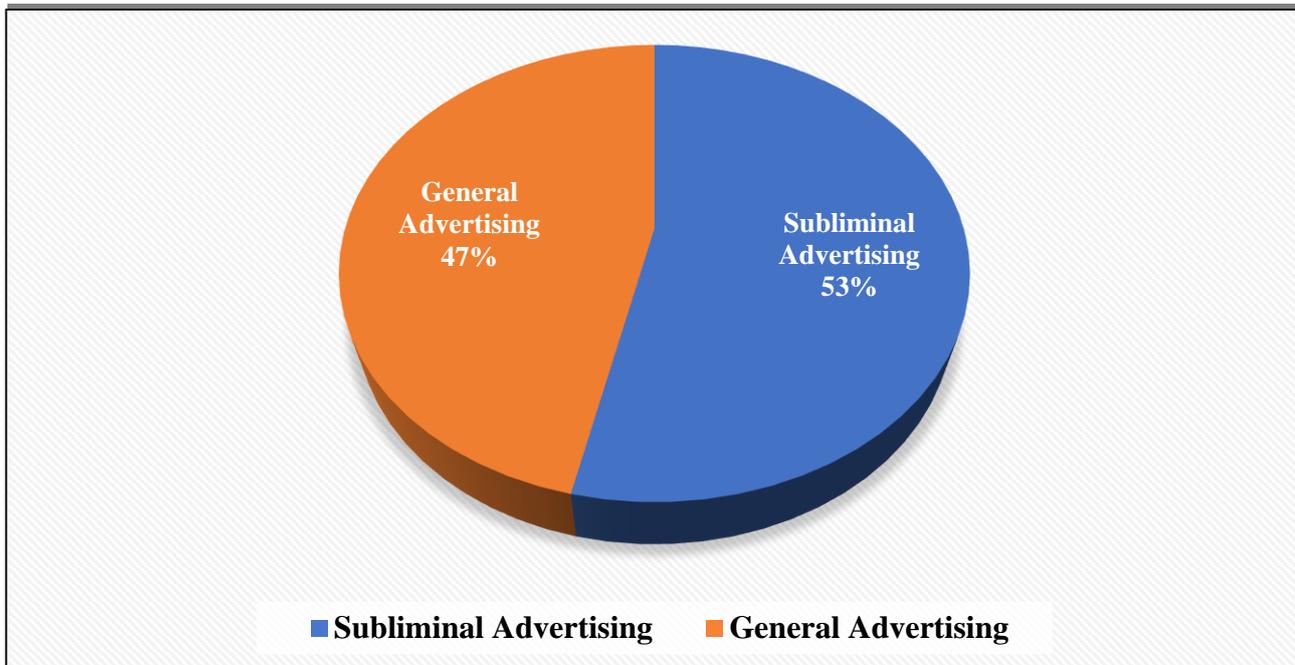
Subliminal Advertising was considered more impactful by **61 respondents,** accounting for **53.50%** of the total. **General Advertising** was chosen by **53 respondents**, representing **46.50%** of the total.

This suggests that while neither method overwhelmingly swayed participants, subliminal advertising has a subtle yet more noticeable impact on consumer preferences and behaviour.

Analysis based on Secondary Data:

Sources:

1. **International Journal of Advertising (2007):** Examines subliminal advertising's effects on brand recall.
2. **Journal of Marketing Research (2019):** Explores the effectiveness of traditional advertising strategies on consumer behaviour.
3. **Studies from Psychology Today and Harvard Business Review:** Investigate subconscious influences and consumer awareness in advertising.

Subliminal Advertising:

1. **Effectiveness:** Can subtly influence preferences when consumers are unaware.
2. **Limitations:** Unreliable and transient, affected by attention, mood, and environment.
3. **Example:** Better at increasing brand awareness than driving immediate sales.

General Advertising:

1. **Effectiveness:** Directly appeals to consumers with clear messaging and product features.
2. **Limitations:** More reliable, fostering informed decision-making and long-term brand awareness.
3. **Example:** More effective in influencing behaviour and purchases due to clear content.

Comparison:

1. **Influence on Behaviour:** General advertising has a stronger, quantifiable impact on behaviour.
2. **Subtle Impact:** Subliminal advertising affects emotions and preferences, but less directly.
3. **Long-term vs. Short-term:** Subliminal advertising offers short-term nudges, while general advertising builds lasting relationships.

Summary: General advertising is generally more effective and reliable than subliminal advertising in shaping consumer behaviour, providing clearer and more consistent results**.**

TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS:

1. **Null Hypothesis [H$_0$]: Subliminal Advertising influences consumer behaviour** is supported by several key data points:

   - Most respondents (61.4%) believe subliminal messages influence their behaviour.
   - Over half (53.5%) found subliminal advertising more impactful than general advertising.
   - A significant portion of respondents noticed subliminal advertising on various platforms, suggesting that it is widespread and noticeable.

2. **Alternate Hypothesis [H$_1$]: Subliminal advertising has a greater effect than general advertising** is somewhat supported but not overwhelmingly. The split between those who found subliminal vs. general advertising more impactful is close (53.5% vs. 46.5%). While subliminal advertising may have a subtle edge, general advertising also plays a strong role in influencing behaviour.

Result: The data leans toward accepting **H$_0$**, as subliminal advertising does influence consumer behaviour, but **H$_1$** is only partially supported. Subliminal advertising shows a subtle influence, but general advertising still has a comparable impact.

FINDINGS:

1. A significant majority of respondents (71.9%) are somewhat aware of subliminal advertising, suggesting a general familiarity with the concept but indicating potential gaps in understanding its mechanisms.
2. The survey predominantly involved younger respondents, particularly those aged 18-25 (71.9%). This age group is likely to be more exposed to digital and social media, where subliminal advertising may be more prevalent.
3. Most of the respondents (63.2%) are students, indicating that the sample primarily consists of younger individuals who may be more impressionable and receptive to advertising strategies.
4. Social media is identified as the primary platform for encountering subliminal advertising (57%), followed by movies/TV shows (44.7%) and online advertisements (43%). This points to the effectiveness of digital platforms in utilizing subliminal messages.
5. Approximately 50.9% of respondents agree that subliminal advertisements can influence their behaviour, with 10.5% strongly agreeing. This shows a general belief in the effectiveness of subliminal messaging among consumers.
6. A notable 61.4% of respondents have made purchases they later suspected were influenced by advertising, highlighting the impact of advertising—both subliminal and overt—on buying decisions.
7. Respondents expressed experiences of emotional bonds with brands, indicating that subliminal advertising may effectively create subconscious associations with products.
8. Both subliminal and general advertising were found to have a neutral influence on consumer behaviour, indicating that neither approach is overwhelmingly favoured in terms of perceived effectiveness.:
9. Subliminal advertising was seen as slightly more impactful (53.5%) compared to general advertising (46.5%). This suggests that while subliminal methods have a noticeable effect, traditional advertising remains relevant.
10. The literature supports the notion that subliminal advertising can influence consumer behaviour, albeit less reliably than traditional advertising. General advertising, with its clearer messaging, tends to have a more substantial and measurable effect on consumer decisions.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Safeguard consumers and encourage innovative marketing, more precise ethical standards and legal frameworks pertaining to subliminal advertising should be put in place.
2. Businesses should find out if consumers are more aware of subliminal advertising strategies and whether this causes them to be less trusting of companies that use them.
3. Brands should try including specific positive words in headlines, slogans, or product descriptions to create an unconscious association. For instance, using words like "exclusive" encourages consumers to feel they are getting something unique.

4. Atmosphere in Retail Spaces: Subtle scents that evoke positive memories or emotions (like vanilla for warmth or citrus for freshness) can help consumers to feel more relaxed and comfortable, which may lead to a higher likelihood of purchasing products.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS:

1. **Hard to get Company Side Information:** We tried to gather information about companies view point on Subliminal Advertising but we could not get any responses.
2. **Focus on short term impact:** Current research focuses on short-term effects, but understanding whether subliminal advertising have a lasting impact on brand loyalty or purchase behavior would provide more comprehensive insights.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

As our research was limited to India further researchers can do an in-depth analysis by covering more Countries. Research can also be done to understand how companies are using Subliminal Advertising to gain more customers base and is it helpful for them.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that, by using covert cues to affect emotions and preferences, subliminal advertising has a small but noticeable effect on consumer behaviour, especially among younger audiences. The study found no noticeable differences in the impact of subliminal and general advertising on consumer purchase behaviour, even though more than 60% of respondents said subliminal messaging influences their decisions. Both approaches demonstrated comparable efficacy in influencing purchasing decisions, with general advertising exerting a more pronounced, long-term influence and subliminal advertising giving brief emotional prods. In addition to urging more research into the long-term impacts of subliminal techniques and their wider worldwide applicability, the study emphasizes the necessity of ethical standards and openness when employing subliminal tactics to foster trust and sustain customer involvement.

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