

# Chapter II

## **Review of Related Literature**

## 2.1 History of subliminal Ads

The birth of subliminal advertising dates back to 1957 when a market researcher named James Vicary inserted the words "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" into a movie .The words appeared for a single frame, allegedly long enough for the subconscious to pick up, but too short for the viewer to be aware of it. The subliminal ads supposedly created an 18.1% increase in Coke sales and a 57.8% increase in popcorn sales. Vicary's results turned out to be a hoax<sup>[1]</sup>. But more recent experiments have shown that subliminal messages actually can affect behavior in small ways. William Peter Blatty, author of *The Exorcist*, prominently spoke out against subliminals when the movie adaptation of his book came under fire for allegedly including subliminal messaging. He said there are no subliminal images. If you can see it, it's not subliminal."So do advertisers consciously choose to include subliminal messages in their ads? Can they harness subliminal power to associate their products with sex and power? If so, does it actually affect a consumer's buying decisions? <sup>[2]</sup>

There were problems in 1950s within the United States as the World War II had just ended and there were difficulties with the supply side of the production as factories would go on producing with having only a lesser demand. Unfortunately, there were not enough consumers who could have purchased in large amounts from the manufacturers because of the destruction that had struck people after World War II. Not only this, there were economic problems

within the State because of long economic slowdown and also the conflict that followed had serious ramifications on the public psyche. This scenario had left consumer in prudent state as every consumer had become very conservative. Almost all the consumers tried to consume what used to be with them, and they tried to avoid purchasing unnecessary things. Most of the things manufactured were of high quality with less replacement rate. From the consumer's point of view, this looked like an ideal situation but the market was approaching near stagnation as lack of demand posed a serious threat to the postwar recovery. It had become a challenge for manufacturers and other people to respond to these crises. People started investing money to get through this tough period of no consumption and some of the research experts created a new field of investigation, known as "motivational research"<sup>[3]</sup>. Advertising agencies recruited psychologists and sociologists from different parts of the world, who were given access to sophisticated laboratories, they had the job to come with a technique so that people would be influenced to purchase things on aggressive buying pattern. As the study in motivational research gained momentum, advertising agencies invested enormous amount in trillion dollars a year on projects associated with MR and advertising. The advertising researchers employed psychological methods that had previously been used to diagnose what can make people to buy things without conscious evaluation, when they don't buy on need basis. In other words, they were trying what can be done to induce people to an aggressive, unplanned, irrational buying

behaviour. After thorough analysis and interpretation, they came up with the theory that consumers can be persuaded to purchase products without their conscious evaluation and in most of the cases they will not be aware of the things they would be buying. In one "depth probing," approach they searched out peoples' hidden desires about different categories of products [4]. Experts from "Marketing Research", asked number of questions, they also utilized the technique of word association tests along with sentence completion tests. Projective techniques were also used. They employed psychodramas as well, where subjects under experimentation were required to physically "act out" their inner desires against the projected product. To explore and get feedback from group of people at the same time "focus group interviews" were conducted. Group meetings were arranged on continuous basis by experts in the field of advertising and key findings, which motivational researchers gained with the passage of time, helped them to improve the persuasive appeal of advertising. Apart from psychological tests, advertising agencies invented electronic device which could measure an individual's' unconscious physical reactions against advertised brands and packages. This device could even detect minute amounts of sweat on the skin, tiny changes in heart and pulse rates, and minute muscular contractions that divulged the subject's unconscious emotional states. In some supermarkets, sophisticated hidden cameras were used to monitor the eye movements of shoppers. The dilation of the shopper's pupils revealed how interested they were in each of the products.

The number of times they blinked per minute revealed their degree of tension. Many of the shoppers were found to be in mild hypnotic trance. [5]

Valance Packard, one of the famous Motivational Research Analyst, through his book "Hidden Persuaders", revealed that most of these techniques were being used by all persuaders including advertising agencies, shoppers, politicians etc .Though this book of Valance is simple to understand but it contains highly important material for an individual interested in knowing the truth of subliminal advertising and this could have been the reason that it had quickly gained the number one spot on best books sold list and this book proved to be highly precious for scholars involved in depth probing as it contains scientific literature on the subject. During the same time when this book got published one more famous expert in the field of motivational research known by the James Vicary headed a press conference in New York City, where he announced serious facts about the experiment that he had conducted in theatre for New Jersey Movie having employed a device known as "tachistoscope." A Tachistoscope is a machine that is able to flash words or images on a screen for very a short duration of time. Vicary flashed the words "Hungry? Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" every five seconds throughout the movie Picnic. Over 45,000 movie-goers unknowingly participated. Vicary revealed that this technique of flashing words had increased popcorn sales [6]. He openly announced to offer these services of his company "The Subliminal Projection

Corporation' to others including merchandisers and advertisers working in any part of the world. He gave full assurance to all his customers that he can create subliminal advertisements for any kind of products through a variety of mediums. Vicary had the idea that subliminal advertising can be beneficial to the society at large. Just after this episode many organizations decided to use Subliminal Advertising to induce consumers to buy their products. But the controversy about subliminal advertising started just with its beginning as people around the world were furious about the facts that they were being under bombardment of subliminal manipulation. Vicary had the impression that his ideas will be accepted worldwide but most of the people were angry and launched protests against this technique of subliminal persuasion through angry editorials to raise their voice. Large number of organizations including religious organizations declared that the subliminal technique was threat to personal liberty which would brainwash youth and lead to political subjugation. Online magazines like 'The New Yorker' claimed that the mind of youth were "broken and entered". "Newsday", referred to the tachistoscope as the most alarming invention since the atomic bomb. A letter from a prominent businessman published in the Los Angeles Times suggested that Vicary was as evil as Nazi war criminals and should be shot [7].

"Public Opinion Quarterly", published that almost one third of the consumers reported that they would stop watching any programme on TV if it continued

with subliminal messages. With the passage of time and with increased anger, advertising industry had to think about reversing its decision about subliminal manipulation. Different media organizations like TV and Radio stations all over the World did give assurance to their respondents that they won't be using any such technique of subliminal persuasion in future. A number of bills at national and international level were introduced so as to declare this technique of persuasion as illegal. But the results were contradicting all the time as not a single bill was passed.

In 1957, the supreme body of communications know as "The Federal Communications Commission" announced that no media, be it Radio or TV, was using subliminal techniques, so there was nothing to worry about and hence no reason to ban such ads. But contrary to this, advertisers started giving more time and investment to study in depth and come up with better persuasion technique, so it was all the reverse what people actually wanted.

A 1958 article in the Christian Science Monitor entitled, "Ad Firms Ponder Success of Invisible Commercials," exposed "a major firm" that had circulated a confidential memorandum to its clients disclosing that "there was enough at stake" to continue its subliminal research<sup>[8]</sup>.

As a result large number of competing agencies used same strategy and for some time the topic of subliminal persuasion completely lost its place in news

world and people were encouraged not to discuss this issue any more. General public who were threatened by the controversy of subliminal advertising accepted the ridiculous idea that agencies involved in creation of subliminal technique now had lost interest in it.

Ernest Dichter, the self-proclaimed "father of motivational research," wrote in the handbook of Consumer Motivations, we attempt to escape fear-producing stimuli. By producing fear we can alter people's behavior. When caught in fear, we regress step by step to ever more infantile and animalistic drives." [9] This can be better understood by the advertisement "Try our Hard Pack" that unconsciously promotes fear of sexual failure which then forces respondent to engage in irrational behaviour.

## **2.2 Enquiry into the subliminal concept**

There has been continuous research regarding subliminal messages in biological, psychological and other social science fields including management as well. As we mentioned in history of subliminal advertising, James Vicary, a prominent expert in motivational research, claimed to have invented a new technique which could force consumers into irrational buying [10]. As he came out with the Coca Cola study, subliminal messages caught attention of business world and it got highlighted to the extent that Federal funding was pumped into subliminal research related projects [11]. The whole world including

academicians, viewed subliminal persuasion as a medium that in indirect way created antisocial behavior such as early sex stimulation in children, change in value system of an individual, cultural change, suicidal acts and drug use [12]. According to Urban (1992) ,the process of visual subliminal persuasion is undeniable, however there is difference of opinion on the effectiveness of auditory subliminal persuasion .The visual stimulus can be in terms of sexual messages, half sexual actions, metaphor and celebrity endorsement either through graphics or videos, where as auditory includes audios such back ground voice, music etc. However, there are research studies that have shown no signs of subliminal messages and apart from it some scholars have drawn the conclusion that these persuasive messages do not change attitude, behavior, motivation, or complex behaviors [13].

There are, however, many studies on the subject of subliminal messages and their positive effects. Large number of studies have indicated that the visual subliminal messages can effect the viewer's affective dimension to some extent [14].Some of the past studies have also shown significant results about feelings, these studies explored that the feelings in response to an ad are important in determining the effectiveness of an ad [15]. In the area of judgment, fewer studies have revealed that judgements can be influenced by subliminal messages and there are only some research publications that show behaviour can be affected by subliminal messages [16]. In one study, Fleur and Petranoff

(1959) tried to induce television viewers to either buy certain food products or watch a news show directly after a 2-hour feature movie. They could examine the impact of the subliminal messages in isolation and in combination with the help of persuasive techniques such as regular TV advertisements for the food items and the news shows. The findings revealed that subliminal advertising for products like food items, either singly or with other methods of advertising, failed to bring any measurable impact on the sales of the shown items. Here in this case subliminal messages through advertising had no significant effect in seducing consumers to watch the news show after the featured movie either. But contrary to it, the audience size declined slightly to some extent [17]. A research work by Kalra (1999), revealed findings suggesting that visual subliminal messages may be effective through their indirect impact on attitude toward a celebrity /action/product[18].Such findings are relevant to organizations and advertising agencies because the consumers feelings about an advertisements itself (which includes messages, metaphor, celebrity endorsement and product as well) are effective in influencing his or her behaviour. In one more study (Jamie Lynne Wilfong ,2002), subjects were exposed to sexually suggestive subliminal messages embedded in print advertisements in order to examine the effect of subliminal messages on three types of feelings that might be evoked by the ad-upbeat feelings, negative feelings, and warm feelings. This study showed different results with no significant effect of the subliminal message on upbeat feelings but there was a

significant effect about subliminal message by gender interaction as the degree of upbeat feelings in men in the message embed condition was significantly higher than the level evoked in women. There was also a significant main effect of the subliminal embeds on negative feelings. The gender by embed interaction was not significant. For warm feelings, neither embeds nor gender had any effect [19].

The public and academicians viewed the subliminal message as a channel that may have indirectly caused antisocial behaviours, such as suicidal acts and drug use (Taylor, Retrieve December 5, 2007, from <http://www.innertalk.com/downloads/subtech.html>). In May 1978, police investigators in a Midwestern city attempted to arrest a murderer by interspersing subliminal messages among frames of TV news film describing the murder (New York Times, 1990). In the music industry, rock and roll has often been blamed as a force for adolescents' antisocial behaviour. These cases were very sensational that subliminal messages in music or TV commercials were becoming widely known and controversial simultaneously [20].

## **2.3 Celebrities**

Nowadays celebrities are used in advertising everywhere. Bret Lie, Akshay Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, Sachin Tendulkar, Michael Jordan, David Beckham endorse various brands like David Beckham for Gillette, Michael Jordan for

Nike, Pepsi by Britney Spears etc. These celebrities have the role of promoters ,who induce consumers to purchase products, services and ideas without their evaluation rather buying is mostly based on the fact that the celebrity has used and recommended it (Kambitsis et al., 2002) [21].The impact of endorsement and no endorsement is shown by the fact that celebrity endorsers are able to generate more positive responses towards products ,messages and advertisements itself and such action of endorsement results in higher purchase intentions than a non-celebrity endorser. The celebrity endorsement can be favourable and unfavourable and can have positive image or negative image as well. One example of successful campaign that was highly effective was the campaign with Jamie Oliver as an endorser for the grocery distribution group J. Sainsbury. The successful format of “The naked chef” TV- show provided the perfect platform on which to model advertisement scenarios within a context relevant for Sainsbury’s desire (Byrne, 2003) [22]. On the other hand, the campaign that had negative impact on respondents was that of Hertz used O.J Simpson’s mass appeal in ads. The company was stuck with Simpson being charged with double homicide, and he was later acquitted on national TV (Levenson, 2005) [23].

The companies that adopt celebrity endorsements have strong associations with models who act as celebrity endorsers over a long period of time (Hsu and McDonald, 2002). In present scenario the trend is that most of the models who endorse brands are actors, athletes and other celebrities. Most of the

studies conducted in the subject of celebrity endorsement have revealed that this method of inducing consumers can have greater impact on consumer behaviour if the characteristics of the model correlate with the attributes of the brand being advertised (Hsu and McDonald, 2002) [24]. One more study related to attractiveness (Till and Busler, 1998) of endorsers has revealed that attractive models used as celebrity are able to influence consumers to larger extent than that of unattractive models. Celebrity advertising strategy has been around for long time now and this form of advertising is used strategically to persuade consumers and almost 20 % of the advertising agencies endorse their products through celebrity endorsement [25].

According to Pringle (2004), Celebrity endorsement helps advertising agencies and companies to achieve long term goals through brand building campaign. He further said, that an important aspect in this kind of campaign is the intension endorser is having when promoting the brand. He pointed out that large number of celebrities seem to be doing it for one purpose that is monetary concern. He further argued that the endorsers should have greater concern for their integrity and credibility in association with the product they are endorsing.

A number of studies have been conducted on the customers response against celebrity endorsement campaign and results have revealed that endorsements help make advertising campaigns attractive believable and induce customers towards buying on irregular/irrational basis. Furthermore as per Pringle

(2004), the attractiveness of public towards prominent stars and role models will increase with full strength as they play an important role as entertainers in their society, which would further add to the usage of endorsers in advertisements(Pringle,2004)<sup>[26]</sup>.This undefined relationship of celebrity endorsement is used for creating consumer pull which most of the time leads to irrational buying .However, some research studies on the subject have reported decreasing returns with usage of celebrities in advertisements and this may be because of the costs that they incur to engage celebrity for advertising. Also some endorsers endorse several brands and for personal benefits they at times switch and endorse competing brands and this does create negative image and its impact on sale of the product. But overall figures have shown a favourable relationship between celebrity endorsement and anticipated results, which is encouraging for the marketers as it enhances the scope of celebrity endorsement in advertising .In a study based on large number of samples, it was reported by the researcher that this technique persuades consumers to go for irrational buying which leads to profitable strategy for the business <sup>[27]</sup>.

## **2.4 Cognition, Affection and Irrational buying**

Past research has addressed affective and cognitive processes as psychological occurrences that happen during consumer decision-making. Investigation in the affective and cognitive processes and components, that occur during the course

of consumer decision-making, is essential as these are among those processes that play positive role in inducing consumer towards irrational buying. From 1950s, experts from around the world in the field of Economics, Psychology and consumer behaviour have been trying to explore and define the conceptual framework of irrational buying along with its importance to consumer behaviour (Burroughs, et al, 1996) [28]. Several research studies have been conducted which have classified items as irrational versus non-irrational products. It was revealed by Bellenger (1978), that consumer irrational buying behaviour was widely spread both across the population dimension and across categories of products [29]. Statistical reports on irrational buying during 1970s were stunning as almost 50 % of supermarket products (Kollat & Willet, 1967), 51 % of pharmaceuticals, and 61 % of healthcare and beauty aid items were bought on an unplanned and irregular basis. (POPAI/DuPont Studies, 1978); besides it, 62 % of discount store buying (Prasad, 1975) and 27-62 % of all departmental store buying were declared as irrational purchase categories. From those departmental store items bought on irrational basis, 39.6% were from apparel goods which included men's sport and casual clothes, men's apparel and furnishings, women's/girl's clothing, women's sportswear, and women's dresses[30]. It was found by Williams and Dardis (1972) that 46 % of women's outerwear and 32 % of men's wear, out of total purchases, were made on an unplanned basis throughout department store, specialty stores, and discount stores. Only some product lines were treated as not being affected by the

dissonance between cognition and affection (Rook & Hoch, 1985). However, the figures could be on higher side because of the bombardment of external stimuli such as subliminal ads and also because of the pace with which consumers live today and other factors such as time constraints, family structure, availability of 24-hour E-Commerce.

Latest developments in consumer behaviour and consumer decision making have considered consumer behaviour either the result of reasoned actions or as a repository of emotional reactions. Hoch and Lowenstein (1991), defined irrational buying as a struggle between these two components of consumer behaviour i.e affect or emotions and cognition or thoughts. Irrationality is mainly because of emotional forces while as the cognitive component supports willpower of an individual. Previous studies have examined these components in isolation but to understand complete decision making process, neither of the two alone can be sufficient (Hoch & Lowenstein, 1991) [31]. Affective and cognitive responses are important dimensions of irrational buying. An irresistible inclination to purchase fights with the internal willpower to delay instant pleasure. When a consumer has lesser amount of self-control than that of buying inclination, irrational buying emerges (Youn, 2000). The conflict between the affective dimensions (i.e. emotional desires to purchase) and the cognitive dimensions (that includes strong internal control not to purchase) is similar to a balance beam that can shift at any moment and only a slight shift is required so as to create the change. Affection (Emotional desire) and Cognition (cognitive

willpower) fight against each other and produce an uneven irrationality/self-control balance beam effect. If an individual's emotional inclination are on higher side than the cognitive dimensions of self control then result will be irrationality if all other contributing factors remain constant (Youn, 2000) [32].

## **2.4 Research gap**

The topic of subliminal advertising is still an emerging field and number of studies have reported mixed results with some showing positive impact of subliminal ads on dimensions of consumer behaviour(Jamie Lynne Wilfong ,2002).There have been only few studies in the field of consumer behaviour and subliminal advertising as being external stimuli and all the studies have been conducted in foreign countries .The field of subliminal advertising has hardly caught the interest of researchers in Asia particularly in India and no study till date has been conducted in Kashmir province of J&K. How subjects exposed to subliminal ads report or behave after being exposed to subliminal ads still remains unexplored in this part of world. No study has been conducted in Jammu and Kashmir to see impact of subliminal ads on cognitive ,affective dimensions which shape the buying behaviour/compulsive buying behaviour of an individual. The field of consumer behaviour and subliminal advertising

together is still an open field that provides enough opportunities for researchers from different fields.

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