

# Marketing professor finds that subliminal advertising has an effect

March 21 2014, by Lillian Cheung

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Professor Gerald Gorn, Chair Professor of Marketing at the Faculty of Business of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU); and Ms Maria Galli from the Department of Economics and Business of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain, co-authored a paper entitled "Unconscious transfer of meaning to brands" to investigate the effect of subliminal advertising.

The paper, which has been named as best article in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* in 2011, has just been awarded the C.W. Park Prize by the Society for Consumer Psychology.

Subliminal advertising refers to advertising where some of the advertisement, for example "Thirsty? Drink Coke," is shown to an individual for so brief a duration that s/he is unable to consciously detect it.

It has been controversial since the 1950's when advertisers first claimed that it worked. Since then, however, scientific research has been unable to provide convincing evidence in support of it.

The research, conducted in Hong Kong by Gorn and Galli, investigated if it was possible for people to learn the attributes of a brand unconsciously.

The findings suggested that subliminal advertising might in fact work—it is possible that information in an advertisement a person never

consciously sees changes their thinking about the advertised product.

Sitting in front of a computer screen, the research participants were shown a Chinese fictitious brand name paired with the word "black," and another Chinese fictitious brand name paired with the word "white."

The fictitious [brand names](#) were shown for 26 milliseconds, so briefly that participants could not realise that they saw them; they could only consciously see the words "black" and "white."

Later on, these participants were asked to state their preferences for two potential "new" brand names of either cola or soymilk beverages. The "new" brand names were the fictitious ones that had been subliminally paired with, respectively, black and white.

Participants liked the brand name that had been unconsciously associated with black much less for a soymilk drink than for a cola drink, and participants liked the brand name that had been unconsciously associated with white much less for a cola drink than for a soymilk drink.

This shows that the participants had been persuaded by the subliminal procedure and that associations were created in their heads between the colours and the fictitious brand names that they never even realized they saw, and this influenced how they felt about the brand names.

While advertising regulations prohibit the use of subliminal advertising, there are many commercials in today's world of advertising where images and words are very fleetingly presented that they are hardly noticed, if they are noticed at all.

The research suggests that these types of advertisements nevertheless have an effect.

When asked to comment on their research they said: "The brain is extraordinary—it creates connections between things even when we don't know we saw them, and we can't stop these connections from influencing our attitudes and behavior!"

**More information:** The paper "Unconscious transfer of meaning to brands" is available online: [www.bm.ust.hk/mark/staff/Maria/Maria%20-%20JCP%20-%20Jan%202011.pdf](http://www.bm.ust.hk/mark/staff/Maria/Maria%20-%20JCP%20-%20Jan%202011.pdf)

Provided by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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