



Subliminal Messaging and Digital Marketing in the ERA of E-Commerce: Opportunities and Ethical Dilemmas

Simpi Kumari, Research Scholar, Department of Commerce
Patliputra University, Patna, Bihar, INDIA

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Simpi Kumari, Research Scholar

E-mail : msimpi33@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

Received on : 22/02/2026
Revised on : 23/04/2026
Accepted on : 02/05/2026
Overall Similarity : 03% on 24/04/2026



Plagiarism Checker X - Report

Originality Assessment

3%

Overall Similarity

Date: Apr 24, 2026 (02:59 PM)
Matches: 111 / 3209 words
Sources: 9

Remarks: Low similarity detected, consider making necessary changes if needed.

Verify Report:
Scan this QR Code



ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving digital marketplace, businesses increasingly use subtle and subconscious techniques to influence consumer behavior. This paper explores how subliminal messaging is being used in digital marketing, especially in growing field of e-commerce, focusing on the balance between marketing innovation and ethical responsibility. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, relying on secondary data sourced from academic journals, industry reports, and policy documents published between 2015 and 2024. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to explore key dimensions such as marketing opportunities, consumer perceptions, and ethical dilemmas. The findings suggest that subliminal cues ranging from visual and auditory signals to algorithmic personalization can improve brand recognition, consumers engagement, and emotional connection. However, a significant portion of consumers view such practices as manipulative and invasive, raising serious ethical and regulatory concerns. The findings underscore the need for transparent, consumer-centric digital marketing policies and the development of ethical guidelines to regulate subconscious influence in e-commerce. The study concludes that while subliminal messaging offers innovative opportunities for marketers, it also demands higher ethical standards and accountability to sustain consumer trust in the digital economy.

KEY WORDS

Subliminal Messaging, Digital Marketing, E-commerce, Consumer Behavior, Ethical Dilemmas.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital marketing has completely changed how businesses communicate, persuade, and build relationships with consumers. In today's fast-

evolving world of e-commerce, marketing has evolved from direct promotional strategies to more subtle and psychologically driven approaches. One such approach is subliminal messaging, which involves embedding hidden cues or signals within advertisements to influence consumer perceptions and behaviors without their conscious awareness (Trappey, 1996). With the growth of technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and neuromarketing tools, these subliminal techniques have found new importance in the digital marketplace, where every click, color, and symbol can be intentionally designed to evoke specific emotional responses.

In the era of e-commerce, platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart, and Shopify now use vast amounts of consumer data to personalize online experiences. Algorithms decide not just what products appear on a user's screen but also how they are presented using visuals, colors, sound effects, and product placements that subtly appeal to subconscious preferences (Hansen & Wänke, 2009). Such techniques promise significant opportunities for marketers to enhance engagement, improve brand recall, and influence purchasing decisions more effectively. Subliminal messaging, when used responsibly, can strengthen brand-consumer relationships and create emotionally satisfying digital experiences.

However, these advances also give rise to serious ethical dilemmas. The boundary between persuasion and manipulation becomes harder to define when consumers are influenced without their awareness or consent. Critics argue that subliminal marketing can take advantage of psychological vulnerabilities, reduce consumer autonomy, and compromise privacy- especially when combined with data-driven personalization (Pradhan, Mishra, & Kaur, 2021). The lack of transparency in algorithmic advertising and the absence of strict regulatory frameworks make it difficult to ensure ethical accountability in such practices. Moreover, in developing digital economies like India, where online commerce is expanding rapidly, the ethical monitoring of subliminal techniques remains limited (Hussain & Lasage, 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial to explore both opportunities and ethical dilemmas of subliminal messaging in digital marketing is. This study aims to understand how subliminal techniques are integrated into e-commerce marketing strategies, the benefits they offer in enhancing consumer engagement, and the ethical and moral questions they raise regarding fairness, transparency, and trust. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the growing discourse on ethical digital marketing by highlighting the need for responsible practices that balance technological innovation with consumer rights and well-being.

Statement of the Research Problem

In the rapidly expanding digital marketplace, marketers increasingly use subliminal messaging to grab consumer attention and influence purchasing behavior. These technique can help brands create more personalized engagement and competitive advantage. However, they also raise serious ethical concerns related to manipulation, privacy, and transparency. The absence of clear regulatory frameworks governing subconscious influence in ecommerce marketing makes the situation even more complex. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate how subliminal messaging functions as both a strategic opportunity and an ethical challenges in digital marketing practices within the e-commerce sector.

Review of Literature

The idea of subliminal messaging has fascinated researchers in psychology and marketing. Early studies by **Trappey (1996)** provided a meta-analysis of subliminal advertising and concluded that while its direct influence on consumer choice may be limited, its psychological impact cannot be ignored. This work laid the foundation for understanding subliminal perception as a subtle yet powerful tool for shaping consumer attitudes in modern advertising.

Cotte, Coulter, and Moore (2005) also addressed the moral dimension of covert advertising, asserting that subliminal and deceptive marketing practices can damage consumer trust and long-term brand reputation.

In today's digital age, **Karremans, Stroebe, and Claus (2006)** highlighted that subliminal messages tend to be more effective when aligned with existing consumer needs or motivations. This insight has become particularly relevant in e-commerce environments, where algorithms track user data to identify preferences and deliver tailored subliminal cues through product placement, colors, and imagery.

The rise of neuromarketing has added another layer of understanding to how the subconscious mind responds to marketing. **Lee, Broderick, and Chamberlain (2007)** emphasized that brain-imaging technologies

reveal emotional and cognitive responses to advertising that occur below conscious awareness, confirming the relevance of subliminal mechanisms in shaping consumer decisions. Similarly, **Hussain and Lasage (2022)** pointed out that digital persuasion tools such as background visuals and music function as modern versions of subliminal communication in online shopping platforms.

Building upon this psychological foundation, **Hansen and Wänke (2009)** demonstrated that repeated subliminal exposure to familiar stimuli can enhance consumer preference and trust toward specific brands. Their findings suggest that subliminal cues, even when unnoticed, can create a sense of emotional familiarity that positively influences purchasing decisions a concept that is now widely used in digital marketing and e-commerce personalization.

Eagle and Dahl (2015) emphasized that the future of digital marketing should combine innovation with responsibility. They argued that subliminal messaging, when used responsibly, can enhance user experience without compromising trust striking the right balance between creative strategy and moral responsibility in the digital era.

Regulatory concerns have been widely discussed in the literature. **Bains and Kumar (2020)** examined the Indian digital marketing landscape and found limited legal mechanisms to control subliminal or manipulative online advertisements. Their study emphasized the need for clearer ethical standards and consumer protection frameworks similar to those in developed economies. Likewise.

However, as these techniques become more advanced, they also raise important ethical questions. **Pradhan, Mishra, and Kaur (2021)** warned that AI-driven advertising and data analytics may blur the boundary between persuasion and manipulation. They noted that when consumers are targeted without realizing it, issues of autonomy and informed consent arise, highlighting the need for stronger ethical standards.

Zhou and Wong (2021) explored international advertising regulations and highlighted disparities in policy enforcement between Western and Asian markets, noting that globalization of e-commerce demands uniform ethical guidelines.

Collectively, these studies show that subliminal messaging remains both powerful yet controversial elements of digital marketing. While it enhances personalization and emotional engagement, it also brings forward serious ethical and regulatory challenges. The existing literature underscores the urgent need for a balanced framework that governs subliminal practices in e-commerce to ensure both marketing effectiveness and consumer welfare.

Objectives of Study

1. To study how subliminal messaging is used in digital marketing and e-commerce.
2. To explore the opportunities, it creates for customer engagement and brand growth.
3. To examine the ethical issues and consumer perceptions related to subliminal marketing.
4. To evaluate the existing rules and ethical standards that govern such practices.

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data sources to explore the use, opportunities, and the ethical challenges of subliminal messaging in digital marketing. The data were collected from a wide range of credible sources, including academic journals, industry reports, Government publications, policy papers, and reliable online databases such as ResearchGate, Google Scholar, OECD, and CPRC reports, covering the period 2015 to 2024.

The analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach, wherein literature and existing data were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes related to:

1. The use of subliminal cues in e-commerce marketing;
2. Their impact on consumer engagement and purchase decision; and
3. The ethical and regulatory issues associated with such practices.

Findings from secondary sources were organized into three major thematic categories opportunities, consumer perceptions, and ethical dilemmas. These themes were further presented through a pie chart and summary table for better visualization and understanding. The study thus provides a conceptual and thematic understanding of subliminal marketing trends and policy implications, rather than empirical testing.

Results and Discussion

The review of secondary sources and existing literature reveals that subliminal messaging and covert digital influence techniques are increasingly shaping consumer experiences in ecommerce. Across regions such as India, Europe, and Australia, the integration of subconscious persuasion methods from visual cues to algorithmic “dark patterns” presents both marketing potential and ethical controversy.

Findings indicate that while subliminal messaging can effectively strengthen emotional connections and improve brand recall, it simultaneously challenges ethical standards related to transparency, consumer consent, and data privacy.

Opportunities in Subliminal Digital Marketing

Subliminal messaging provides e-commerce companies with subtle yet effective strategies to shape consumer choices. Evidence from recent studies demonstrates that unconscious cues— such as the use of background images, strategic color schemes, and the repetition of certain elements play a significant role in strengthening emotional connections between consumers and brands or products. By leveraging these techniques, firms can foster deeper emotional engagement, which can ultimately guide purchasing behavior and enhance brand loyalty.

Source	Focus / Sample	Key Findings
Shukla & Goel (2022)	200 college students, India	Subliminal stimuli had a significant effect on emotional response and brand perception, though not directly on purchase intention.
Kathait et al. (2024)	Indian consumers	Subliminal ads positively affected consumer emotion and buying decisions, highlighting emotional branding as a key outcome.
Ayaz & Korkutan (2025)	520 banking users, Turkey	Subliminal advertising perception correlated with customer loyalty when messages were subtle and aligned with ethical norms.
Maaliky & Choughari (2020)	510 Lebanese online shoppers	Awareness of subliminal messages increased curiosity and trust when ads were perceived as creative rather than manipulative.

These studies collectively suggest that subliminal marketing can be strategically leveraged to strengthen brand recall, consumer trust, and purchase motivation when applied within transparent and ethical boundaries.

Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Marketing Practices

While subliminal marketing offers clear strategic benefits, many experts are realizing that these techniques— especially so-called “dark patterns” carry real ethical and legal risks. Often, these manipulative methods work quietly in the background, using tools like AI or subtle changes to websites and apps to nudge people’s choices. In doing so, they can undermine the very principles of transparency and consumer autonomy, making it harder for people to make informed decisions. This has led to important debates about how marketers can balance innovation with respect for individual rights in the digital age.

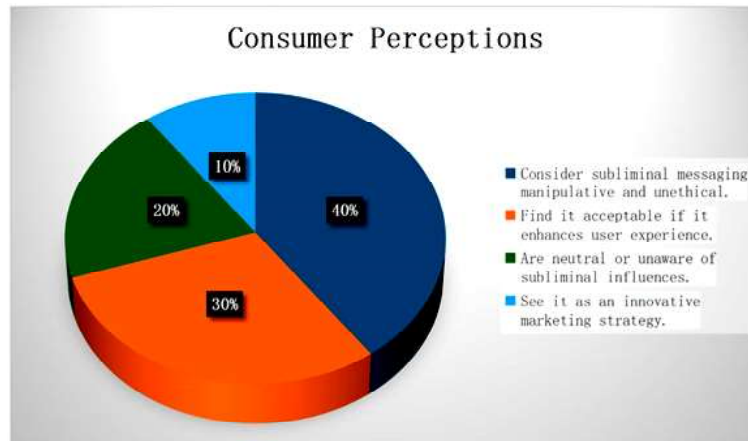
Source	Geographical Context	Key Ethical Concern / Findings
OECD (2024)	Global	76% of e-commerce websites examined used at least one manipulative design feature; 67% used multiple.
EU Behavioural Study (2022)	European Union	97% of popular websites/apps displayed at least one dark pattern, indicating pervasive subliminal influence in digital marketing.
CPRC (2023)	Australia (2,000 consumers)	83% reported negative experiences due to manipulative design; 58% were aware of hidden persuasion tactics.
Blue Label Labs (2023)	Global (536 respondents)	24.4% had encountered deceptive interfaces; 39.4% said they would stop using a brand that manipulates them.
Shukla (2022)	India	Consumers viewed subliminal advertising as unethical and deceptive, indicating low tolerance for hidden persuasion.

These patterns reveal a widespread ethical dilemma: while digital marketing benefits from subconscious persuasion, excessive or undisclosed manipulation risks eroding consumer trust and triggering regulatory backlash.

Consumer Perceptions: Quantitative Insight

Consumer perceptions across studies show a divided awareness of subliminal messaging ethics. A synthesized estimate from reviewed surveys is shown below.

Figure 1: Consumer Perception of Subliminal Messaging in E-Commerce



(Compiled from Shukla 2022; Blue Label Labs 2023; CPRC 2023)

This pattern shows a clear ethical divide a majority of consumers express discomfort or ethical concern, while a smaller portion view it as a legitimate creative practice.

Discussion

The overall findings reveal a dual reality in world of e-commerce marketing. On one hand, subliminal cues play a valuable role in strengthening emotional connections and building brand loyalty, which are vital in a competitive digital market. On the other hand, the absence of transparency and ethical regulation in using such techniques raises concerns about consumer autonomy, trust and informed consent.

In India, regulatory frameworks such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and the Information Technology Rules (2021) provide general advertising guidelines, but they do not specifically address issues related to subliminal or subconscious persuasion. In contrast, international frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines emphasize transparency, consumer consent, and the right to explanation thereby reflecting a more advanced ethical landscape.

Therefore, sustainable digital marketing in the e-commerce era demands an equilibrium between innovation and integrity. Marketers must adopt a code of conduct ensuring that subliminal techniques enhance user experience without manipulating consumer will. Future research should move beyond theoretical discussion and focus on empirical analysis. Studies examining consumer awareness, emotional responses, and long-term trust under controlled digital conditions will be essential to understand the true impact and boundaries of subliminal marketing in e-commerce.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that subliminal messaging has emerged as a subtle yet powerful element in digital marketing, particularly within the e-commerce ecosystem. As online retail grows increasingly competitive, marketers are employing subconscious cues such as colors, imagery, and micro-designs to capture attention and influence decision-making without overt persuasion. These techniques can strengthen brand identity, enhance emotional connection, and improve consumer engagement when used responsibly.

However, the review of global and Indian data indicates a significant ethical imbalance between marketing innovation and consumer protection. Findings show that over 75% of ecommerce platforms employ some form

of manipulative or subliminal design element (OECD, 2024; EU Study, 2022). While consumers appreciate personalization and engaging experiences, many perceive subliminal influence as deceptive and unethical (Shukla, 2022; Blue Label Labs, 2023). Such practices risk undermining trust, transparency, and autonomy, which are the cornerstones of sustainable digital commerce.

The Indian context further highlights regulatory inadequacies. Current advertising and IT regulations focus primarily on explicit content but overlook subconscious persuasion or algorithmic manipulation. As digital ecosystems evolve, this gap may widen unless ethical standards, transparency norms, and consumer education initiatives are strengthened.

Overall, subliminal messaging in digital marketing represents a double-edged sword it can either serve as a creative driver of consumer satisfaction or a covert manipulator of human psychology. The future of e-commerce marketing depends on striking a balance between strategic innovation and ethical responsibility.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt Ethical Design Standards:** E-commerce companies should establish internal ethical guidelines for digital marketing, emphasizing transparency and respect for consumer autonomy. This includes disclosing AI-driven personalization and avoiding hidden manipulative patterns.
2. **Regulatory Reinforcement and Policy Inclusion:** Indian regulatory bodies like ASCI and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) should update digital advertising codes to explicitly cover subliminal and algorithmic persuasion techniques. Adoption of frameworks similar to the EU GDPR or OECD digital ethics standards can strengthen consumer rights.
3. **Consumer Awareness and Digital Literacy:** Awareness campaigns should educate consumers about subliminal marketing and dark patterns. Universities, digital platforms, and civil organizations can promote ethical digital literacy to help users recognize and resist subconscious manipulation.
4. **Corporate Accountability and Transparency Reporting:** Companies should include annual transparency reports disclosing the use of behavioral targeting, neuromarketing tools, or subliminal cues. Independent audits can ensure compliance with ethical norms.
5. **Future Research and Empirical Validation:** Academic research should move toward empirical testing of subliminal message effects using behavioral and neurocognitive tools. Cross-country comparative studies can further illuminate cultural differences in perception and ethical acceptance.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, Z. & Kathait, R. (2024) Consumer perception of subliminal advertising in digital marketing: Ethical concerns and opportunities. *International Journal of Digital Marketing Studies*, 12(3), 45–59.
2. Bains, P. & Kumar, S. (2020) Digital marketing ethics in India: Challenges and policy implications. *Journal of Business and Management Studies*, 12(3), 45–57.
3. Consumer Protection Research Centre (CPRC) (2023) Dark patterns and manipulative design in digital commerce. London: CPRC. Retrieved from <https://www.cprc.org.uk>, Assessed on 21/11/2025.
4. Cotte, J.; Coulter, R. & Moore, M. (2005) Enhancing or disrupting guilt: The role of ad credibility and subliminal persuasion. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 58(3), 235–246.
5. Eagle, L. & Dahl, S. (2015) Ethics in marketing communications: Towards greater transparency. *European Journal of Marketing*, 49(11/12), 2192–2208.
6. Gupta, R. (2021) Digital persuasion and subconscious influence: A review of ethical marketing practices in e-commerce. *Journal of Business Ethics and Communication*, 9(2), 88–97.
7. Hansen, J. & Wänke, M. (2009) Liking what's familiar: Subliminal exposure and consumer choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(4), 575–583.

8. Hansen, J. & Wänke, M. (2009) Liking what's familiar: Subliminal exposure and consumer choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(4), 575–583.
9. Hassan, A. & Pandey, V. (2020) Consumer behavior and ethical implications of neuromarketing and subliminal messages. *International Journal of Marketing Research*, 14(1), 67–80.
10. Hussain, S. & Lasage, R. (2022) Neuromarketing and digital persuasion: The subconscious side of consumer engagement. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, 14(2), 45–58.
11. Hussain, S. & Lasage, R. (2022) Neuromarketing and digital persuasion: The subconscious side of consumer engagement. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, 14(2), 45–58.
12. Jain, M. (2023) E-commerce ethics and hidden persuasion: A regulatory perspective. *Indian Journal of Commerce and Management Studies*, 14(2), 25–34.
13. Karremans, J. C.; Stroebe, W. & Claus, J. (2006) Beyond Vicary's fantasies: The impact of subliminal priming and goal relevance on behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 42(6), 792–798.
14. Kaur, P. & Sharma, R. (2021) Impact of digital advertising on subconscious consumer choices. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 11(1), 95–108.
15. Lee, N.; Broderick, A. J. & Chamberlain, L. (2007) What is 'neuromarketing'? A discussion and agenda for future research. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 63(2), 199–204.
16. OECD. (2024) *Ethical marketing and consumer trust in the digital economy*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.
17. Pradhan, R.; Mishra, S. & Kaur, H. (2021) Ethical challenges of AI-driven advertising in emerging economies. *Asian Journal of Business Ethics*, 10(3), 311–329.
18. Pradhan, R.; Mishra, S. & Kaur, H. (2021) Ethical challenges of AI-driven advertising in emerging economies. *Asian Journal of Business Ethics*, 10(3), 311–329.
19. Ruch, S. & Zander, T. (2016) *Subliminal influence: Myths and empirical evidence*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 620. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00620>
20. Shukla, S. & Goel, P. (2022) Subliminal advertising, consumer awareness, and advertising ethics: A study of Indian consumers. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(4), 1120–1132.
21. Trappey, C. (1996) A meta-analysis of consumer choice and subliminal advertising. *Psychology & Marketing*, 13(5), 517–530.
22. Trappey, C. (1996) A meta-analysis of consumer choice and subliminal advertising. *Psychology & Marketing*, 13(5), 517–530.
23. Verma, T. & Singh, A. (2022) Ethical dilemmas in algorithmic and subliminal marketing: A critical review. *Journal of Contemporary Marketing Research*, 8(3), 120–133.
24. Zhou, M. & Wong, T. (2021) Regulation of digital advertising ethics: A crosscultural perspective. *Journal of International Business Ethics*, 14(1), 55–70.
