

A subliminal message is one that is communicated to a subject below her or his level of conscious visual or auditory perception. Tests have shown, however, that people can perceive subliminal messages without being conscious of them. Some department stores and supermarkets have inserted in their music and tracks the messages "Don't shoplift," or "Don't steal." Studies have shown that stores that use this device have a lower rate of shoplifting than comparable stores that do not use it.

Is it ethical for stores to insert subliminal messages not to steal in their music and tracks? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It is unethical for stores to insert subliminal messages not to steal in their music and tapes. This practice involves deception insofar as patrons reasonably expect that they are not subjected to such messages upon entering a store. The moral rule forbidding deception may be violated justifiably under certain circumstances, but not one of them. The studies comparing stores that use subliminal messages with those that do not only provide some, but not compelling, reason to believe that the messages significantly reduce the amount of stealing. If everyone violated the moral rule forbidding deception in similar kinds of situations the rule would mean little.

Case from the 4/18/1995 Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.