

How Starbucks, Molson Coors and Subaru Make Use of Subliminal Advertising and the Tetris Effect in the “Road to Paradise” Summer Game: A Detailed Analysis

Posted by u/idrinkeverclear on June 17, 2022

Starbucks has a tradition of launching a promotional campaign every summer in North America, in which they invite Starbucks Rewards members to play through a fun little game and take a chance at winning prizes. Sounds fun and harmless, right? Well, not exactly...

It shouldn't come as a surprise that in a capitalistic society, companies never offer anything truly for free.

Starbucks' real intention behind that promotional campaign is to **deeply engrain their brand** in their participants' **subconscious**. It's a form of subliminal advertising that makes use of both subliminal stimuli and something called the Tetris effect.

Subliminal advertising is a form of advertising that makes use of subliminal stimuli, which are sensory stimuli perceived below the threshold of consciousness. Subliminal advertising is actually banned in the United Kingdom.

As for the Tetris effect, it's a phenomenon that occurs when a person spends a lot of time and attention doing a certain activity to the point where the activity begins to pattern their thoughts, mental images, and dreams. It takes its name from the video game *Tetris*, whose players have frequently described experiencing it after playing the game for a significant amount of time.

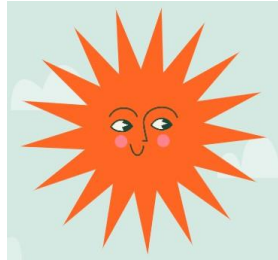
What Starbucks is essentially doing here is **renting some advertising space in their participants' subconscious**, advertising that might also manifest itself in **hypnagogic states and dreams**.

Let's take a closer and detailed look at how Starbucks makes use of the two aforementioned techniques in the 2022 edition of their summer game, titled “Road to Paradise.” It should be noted that this post examines the promotional campaign as it was advertised in Canada, so there can be some differences between the Canadian version and other versions.

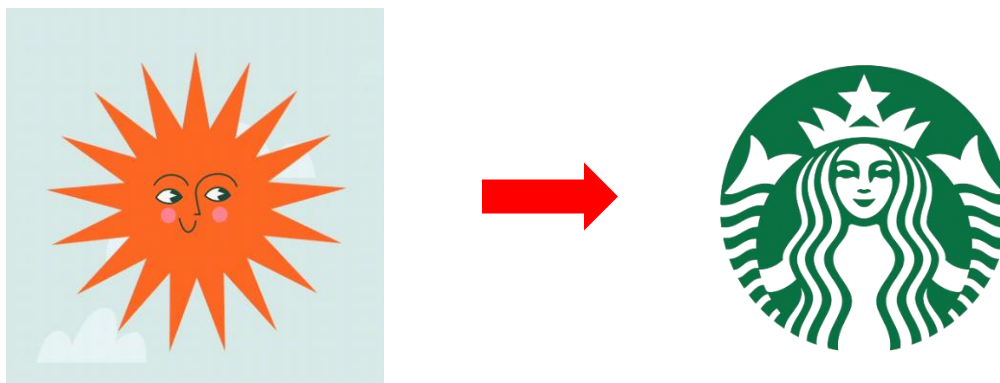
The game they present their Starbucks Rewards members with is a very simple tile-matching game, similar to *Candy Crush* and the likes. The game has six levels, with the sixth level being a “high score” version which can be played indefinitely. The objective of the game is to clear out a specific number of specially designated tiles from the board by tapping on the matching ones, and doing so while being limited by a maximum number

of moves. There are also “boosters” that players can make use of, at least once they’ve earned some by completing certain activities.

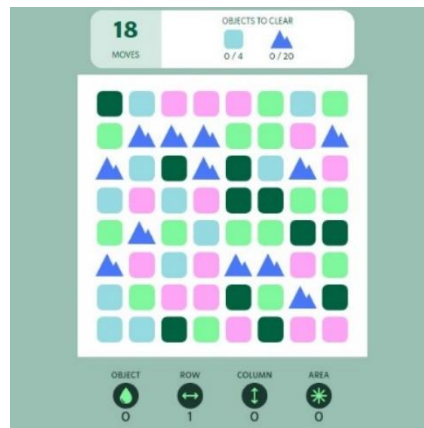
Apart from the tile-matching game, the promotional campaign also features a wheel that participants can spin for a chance to win Starbucks Rewards stars and gift cards. This is the first thing that participants are invited to play after they log in: a wheel shaped like a smiling sun disk that must be tapped in order to make it spin and “release” a booster or a prize.



While this might look like a friendly, summer-themed wheel at first, this is actually the first instance of a subliminal stimuli being presented to the participants. When the “wheel” starts to spin, it doesn’t look as spiky anymore, since its pointy edges start to form a continuous circle. Meanwhile, participants are **flashed with rapidly succeeding images** of a shape that heavily invokes the Starbucks logo. Also, the smiley face’s pupils constantly shift from left to right, back and forth, with a **very brief moment** during which they stop in the middle, perfectly aligned with the mermaid’s eyes from the company’s logo. Because of the speed at which this happens, participants generally aren’t able to instantly and consciously recognize the logo; rather, the visual stimulus is “absorbed” by the subconscious.



Next, let's take a look at the tile-matching game. This is what the first level looks like.

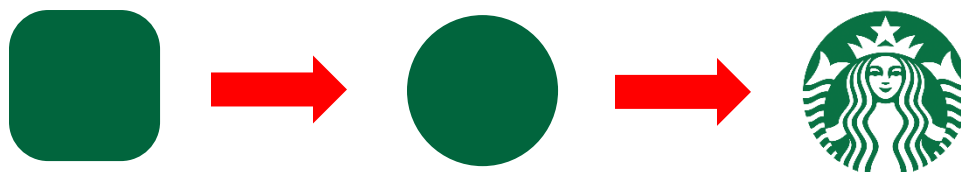


On the first level, the difficulty level is set to easy. In other words, it's perfectly possible for players to complete it without making use of boosters. The players have to clear 4 cyan tiles and 20 mountain shaped tiles, and they only have 18 moves to do so. It's considered easy to beat for two reasons. First, the number of moves available is close to the number of objects to clear (18 versus 24); second, the game's algorithm is set to easy, such that new tiles dropping from the top will often match the ones below, and cyan tiles and mountains will be prioritized by the algorithm.

While the color of the tiles changes from one level to another, there are two recurring patterns that appear in every single level.

The first are the dark green tiles, which could more appropriately be referred to as "Starbucks green" tiles. The players are never asked to specifically clear them through levels 1 to 5 (level 6 doesn't have specific tiles to clear at all, since it's a high score version). Instead, the players' attention is diverted to one or two other colors and a unique shape.

This is another instance of subliminal stimuli being presented to the players: because their attention is diverted to other tiles by the game's objective, they're not actively focusing on the dark green tiles, "**absorbing**" them in the background instead. In addition, while these tiles are technically shaped as squares with rounded edges, they'll nonetheless be perceived as circles when in the background, evoking, once again, the Starbucks logo—or one could even argue that they evoke the company's recognizable green straws, despite the fact that Starbucks has been gradually taking these straws out of their drinks in previous years.



The second recurring pattern common to every level is a unique set of tiles that are shaped noticeably differently from all other tiles and that players are always asked to clear. On the first level, the shape is that of a blue mountain. The unique shape changes for every level, however. The six shapes are, in progressive order: a mountain, a shell, a sun disk, a lily pad, an anchor, and a sparkle.



Summer-themed, right? Not so fast.

Here, Starbucks makes use of the Tetris effect. Because the difficulty level increases for every level, and because the sixth level invites the players to constantly beat their previous high score, the time players spend on clearing these objects also increases. **The longer the players take to beat a level, the more effective the Tetris effect, and the more likely that the pattern will start manifesting itself in the players' thoughts, mental images, and dreams.**

With the exception of the first (the mountain) and sixth (the sparkle) shapes, which we'll come back to, most of these shapes evoke either part of, or the entirety of, the Starbucks logo, but not to the same extent, which is why the order in which they're presented matters: from least effective to most effective.

Can you guess at which level the difficulty increases considerably? Yes, it's at level 4.

While the difficulty level increases slightly from level 1 to 3, these levels are generally easy to beat, which means that players spend on average less time playing them. As a result, the Tetris effect doesn't occur very effectively. This is because the second and third shape only slightly evoke the company's logo. Interestingly, the second shape also evokes the mermaid indirectly by means of association.



As for the blue mountain shape used in level 1, does it evoke anything else to you? If you haven't noticed, this is the exact shape that appears right above the Coors Light logo. Which means that Starbucks Rewards Games worked with Molson Coors in the making of this game.



On top of the fact that the shaped used is the exact same one, we know for a fact that Starbucks worked with other companies on this promotional campaign, like Volvo, since they're clearly mentioned in the list of activities and in the prizes to be won.

And speaking of Molson Coors, they're no strangers to subliminal advertising. Another curious thing about the Coors logo is that when you take a closer look at it, it seems to contain many phallic shapes (one could say *too many* of them), but that's beyond the scope of this post.

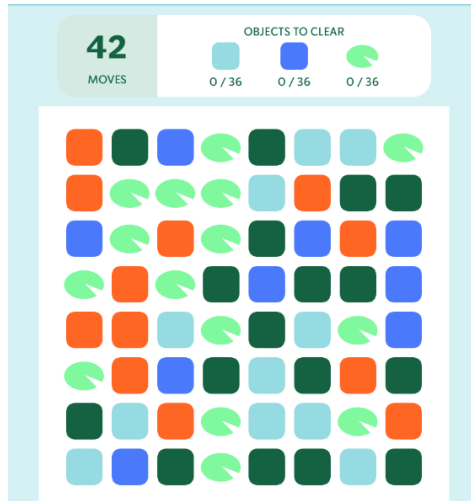


Unlike in the case of Starbucks, however, I'm not surprised that Molson Coors would resort to subliminal advertising as a desperate attempt at increasing their sales, since nobody's drinking their piss.

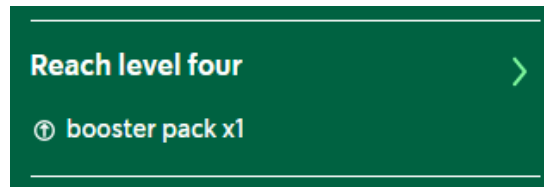
Moving on to the second shape (the shell), there's an alternative explanation for why it was chosen. It's entirely possible that Starbucks worked with the oil company Shell in selecting the second object, but the resemblance is weaker with this one. Starbucks did, after all, work with Volvo, an automobile company, so the possibility of also having worked with an oil company is not entirely absurd. However, it's harder to come to a definite conclusion with this one.



Going back to Starbucks, level 4 is where the difficulty level noticeably increases. The ratio of moves available to objects to clear becomes 42 to 108, and while it would be difficult to determine whether or not the game's algorithm actually changes its difficulty mode, it feels like that it does. Regardless of whether or not the algorithm is tweaked for this level, the overall difficulty reaches a point where the players might have to use some boosters in order to beat it.



And the game does exactly that! Once players reach level 4, a booster pack is unlocked. Here's the insidious part, however: that booster pack is initially hidden from the players. In order to retrieve it, players must close the board and go back to the activities menu. Most players will play the game without being aware that a booster pack unlocks precisely after reaching level 4, since this activity is positioned all the way at the bottom of the list of activities to complete. This was done on purpose: the game's designers assumed that most players wouldn't take the time to read through the long list of activities before starting and would simply jump straight into the game.



The consequence of this is that players end up giving many attempts at beating level 4, until they eventually give up and realize that a booster pack was made available to them on the home screen. Because they've already spent a considerable amount of time on this level, however, the Tetris effect is more likely to occur.

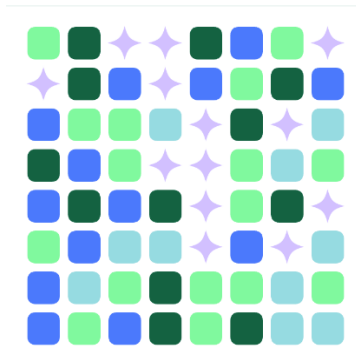


Level 5 is even more difficult to beat, so the Tetris effect is also likely to occur and yield even more effective results. This level's unique shape was therefore carefully chosen.



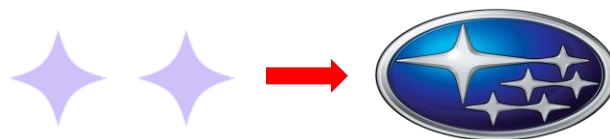
Finally, when the players reach level 6, they have 30 moves to clear as many tiles as possible, regardless of color or shape. They're then invited to try to beat their high score for as long as they want.

Another element that sets level 6 apart from the first five levels is the fact that, unlike with previous levels, all the different colors used here pair well together, resulting in an aesthetically pleasing board.



Can you guess what the shape from this final level is supposed to refer to? Surprise, surprise! It refers to a shape that appears six times in Japanese automaker Subaru's logo. Therefore, Starbucks worked with not one, but two automobile companies for this promotional campaign: a visible one (Volvo) and a hidden one (Subaru).

Because the players are expected to attempt to beat their previous high score for several rounds, the Tetris effect is, once more, likely to occur at this level.



What can we conclude from this analysis?

First, it has to be made clear that Starbucks Rewards Games, the team behind this concept, is not just a regular team of employees working for Starbucks' marketing department. They more specifically constitute Starbucks' **subliminal advertising department**.

In a consumerist society, it's frankly pathetic the lengths some companies will go to simply to increase their sales and profits.

As a society, we should be asking ourselves whether or not this type of advertising is ethical or not. Is it ethical for Molson Coors to make use of a tile-matching game requiring focus to embed its blue mountain shape in the players' minds, precisely **without revealing itself as Molson Coors?**

Finally, if you've already played this game and later found yourself stopping by a Starbucks more often than you need, say, during the summer, it's entirely possible that you've actually been brainwashed by the company. Or not. Maybe you just really like Starbucks... Right?

P.-S. If you're feeling a little angry or deceived after reading this, you can let Starbucks know what you think by clicking here.

https://customerservice.starbucks.com/app/contact/ask_company_info/