

THE NEW REPRESENTATIONS AND MODALITIES OF THE TABOO CONCEPT: AN APPLICATION TO ADVERTISING PROVOCATION

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Abstract

Taboos, as cultural productions, geographically, historically and socially situated, evolve in line with society and mentalities. One may therefore wonder whether the traditional representations of taboo found in literature are not, at least in part, dated. This exploratory research proposes to answer the following questions: What are the new representations and modalities of the concept of taboo? What impact could it have on affective and conative reactions in provocative advertisements that appeal to these new representations? We mobilize a sample of 35 semi-directive individual interviews, asking respondents about their experiences as spectators of shocking and taboo advertisements. We assess their individual perceptions and feelings, in the face of various sexual and morbid stimuli pre-tested as taboo. In doing so, the interviewees are invited to share their own definition of the concept before giving their opinion on the theoretical facets present in the literature definitions. For many, especially the younger ones, "nothing is taboo anymore", in other words, taboos are on the way out. Nevertheless, it appears that this is mainly due to the increasing difficulty of individuals to verbalize their own taboos and to a distancing from the concept. We show that if taboos do not disappear, they are no longer necessarily qualified as such by respondents.

Introduction and Objectives

In the advertising space, there is a real competition between advertisers to attract attention. In recent years, we have been facing an overload of advertising information that exceeds the attention capacity (Anderson & De Palma, 2012). Under these conditions, Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes (2006) explain that when choosing an advertising strategy, it is a question of choose between: (1) demonstrate the quality of the product (2) rely on the aesthetic quality of the advertising (3) or provoke by using taboos. As a result, companies adopt radical tactics to stand out (Dahl & al., 2009). Taboos are known to be an excellent advertising way for attracting attention (Dahl & al., 2003; Parry & al., 2013; Pope & al., 2004; Reichert & al., 2001; Sabri, 2012; Vézina & Paul, 1997). As a result, they have been staged for many years (Sabri & al., 2010) and are very present in society and in public debate. Although some marketing research, still few, has focused on the question of advertising provocation and the impact of shock, it is not based on the very notion of taboo and its different dimensions, despite the numerous and rich investigations of the concept in Anthropology, Sociology and Psychoanalysis (Sabri, 2006; Sabri & al., 2010). In fact, the understanding of the influence of the five defining characteristics of taboo (cultural production, forbidden, sacred profane, contagion, ambivalence) (Sabri & al., 2010) on consumer behavior, on the perception of taboo character, as well as on the societal and ethical consequences of the transgression of taboos have been overshadowed by the academic world. Our research mobilizes the theoretical framework of taboo and advertising provocation to discover the new individual representations at the heart of the taboo concept. We propose a new definition of the concept of taboo in order to suggest new, less dated representations. We study the underlying mechanisms that explain, among other things, attitudes towards advertisements, the diffusion of transgressors and the impact of normative social influence associated with the individual evaluation of the advertising taboo. Our field of application concerns the individual reactions associated with an advertising stimulus considered as taboo. What attitudes do lonely individuals adopt when faced with this type of ad? What advertising elements can moderate these reactions? How do respondents position themselves and self-evaluate their own taboos? How do they define this concept? This research aims to answer these questions.

Conceptual framework

The use of provocation, particularly in advertising, would make it possible to attract attention thanks to the "shock" effect; it has been increasingly used since the 1980s (Pope & al., 2004). These practices take many forms, from coarse language to blasphemy (Brown & Schau, 2001), nudity and sex (Jones & al., 1998; Kerin & al., 1979; Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006; Sabri-Zaaraoui, 2007; Reichert & al, 2001) and extending to violence, suffering, drugs, political issues, ethnicity or even death (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006, Sabri-Zaaraoui, 2007; Vézina & Paul, 1997). These sometimes hard-to-see advertisements cause shock, fear, disgust, shame, and emotionally affect the consuming public (Albouy, 2016; Becheur & Valette-Florence, 2014; Dahl & al., 2003; Morales & al., 2007, 2012; Vézina & Paul, 1997). For some researchers, the very objective is to offend the audience (Brown & Schau, 2001). For others, these methods are more tolerable, since they are primarily intended to differentiate themselves from the multitude of other advertisements; some would even be laudable because they seek to change habits by promoting good behavior (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006; Reichert & al., 2001). To qualify an advertisement as provocative, it must have a distinct character, a certain ambiguity and, above all, transgress a cultural or social taboo (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl & al., 2003; De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996; Vézina & Paul, 1997). In other words, the taboo is the stimulus for provocative advertising (Pope & al., 2004).

Of Polynesian origin, the term taboo was imported into the West by Captain James Cook following his discovery of the Pacific Islands in 1769 (Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2018). The taboo is multifaceted, it is a difficult concept to define and there are many disagreements in the literature. After a meta-analysis of studies carried out before 2010 directly and indirectly on taboos, Sabri, Manceau and Pras (2010) defined the concept of taboo as: "*a cultural production, of a sacred (religious) or magical (profane) nature, which enacts behavioral and/or conversational prohibitions, associated in the individual with emotional ambivalence, and whose transgression is likely to provoke sanctions because of the contagious nature of the taboo*" (p.60). We note that the facet of the "forbidden" is predominant in the term taboo (Frazer, 1911; Van Gennep, 1904; Webster, 1942). It is, first of all, a conversational prohibition that restricts freedom of expression. These limits are in fact linked to conveniences that may be moral, social or religious (Walter, 1991). The prohibition may also be behavioral, with certain actions being associated with "*life practices labelled as abnormal, strange or unacceptable by social groups*" (Sabri & al., 2010 p.64), making them behavioral taboos subject to normative social pressure (Van Gennep, 1904; Vezina & Paul, 1997; Webster, 1942). Taboos can be both behavioral and conversational. For example, death is a conversational taboo par excellence (Walter, 1991); it is a difficult subject to discuss in society. However, the very essence of this taboo lies in the fact that killing one's neighbor or inflicting death on oneself are then considered behavioral taboos (Durkheim, 1897). The question of the double dimension (conversational and behavioral) has not been recognized by anthropological and psychoanalytical approaches (Sabri & al., 2010), so one question remains, is unobservable deviant behavior taboo? Or is only talking about it taboo?

Cultural production, geographically and historically located: The taboo is also a socially situated cultural production, it is an unwritten but very old code instituted for the security of the group (Freud, 1912). It organizes the social structure and creates links between individuals (Levi Strauss, 1962). The origin of taboos is therefore quite simply the culture, societies and individuals that compose them. Taboos also depend on geographical situations, taboos differ according to groups, locally, sometimes they are also national, but there are also universal taboos such as incest, cannibalism and murder (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). Finally, it is a historically situated cultural production: taboos are created and destroyed, then new ones appear (Wilson & West 1981, 1992). In other words, their presence at a given time, in a given place is temporary, provisional. This is why knowledge about the characteristics of the taboo and the elements considered as such requires special attention and regular updating.

Sacredness: If, originally and for decades, the taboo was considered "*essentially religious*" (Tournier, 1975, p. 151), today its use has become semantically extended, even generalized, in the sense of a normative social prohibition. This new use of the concept raises the following question: if the taboo no longer belongs to religion but to social regulations, has it become totally dissociated from its sacred aspect?

Transgression: The question of sanctioned transgression is in fact at the crossroads of cultural production and sacred nature. Transgression implies a punishment that can be social since individuals who do not respect the rules dictated by the group are considered deviant, in this sense, groups can impose cognitive or affective punishments (Abrams & al., 1990; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Durkheim, 1915). The biggest faults may be at the origin of what is called in the literature a "*social suicide*" (Caillois, 1950; Cazeneuve, 1971). However, the processes underlying the spread of transgressors remain unidentified. Nevertheless, we know that once transgressed, taboos become less taboo (Wilson & West 1981, 1992) and that isolated individuals facing a group favorable to the taboo comply (Destoumieux & Vernet, 2020). In other words, it seems that active minorities can change the perception and evaluation of advertising taboos.

Contagion: Anthropological studies consider taboo to be contagious, transmissible (Frazer, 1911; Van Gennep, 1904). In other words, a completely ordinary object coming into contact with a taboo element would in turn become contagious. Moreover, a person

transgressing a taboo would be "tabooed" and could *in fine* transmit it to the social group, thus becoming a threat. *Ambivalence*: The taboo is at the origin of a certain emotional ambivalence towards the forbidden, it is in fact considered as a forbidden action for which there is, despite everything, a strong attraction in the unconscious (Freud, 1912). The individual is torn between taking refuge in the norm and keeping his impulse inside or satisfying his desires and satisfying his impulse through revolt. Certain profiles would be more likely to accept or even transgress the taboo: ambivalents are inhabited by doubt, positive univalents are positive in the face of the taboo, in fact they do not consider the act or subject to be taboo and they oppose negative univalents (Sabri, 2012). *Taboos in advertisements*: Among controversial advertisements, there are advertisements for practices, subjects or products that are not taboo themselves (perfumes, cars, ...) but where the execution of the advertisement is taboo. In contrast, there are advertisements whose strategy is not to provoke but to make known, make people like a behavior or make them buy a tabooed product, these products and behaviors being qualified as "*unmentionable*" (Wilson & West, 1981, 1992). Finally, awareness-raising advertisements sometimes use taboos but with a different, non-monetary purpose: to promote the development of citizen behavior.

Method

Given our objective (updating the definition of advertising taboo) and the nature of our research object (taboo advertising stimuli), the semi-structured interview methodology proved to be the most promising and appropriate. It turns out that the sensitivity of this research subject imposes the consideration of possible biases linked to the defense mechanisms put in place by individuals and therefore an adapted methodology. The study was carried out in two stages. A first exploratory qualitative study was conducted on a sample of 15 people aged between 15 and 85 years old. Originally, this study was intended to update the definition of the advertising taboo by taking into account the age differences between respondents. Indeed, previous studies have shown that age had an impact on the evaluation and perception of advertising taboo (Dahl & al., 2009; Manceau & Tissier Desbordes, 2006; Sabri-Zaaraoui, 2007; Vézina & Paul, 1997). Nevertheless, the field pointed us in a new direction and above all raised an unexpected problem, namely that for 20-30 years-old "nothing is taboo anymore", a discourse that contradicts their response. This is why we conducted a second study on a specified population of 20 people aged 22 to 32, an age group that is *a priori* rather non-conformist (Sabri & al., 2010). Thus, the qualitative phase, following an ingrained theoretical approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), consisted of a total of 35 semi-structured interviews, (18 female respondents and 17 male respondents). All the interviews are based on an interview guide with presentation of four advertising stimuli pre-tested (N=77) as the tabooest in a database of 70 advertisements. These ads (Appendix 1) use death (animal abuse) or sex (nudity) as the two taboo themes favored by advertisers (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). They differ by their advertising objectives and by the product or cause presented in order to increase the external validity of our results. Five themes were addressed (1) as an introduction, respondents were able to express their experiences and feelings as spectators of advertisements, (2) we then refocused the interview on shocking advertisements (3) then taboos, before (4) presenting the stimuli and (5) leading the individual to define the concept of taboo and the modalities that make it up. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and were subject to manual vertical and horizontal thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2001). The relevance of the themes was highlighted by counting their occurrences through the interviews conducted.

Findings

The first phase of our interviews highlighted the fact that people in their forties and over have *a priori* no difficulty in asserting that they have taboos and in quoting them. For the sake of clarity, only the second phase of the interviews will be dealt with, the objective being to better understand the relationship that individuals (22-32 years old) have with taboos. The presentation of the results is organized in three axes. Firstly, we verify the concordance between the elements of definition presented above and the results of the interviews. Then, we will focus on the orientation of the discourse in order to explain the new representations of the taboo and in particular why, according to the youngest, "nothing is taboo anymore". We will then look at strategic advertising elements that promote positive attitudes.

Among the already established facets that we can confirm, in a few words, the forbidden, the geographically and historically located cultural production, as well as the risk associated with transgression are many elements that persist in the individual perception of the taboo. We can also confirm the assumption made by Sabri and his co-authors in 2010 that young people tend to be ambivalent about taboos, with the majority of the interviews divided into two contradictory phases. On the one hand, the respondents consider that these subjects are shocking in advertising, that they are not intended to be used for commercial purposes and that they provoke negative reactions (shock, anger, sadness, misunderstanding, ...), On the other hand, they also consider that "*it is necessary to talk about it*" (Clémence¹, 23 years old), that "*if it could feed the debate, or make people ask themselves certain questions*" (Aude, 23) then this is positive because "*it helps society to break taboos*" (Paola, 23). Nevertheless, our results question or even invalidate certain knowledge we had about taboos. Indeed, no respondent addressed (1) the sacred, magical, profane aspect of taboo. The current taboos seem no longer originate from or are the consequences of religion. Octave, 26 years old, explains that "*religions have for a very long time had a very strong impact on our societies and today we see taboos becoming less and less taboo*". On the other hand, religion, the origin of taboos, has itself become a taboo "*the taboo of religion so we don't get too close to it*" (Aude, 23) "*we must above all not talk about religion*" (Mélina, 23). Thus, its use in advertising becomes shocking: "*they (Editorial Note: United Colors of Benetton) had mixed homosexuality, religion, uh... racism, they had everything, politics too, so they did well on purpose to shock everyone*" (Paola, 23). According to three of our respondents, this is a taboo that is already fading and will disappear. Secondly, the respondents showed no signs that there is (2) a contagiousness of the taboo, that the negative attributes associated with the ad will transfer to the brand. On the contrary, they explain that even if they have negative reactions (shock, irritation,...) they will live their emotions at the time and then resume their life without any form of boycott, as Céline, 25 years old, explains: "*I'm not going to do any particular action behind I'm not going to say... I'm not going to criticize the ad on social networks or I'm not necessarily going to tell my friends and family about it (...) I'm going to keep it to myself, I'm going to be a bit upset and then... then I'm going to move on*". On the other hand, the respondents question the quality of the work, the skills and the legitimacy of the communication manager at the origin of the ad as expressed by Maxence 31 years old: "*the advertisers who were paid I hope they were not paid much or they were fired because ...*". In other words, the brand seems completely dissociated from the advertisement, it is the creator of the ad who is questioned.

"The context and the environment in which you find yourself is important, but when you're alone, it's easier to be confronted with this kind of advertising, (...) because you don't have the social pressure that there is around you, you think, well, go ahead, I can look at what I want"

¹ In the interest of confidentiality, first names have been changed.

(Melvin, 23). Many environmental factors can moderate the individual's perception of taboo, especially in advertising. While, indeed, the time and place where the individual is located play a significant role in the internal construction of his or her opinion (Sabri, 2006, Sabri & al., 2010), the social context and the time are elements that are much less discussed in the literature. However, it appears that the moment also affects the attention paid to a taboo ad and the attitude respondents adopt towards it: Léo, 23, explains that "*when you're not in that mood or you're doing something else, well, you ignore it a bit... because you don't want to think about it (...) because sometimes you're not ready to have these images in front of you*". This respondent clearly expresses a possible escape from advertising if it comes at the wrong time, but reactions moderated by the momentary context are also addressed by Alexandre, 26 years old: "*It would really shock me if it came at a bad time*". The social context also plays a major role, "*advertising becomes taboo depending on (...) the person you have next to you*" (Alexandre, 26), "*it varies depending on who you talk to*" (Léo, 24), three-quarters of respondents expressly specified that their reactions and perceptions of the taboo depend on who they are with at the time. More specifically, they agree that if they are with friends, they will have rather favorable reactions (i.e., laughing, joking, ...). *A contrario*, if they are with their family or with strangers, the announcement will provoke embarrassment, fear for almost half of the individuals or an escape through ignorance in order to avoid "*tensions*" (Clémence, 23). Then, respondents raise their concerns about the targets of controversial advertisements; their attitudes may become more unfavorable if they consider that children could have access to the ad. Other attitudinal moderators regularly cited include: perceived humor in the ad, aesthetics, beliefs, values, age and gender of the respondent, open-mindedness, and finally, the habit of breaking the taboo or having seen the ad before.

With regard to the orientation of the interviews, during the course of their speeches the respondents have a strong tendency to cite the taboos (that they imagine) of others, of society, specifying that they do not consider this theme as taboo. They envisage the reaction of people for whom it would be taboo (shock, debate, ...), specifying that their attitude would be completely in opposition (laughter, ignorance, ...). Few individuals have been able to express their own taboos. In fact, almost half of the respondents explain that they have no taboos, this assertion is often justified by their self-perceived open-mindedness. Individuals who admit their taboos adopt a defensive attitude by specifying that they are aligned with the social norm, that they find a taboo topic "*like everyone else*" (Sylvain, 24). Moreover, when the interview enters the phase of questioning about taboo, respondents tend to replace the first person singular with the plural "*it makes us uncomfortable*" (Guillaume, 28), or even to globalize to a significant part of individuals "*the majority of people find it embarrassing*" (Melvin, 25) or to society as a whole: "*quite shocking for society*" (Octave, 27). Young people do indeed seem to have an ambivalent attitude towards taboos, they seem to be uncertain about their position, questioning it as they speak, sometimes they deliberately and instantly change their minds ("*it's not a taboo... well, yes, you can put it in the taboos*" Guillaume, 28; or "*It doesn't shock me... well... in fact it shocks me because I remember and I talk about it. Yes, it's shocking*" Jules, 22) or even involuntarily contradict themselves. We notice that individuals adopt a first reaction of negative univalents (not taboo, not shocking) instinctively, by automatism or even by social convenience, and then move, probably, after reflection, and reposition themselves as positive univalents (it's taboo, it's shocking).

Discussion

The question of the advertising taboo has remained hidden or insufficiently addressed by the academic world in recent years, this work allows us to update our knowledge of this concept. We confirm certain facets (prohibited, cultural, geographical and historical production,

sanctioned transgression) and question others (sacred aspect and contagiousness). *So far "no research has attempted to understand (...) the role of the situational context of exposure or transgression (alone, with family, with friends, in an unknown crowd)."*(Sabri & al., 2010, p.73). This work raises a still unknown facet of the concept: Taboo is taboo when it is unexpected, impromptu, when we face it without preparation, it catches us off guard and this leads to negative emotions such as embarrassment, discomfort, malaise. On the other hand, if the individual is ready to face it, especially once he has prepared an argument or a socially acceptable behavior, he can confront it since the taboo becomes controllable. Finally, this process is similar to, and could explain in part, the spread of transgressors. The taboo becomes less taboo once it has already been transgressed (Wilson & West, 1981, 1992), because we become accustomed to it and are mentally ready to deal with it. Then, taking into account the context also raises the question of social presence, proximity and the relationship maintained with nearby individuals seem to have an importance on the perception and possible transgression of the taboo. Indeed, it seems that the people with whom it is most difficult to transgress a taboo are family members and strangers. The social apprehension of being rejected applies in these social contexts. The taboo is not an individual production, but rather a subject or behavior that becomes (or does not become) taboo according to a given social context. Taboos only appear in front of others, themes are taboo when we develop the *"feeling that it is impossible today to represent them publicly"* (Sabri & al., 2010, p.59). And for good reason, if a significant part of taboo behavior is associated with laws (murder, rape, etc.), conversational taboos are only regulated by social rules. In other words, the transgression of a conversational taboo generates a social punishment, an individual can become infrequent if his words or actions do not correspond to social expectations. Thus, the mind has no limits, unlike words and visible behaviors. In other words, our path of thought has no filter, each individual has already imagined bloody disaster scenarios or socially unacceptable fantasies, taboo visions are present internally but are not communicated, a social context obliges.

Conclusion

The progressive momentum of the society and the need not to repeat past mistakes, ultimately has an impact on the perception of taboos. Today, it is taboo among younger people to say that they have taboos, since we have to be able to talk about everything, otherwise we would limit the evolution of thoughts and morals. The word taboo is now used in its weak form or even replaced by non-offensive substitute terms (shocking, scandalous, unacceptable...). This explains the respondents' common assertion that "there is no longer a taboo", as individuals have distanced themselves from this concept and find themselves unable to verbalize or socially assume the taboos that inhabit them. In the end, this new standard allows the emergence of moderators making the use of advertising taboos less controversial and more acceptable among young people.

Limitations

This research has certain limitations, in fact, the study of the taboo, a subject sensitive by nature can cause certain biases. Also, we question individuals about their experiences as spectators of advertisements, we are facing here a possible memory bias. Finally, the stimuli were presented non-randomly as a set of images with a cross presentation of gender (male / female) and the type of taboo used.

Further Research

Since young people have a strong tendency to be ambivalent, flexible, in the face of taboos, it is conceivable that their opinions can easily be modified by social influence. We know taboo as a concept inherent to social norms (Sabri & al., 2010), the findings made regarding discourse

orientations can be associated with the projection theory convened by Freud (1895), young people shift their perception of taboo to the rest of the population. It would be particularly interesting to conduct a study verifying and confronting the conformism of young people on the one hand and their elders on the other.

Managerial implications

From this work, important managerial contributions emerge: advertisers face a population of young consumers, in a process of deconstruction, who expect social progress resulting from the transgression of taboos and thus, in fact, from the upheaval of morals. The key elements emerging from these interviews are that young people, who are ambivalent, see the positive in questioning a conditioning they have been experiencing since childhood and thus adopt positive emotional reactions to advertisements using taboo feeding debates. However, certain moderators such as the context, timing, and whether or not individuals are ready to witness a taboo scene must be taken into account because they can have a particular impact on attitudes. In this sense, it is crucial to strategically choose your media and timing. In addition, it also appears that our respondents are deeply concerned about the impact of this type of ad on more sensitive profiles such as children; they will only be in favor of this type of ad if the timing and media appear to them to be devoid of the presence of this audience. A structure that issues an advertisement transgressing a taboo whose objective is to raise awareness will provoke more favorable reactions than an advertisement with a pecuniary vocation. Finally, the creative characteristics of the advertisement, namely its aesthetic aspect as well as the humor perceived in it, can literally annihilate the shocking character, thus provoking favorable attitudes. In summary, the 22-32-year-old target group seems to be conducive to adopting favorable attitudes towards the transgression of taboos in advertising.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 : Stimuli

	Women	Men
Sex	 <p>TOM FORD FOR MEN THE FIRST FRAGRANCE FOR MEN FROM TOM FORD</p>	 <p>FROMAGE DE CHEVRE SAINTE MAURE DE TOURAINE DU LAIT ENTIER CRU</p> <p>VIENS GOÛTER MON SAINTE-MAURE SOURCE NATURELLE DE BIEN-ÊTRE</p> <p>Fromage unique, Le Sainte Maure de Touraine AOP vous offre 100% des bienfaits naturels du lait de chèvre entier cru qui :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 - Nourrit & Hydrate 2 - Apporte vitamines et minéraux
Animal death	 <p>There is no kind way to rip the skin off an animal's back. Say NO to fur and fur trim.</p> <p>ASHLEY JAMES FOR PETA</p> <p>HARVEY NICHOLS: HERE'S THE REST OF THAT FUR COAT</p>	 <p>HERE'S THE REST OF YOUR WOOL COAT</p> <p>Joan MarCUS - KILLED THE FURM QUEEN - PETA</p>