

No more taboos for young people? sex and death in provocative advertisement.

Abstract

According to young people, «nothing is taboo anymore». 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 taboos found in literature are not, at least in part, dated. This research proposes to answer the following questions: What are the current representations and modalities of the concept of taboo? What impact could they have on attitudes to provocative advertisements? What advertising strategies can moderate these reactions? We mobilize a sample of 20 semi-directive individual interviews, asking respondents about their experiences as spectators of shocking advertisements using taboos. We assess their individual perceptions and attitudes, in the face of various sexual and morbid stimuli pre-tested as taboo. The interviewees are invited to share their own definition of the concept, we compare their speeches with defining facets found in the literature. The ambivalent young people want to push forward the morals and the mentalities, it is taboo for them to say that they have taboos, they appear thus rather favorable to taboos' breaking if advertisement has progressive intentions. This study demonstrates the importance of social and momentary contexts in forming the attitudes towards provocative advertisements.

Key words: Taboo, Provocative advertising, Sex, Death, Young

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“ Thanks to young people, it is more and more talked about and therefore no longer taboo.”

Introduction and objectives

Between 1200 and 2200 ads and more generally 15,000 commercial stimuli per day and per person, this is what Arnaud Pêtre, a researcher in Neuromarketing, estimated in 2007. Fifteen years later, the spectacular development of the Internet has multiplied our exposure and modified our way of interacting.

In this advertising space, to differentiate in the middle of the vast amount of advertising information, 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 and De Palma 2012). Under these conditions, Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006) explain that when choosing an advertising strategy, it is a question of choosing between: (1) demonstrating the quality of the product (2) relying on the aesthetic quality of the advertising (3) or provoking through the use of taboos. As a result, companies adopt radical tactics to stand out (Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009). Taboos are known to be an excellent advertising tactic for attracting attention (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Myers et al. 2020; Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson 2001; Vézina and Paul 1997; Sabri 2012a), the taboo is the stimulus for provocative advertising (Pope, Voges and Brown 2004).

Nevertheless, still few marketing research have focused on the question of provocative advertisements and their impact. These researches are often not based on the notion of taboo despite the numerous and rich investigations of the concept in Anthropology, Sociology and Psychoanalysis. In fact, the understanding of the influence of the five defining characteristics of taboo (cultural production, forbidden, sacred, contagion, ambivalence) (Sabri, Manceau and Pras 2010) on consumer behavior, on the perception of taboo aspect, as well as on the societal and ethical consequences of the transgression of taboos have been understudied in the academic world, especially for marketing use. This massive revolution in advertising justifies the re-inquiry of individual attitudes towards provocative advertising. How do individuals perceive taboos in the context of advertising consumption and the deviant positioning of a brand?

Following stereotypes, young people are well known to be rebels and are seen as challenging social norms. They are particularly targeted by provocative advertisements that match this need (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003). In the context of studies on provocative advertising and taboo, young people are insensitive to taboos (Parry et al. 2013). In today's digital revolution, they are particularly present on the internet, thus favoring their chances to face taboos (access to pornography, shocking photos and videos, films/reports, uncensored, live) and ads that may or may not be provocative (national and international). They are also active on social networks, where we can discover the appearance and development of new movements (Je suis Charlie, WOKE movement, #MeToo, ...). Provocative advertising produces strong reactions on social networks (Hanan, Moulin and Portes 2020). It seems interesting to verify the perceptions and today's attitudes of young people towards the transgression of taboos in provocative advertising. This research involves the theoretical framework of taboo and provocative advertisement to discover the new individual representations of young people in front of the use of taboos in provocative advertising. This work mobilizes 20 semi-directive interviews, we propose an update of knowledge on the concept of taboo by suggesting a new and less dated individual representations. We verify the attitudes and advertising strategies that can moderate them. We study the underlying mechanisms that could explain, among other things the diffusion of transgressors via the impact of momentary and social context on the individual's evaluation of the advertising taboo. Our field of application concerns the individual's reactions associated with an advertising stimulus considered to be taboo. What attitudes do lonely individuals adopt when faced with this type of ad? What advertising strategies can impact these reactions? How do respondents position themselves and self-assess their own taboos? How do they define this concept?

Conceptual framework

Taboo concept

The term taboo was imported by Captain James Cook following his discovery of the Pacific Islands in 1769 (Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2018). Taboo has multiple facets, the concept is difficult 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).

¹ Sylvain, 24 years old

Cultural production geographically and historically located. First, taboo is a socially situated cultural production, 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. Therefore, the origin of taboos is quite simply narrowed down to the culture, the societies and the individuals that compose them. Secondly, taboos also depend on geographical situations, they differ according to groups, locally, nationally, but are sometimes universal such as incest, cannibalism, and murder (Freud 1927). Finally, it is a historically situated cultural production: taboos are created and destroyed (Wilson and West 1981, 1992). Appear, disappear, new ones appear and so on. In other words, their presence at a given time, in a given place is temporary, provisional, taboo and the elements considered as such requires special attention and regular updating.

Sacredness. For decades and originally, the taboo was considered “*essentially religious*” (Tournier 1975, p.151). These are religious prohibitions whose transgression will cause divine punishment (Frazer 1911; Van Gennep 1904).

Transgression. The question of sanctioned transgression is at the crossroads of cultural production and sacred nature. Transgression implies a punishment that can be social since individuals who do not respect rules dictated by the group are considered deviant. In this sense, that group can impose cognitive or affective punishments (Abrams et al. 1990; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Durkheim 1915). The processes underlying the spread of transgressors remain unidentified. Nevertheless, we know that once transgressed, taboos become less taboo (Wilson and West 1981, 1992).

Prohibition. We note that the facet of the “forbidden/ prohibited” is predominant in the term taboo (Frazer 1911; Van Gennep 1904; Webster 1942). It’s 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, Manceau et Pras 2010, p.64), making them behavioral taboos subject to social punishment (Van Gennep 1904). Taboos can be both behavioral and conversational. For example, death is a conversational taboo (Walter 1991); it is a difficult subject to discuss in society. Moreover, killing one’s neighbor or inflicting death on oneself are considered behavioral taboos (Durkheim 1897).

Contagion. The taboo is considered contagious and transmissible (Frazer 1911; Van Gennep 1904). In other words, a completely ordinary object, encountering a taboo one, would in turn become contagious. Furthermore, a person transgressing the taboo would be contaminated and could *in fine* transmit it to the social group (Cazeneuve 1971), thus becoming a threat.

Ambivalence. Taboo is at the origin of a certain emotional ambivalence towards the forbidden, it is perceived as a prohibited 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 impulses inside or satisfying his desires and urges his impulses 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: “*the positive univalents are indeed mostly men, middle-aged, weakly religious and weakly erotophobic*” (Sabri 2012a, p.16).

Provocative Advertising

The use of provocation, particularly in advertising, would make it possible to attract attention thanks to the “shock” effect. Its use has increased since the 1980s (Pope, Voges and Brown 2004). Many firms use this strategy (Theodorakis and Painesis 2018). These practices take many forms, from coarse language to blasphemy (Brown and Schau 2001), nudity and sex (Jones, Stanaland and Gelb 1998; Kerin, Lundstrom and Scigliimpaglia 1979; Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson 2001; Sabri-Zaaraoui 2007) and extending to violence, suffering, drugs, political issues, ethnicity or even death (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006, Sabri-Zaaraoui, 2007; Vézina and Paul 1997). These sometimes hard-to-see advertisements cause shock, fear, disgust, shame, and emotionally affect the consuming public (Albouy 2016; Becheur and Valette-Florence 2014; Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Morales and Fitzsimons 2007; Morales, Wu and Fitzsimons 2012; Vézina and Paul 1997). For some researchers, the very objective is to offend the audience (Brown and 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 (Albouy 2016; Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson 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 (Vézina and Paul 1997). In other words, the taboo is the stimulus for provocative advertising (Pope, Voges and Brown 2004).

Among controversial advertisements, there are advertisements (product related) for practices, subjects or products that are not taboo themselves (perfumes, cars, ...) but where the execution of the advertisement is taboo, in a humorous or provocative way. 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 are qualified as “*unmentionable*” (Wilson and West 1981, 1992). Then, awareness-raising advertisements (cause related) sometimes use taboos but with a different purpose: to promote the development of responsible behavior. In terms of reactions to these different advertising strategies, the academic world faces disagreements (Table 1: Taboos in advertising reactions and moderators). Mostly, previous researches agree that advertising taboo attracts attention (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Myers et al. 2020; Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Sabri 2012b ; Vézina and Paul 1997), interest (Reichert, Heckler and Jackson 2001) and encourages brand identification (Myers et al. 2020; Vézina and Paul 1997) but it also provokes negative affective attitude towards the ad (Aad) (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Peterson and Kerin 1977; Vézina and Paul 1997), towards the brand (Ab) (Peterson and Kerin 1977; Sabri and Obermiller 2012; Vézina and Paul 1997) and reduces purchase intention (Sabri and Obermiller 2012) especially among women (Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009; Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006; Parry et al. 2013; Peterson and Kerin 1977; Prendergast and Chia Hwa 2003; Theodorakis and Painesis 2018; Vézina and Paul 1997).

Table 1

Taboos in advertising reactions and moderators

Reactions	Positive impacts	Attract attention	Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Myers et al. 2020; Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Sabri 2012b; Vézina and Paul 1997
		Increase interest	Reichert, Heckler and Jackson 2001
		Benefit memory	Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Myers et al. 2020; Sabri 2012b
		Encourage brand identification	Myers et al. 2020; Vézina and Paul 1997
		Positive on attitudes	Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Severn, Belch and Belch 1990
		Favors message-relevant behaviors	Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003
	No impact	No impact on Pi	De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996
		No impact Ab	De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996
	Negative impacts	Reduce brand identification	De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1996
		Negative impact on Aad	De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Peterson and Kerin 1977; Vézina and Paul 1997
		Negative impact on Ab	Sabri and Obermiller 2012; Vézina and Paul 1997; Peterson and Kerin 1977
		Negative impact on Pi	Sabri and Obermiller 2012

Moderators	Consumer demographics	Sex	Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009; Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006; Parry et al. 2013; Peterson and Kerin 1977; Prendergast and Chia Hwa 2003; Theodorakis and Painesis 2018; Vézina and Paul 1997
		Age	Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006 ; Prendergast and Chia Hwa 2003 ; Sabri-Zaaraoui 2007 ; Vézina and Paul 1997
	Relation consumer-advertising	Product involvement	Vézina and Paul 1997
		Psychological distance	Theodorakis and Painesis 2018
	Advertising strategy	Type of taboo	Theodorakis and Painesis 2018
		Advertising objective	Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004
		Congruence	Pope, Voges and Brown 2004
	Advertising characteristics	Perceived humor	Sabri 2012b
		Viral	Prendergast and Chia Hwa 2003

Method

Given our objective (to understand young people individual’s representation of the taboo) and the nature of our research object (taboo advertising stimuli), the semi-structured interview methodology proved to be the most promising and appropriate approach. 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.

We conduct a qualitative data collection on 20 French people aged 22 to 32, (10 women and 10 men). 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 and presented non-randomly as a set of images. Two of the stimuli, product related, use the taboos of nudity and sexuality to sell. The first advertisement from Tom Ford shows a woman lying naked with her intimacy hidden by a bottle of the brand’s perfume. It is indicated “*Tom Ford for men*” and “*The first fragrance for men from Tom Ford*”. The second advertisement is from Sainte Maure de Touraine, the brand sells logs of goat cheese and has turned its product into the penis of a naked man in the ad. It is written “*Come and taste my Sainte-Maure natural source of well-being*”. The other two stimuli are cause-related advertisements using death and more specifically animal abuse. They were produced by PETA, an animal rights organization. One shows a woman posing holding high a bloody animal corpse and “*Here’s the rest of that fur coat*”, and the other shows a man holding a sheep with torn skin in front of the camera and “*Here’s the rest of your wool coat*”. These ads use death (animal abuse) or sex (nudity), the two taboo themes favored by advertisers (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006).

In the interview guide, 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 facets that compose it. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and were subject to manual vertical and horizontal thematic content analysis. Content analysis consists of “*transcribing the qualitative data, developing a coding scheme, coding the information collected and processing it. The analysis describes the survey material and studies its meaning*” (Andreani and Conchon 2005, p.2). A specific coding scheme was realized for doing the analysis, all themes were analyzed with this grid. The coding was done in French, the original language of the interviews, to avoid various biases related to translation. Verbatims are word-for-word translations. The relevance of the themes was highlighted by counting their occurrences through the interviews conducted. The average length of interviews is 51 minutes, we accumulate a total of 17 hours of interviews.

Findings

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. We study the orientation of the discourses to verify the respondents' self-evaluation of their sensitivity to taboos, current representations, and why according to the youngest "nothing is taboo anymore". Then, we look at attitudes before and during exposition to provocative advertisements as well as strategic advertising elements that promote positive attitudes. Finally, we will conduct a gender comparison, according to a genetic bicategorization (male/female).

Taboos facets

In a few words, the forbidden, the geographically and historically located cultural production are many elements that persist in the individual's perception of the taboo.

Cultural production, geographically et historically situated. According to our respondents, taboos depend on cultures and countries since "each country will have its specificities, and each culture too" (Aude, 23)² They are also subjects that "society denies" (Mélina, 23) so their breaking "upsets the codes of society, the traditions, all the anchored beliefs, so anchored that we are not aware of them and (...) that we repeat them, from generation to generation" (Paola, 23), also the repetitiveness of the transgression of taboos, due to the evolution of the mentalities widely approached by the respondents, provoke the disappearance of some and make them, thus, evolve in time (Appendix 1: Taboos evolution). Sexuality, nudity, homosexuality, single-parent families, divorce are, according to our respondents, taboos that have disappeared. Racism, sexism, animal abuse are the actual taboos. Smoking is starting to become one. Finally, tomorrow's taboos will be irresponsible behaviors towards the environment, meat consumption and certain behaviors related to COVID19.

Sacredness. Our results question certain knowledge we had about taboos. Indeed, no respondent addressed the sacred, magical, profane aspect of taboo. The current taboos no longer seem to originate from or are no longer the consequence of religion. Octave, 27 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". Religion, the origin of taboos, has itself become a taboo "the taboo of religion, we don't get too close to it" (Aude, 23) "we must above all do not talk about religion" (Mélina, 23). Thus, its use in advertising appears shocking: "they (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 3 of our respondents, this is a taboo that is already fading and will disappear. Our results show that taboos could have their origin elsewhere than in religion, and that religion, producer of taboo, has itself become a taboo.

Prohibition. The most redundant element in our interviews is prohibition, taboos are subjects that are forbidden, we cannot talk about them, "we can even talk about apprehension to talk about it" (Melvin, 25 years old). In the concept of taboo "there is the fact of keeping silent, and of not saying anything you see, that is the fact of passing it under silence, to do as if it did not exist" (Alexandre, 26). "We agreed" (Lea, 23), it is not acceptable, it would go against the cultural, moral, and ethical values of individuals, it does not "respond the codes of propriety" (Guillaume, 28), these topics make "a large audience uncomfortable" (Melvin, 25) and they are also topics "that are not too accepted in advertising" (Valentin, 22).

The majority of the respondents approach the taboo as conversational rather than behavioral prohibition, for example "sex surrounds us but we don't talk about it, it's not in our culture" (Lucie, 23) and it is present in our mind, but we don't verbalize it: "everyone has an opinion on it, but we don't dare share it" (Valentin, 22)

Transgression. We do not find any information in the interviews concerning the risks associated with a possible transgression, the laws are cited as regulating. But in the case where they do not regulate the subject, the risk is rather linked to the social context, no punishment but rather a tense situation, discomfort, embarrassment or even fear "I know that there can be opposing opinions and that it can create tensions" (Clémence, 23).

Ambivalence. The majority of the interviews are 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" (Clémence, 23), 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).

Contagion. The question of contagion was not addressed by the respondents, neither from the object to the individual, nor from the individual to the individual or the social group, nor from one object to another. The respondents showed no signs that there is 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

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

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 30 years old: *"the advertisers who were paid I hope they were not paid much, or they were fired because..."*. In other words, the transgressor brand and its consumers seem completely dissociated from the advertisement, it is the creator himself who is questioned.

Discourse orientation: taboos in general. Regarding the orientation of the interviews, during their speeches the respondents have a strong tendency to quote the taboos (that they imagine) of others, of society, specifying that they do not consider these themes as taboo. They foresee the reaction of people for whom it would be taboo (shock, debate...), specifying that their own attitude would be completely in opposition (laughter, ignorance...). Nevertheless, few individuals have been able to express their own taboos. In fact, almost half of the respondents explain that they have no taboos, and 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 (me) with the plural (us) *"it makes us uncomfortable"* (Guillaume, 28), or even to globalize to a big part of population *"the majority 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, doubting 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, 23) or even involuntarily contradict themselves. Regarding taboos in general, we notice that individuals adopt a first reaction of positive univalents (not taboo, not shocking) instinctively, by automatism or by social convenience and, after reflection, they are likely to reposition themselves as negative univalents (it's taboo, it's shocking).

Taboos in provocative advertising

In a few words, respondents are less favorable when they are not confronted with examples of advertising than they are when actually confronted to them. They are supportive of the use of taboos in advertising when it is intended to change morals and break taboos. They may be more favorable, or at least less unfavorable, to the use of taboos in advertising (without a progressive purpose) if it is humorous, aesthetically pleasing, congruent, or because they do not feel concerned. Women have more unfavorable attitudes than men. The taboo is taboo when it appears in an impromptu way, without being prepared for it, especially at first exposure or when it is not *"the right time"*. The social context of exposure to the announcement is very important (no children, not with family, not with strangers, rather alone or with friends) because *"the taboo becomes taboo depending on who you are with"*.

Attitudes

We notice that the respondents converse on the reality that today the use of taboos is more and more common without necessarily specifying if they are in favor or against it. It is an advertising strategy which, according to them, allows brands to stand out, to make the advertisement memorable and to mark the public (*"brands have to stand out so they use taboos quite a lot"* Aude, 23; *"it is shocking, so we remember it"* Jules, 23). According to the respondents, taboos should be talked about, it fuels debates and allows mentalities to evolve: *"I think that on the contrary, we should make more advertisements on subjects that are a little... a little taboo, it could educate many people"* (Sylvain, 24).

When respondents were asked about their experiences and memories of watching shocking or taboo ads, without having been exposed to the stimuli, two categories of ads stood out. The first category concerns advertisements that deliberately use taboo to sell. The second category concerns shocking awareness-raising advertisements intended to change behaviors. We find these two categories in our stimuli, the product-related advertisements are using the taboos of sex and nudity to sell perfume, the cause-related advertisements are using the taboo of death to raise awareness about animal abuse. By counting the number of favorable motivations/emotions and unfavorable obstacles/emotions cited by the respondents, we have drawn up Table 2 comparing the percentages of appearance according to the categories of advertisement and according to the presence or absence of the said stimuli.

Table 2

Reactions with/without stimuli

	Without Stimuli		With Stimuli	
	Product-related Shocking ad	Cause-related Shocking ad	Product-related Sexual stimuli	Cause-related Deathly stimuli
Motivations Favorable emotions	6%	41%	29%	69%
Obstacles Unfavorable emotions	94%	59%	71%	31%

Overall, it appears that, without stimuli, the obstacles are even more present than the motivations for both product-related and cause-related ads. When respondents are exposed to stimuli, they appear to be more favorable to both categories of ads, and the motivations are even more numerous than the obstacles for cause-related ads. In other words, individuals are more unfavorable to provocative ads in general when they must discuss them without being exposed to them, while in reality, when they are faced to them, they become more favorable.

Without stimuli (before seeing the ads)

Specifically, without stimuli, for product-related advertisements, an overwhelming majority of obstacles are cited by respondents among the most redundant: the codes used are considered by respondents to be in disagreement with their own (“*I don’t like the image they convey at all in terms of roles in society*” Paola, 23). Then, the lack of congruence with the product (“*violence and sexuality, but which would not be linked, well which do not bring anything in fact to the video for example you have a perfume which is going to smell uh, a flower in particular, well you are going to show images of this flower in a radiant field (...) that would make more sense.*” Jules, 23). For a great majority, the question of targeting. In fact, these advertisements should not be exposed to all public (“*I consider that we cannot necessarily put everything on television, I don’t know, I always think of the children who see this type of images*” Clémence, 23). The most present feelings are anger (“*it’s really going to make me angry, it’s going to exasperate me, it’s going to piss me off*” Aude, 23) and incomprehension (“*the ads for shower gels with naked women, we’ve been watching that on TV for years and ... why?*” Sylvain, 24). The positive elements that stand out are related to the aestheticism and the humor of some of these ads. For cause-related ads, without stimuli, the individuals are more divided. The obstacles are also related to targeting, the problem of the “all public”. Concerning unfavorable feelings most often cited are guilt, sadness, and powerlessness, which in the end demonstrate the effectiveness of awareness advertising rather than a real aversion to this type of ad.

With stimuli (after seeing the ads)

When respondents are exposed to the stimuli, favorable motivations and emotions increase substantially. For the product-related ads, these variations emerge from intrinsic characteristics present in the ad (see below 4.2.2. Advertising strategies and moderators) especially the aesthetics of the ads (for the Tom Ford ad) and humorous side (for the Sainte Maure ad). In both cases the respondents expressed that these ads were eye-catching. The negative reactions are linked to a certain perceived vulgarity, to the objectification of the body without apparent congruence, to the sexist side (for Tom Ford, perfume for men), corresponding for the respondents to an apparent lack from the communication managers: “*it marks a lack of arguments*” Jules, 23; “*it’s typically something with a lack of creativity*” Maël, 22. Reactions are similar for the two product-related ads: anger and incomprehension, the Sainte Maure ad also provokes disgust (N=9)³ since its objective is to sell cheese. Concerning the cause-related ads, favorable reactions became clearly superior to unfavorable ones following the exposure to the stimuli. Respondents were in favor (“*I am completely in favor, I think it’s great that we’re talking about it, because we’re trying to hide as much as possible of what’s going on behind, even though it exists*” Octave, 27) despite the shocking aspect of the advertisements “*I like this one, but it’s horrible*” (Paola, 23), some even consider that “*they don’t go far enough*” (Guillaume, 28). Here, not only the communication and/or advertising sector is considered, the advertisement is acceptable because it is an advertisement for a fight association (“*it’s shocking but it’s for*

³ (N= number of respondents who mentioned it/20)

PETA so it's okay" Sylvain, 24). Regarding the obstacles and unfavorable reactions, the respondents mainly question the creative characteristics of the advertisement rather than the use of provocation. The human-animal position is perceived as degrading for the animal *"she does not even hold the corpse with respect (...) the animal is not even in a dignified position to be presented, she holds it like a trophy"* (Alexandre, 26). The animal seems to be "too" alive, in suffering *"We hurt it but not... but we didn't finish it so it's horrible, we hurt it for nothing, it's half alive, how will it live afterwards? it hurts my heart more"* (Mélina, 23) which provokes sadness, disgust and guilt. These results also demonstrate the effectiveness of the awareness campaign rather than a real aversion to provocative advertising.

Advertising strategies and moderators.

To promote favorable reactions, advertisers must consider different points in their decision making, whether to use a taboo or not, which one, how, and media/time of broadcast. Many environmental factors can moderate the individual's perception of taboos' breaking in advertising. The moderators that are cited by all the individuals (N=20) and on numerous occasions in their interviews are the individuals around them (family, friends, strangers in particular) and the moment (appropriate or not). In other words, they are willing to face the transgression of a taboo in a certain context. Obviously, these two moderators are not independent of each other since the social context differs at different moments. Melvin, 25 years old explain that *"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"*.

- *Momentary context*, it appears that the moment 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. 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 moment"*.

This raises the point that the taboo would be taboo when faced unprepared (*"we can relate the shock to the surprise"* Jules, 23). Facing the taboo with preparation would include having already seen the advertisement *"the more we see it, the less it shocks us, so the less we consider it taboo"* (Leo 23); *"it's not something we're used to seeing, it can be shocking"* (Octave, 27). It is shocking when it is *"the first time"* (N=7). Respondents who were already familiar with an advert declared it as their favorite, in particular because of its *"familiarity"* (Valentin, 22). The medium and time of broadcast are also cited, and the perceived target of the ad is important. The momentary context is also strongly linked to the social context.

- *Social context*, the social context also plays a major role, *"advertising becomes taboo depending on (...) the person you have next to you"* (Alexandre, 26), *"it differs depending on who you talk to"* (Léo, 23), 75% of the respondents clearly specify that their reactions and perceptions of the taboo depend on who they are with at the being. Moreover, they agree that when they are with friends, they will have rather favorable reactions (i.e., laughing, joking, ...). But 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 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 may facilitate more favorable reactions to taboo ads the more often cited are the following:

- *Advertising objective* (N=18), respondents explain that breaking a taboo in an advertisement when its purpose is to raise awareness and promote good behavior is more legitimate, more understandable, *"I think it's cool because it's actually shocking but shocking to bring awareness"* (Céline, 25) and indeed less offensive, so they will be more supportive than when the taboo advertisement has the purpose of selling a product or service: *"It's not about selling, it's about denouncing, and I think it's more legitimate to put an image in this style"*(Maël, 22).
- *Perceived humor in the ad* (N=15), according to some respondents, the use of humor in advertising reduces or even eliminates the shocking/taboo nature of the ad. This point is more present among men *"it allows you to appreciate an image more easily even if it has a sexual connotation, you say to yourself "well that's fine, it makes me laugh so it's more acceptable"* (Melvin, 25). Whereas for women, even though it is less present, it is still a reality: *"it is less shocking because it makes you laugh at first sight"* (Marine, 22).

- *Aesthetics* (N=14), when we ask the respondents why they prefer a taboo ad to another one, some raise the question of the aestheticism, the beauty of the advertisement, its visual characteristics, *"it is rather elaborate, it is graphic"* (Guillaume, 28); *"it is well-realized, the colors, they are well"* (Jules, 23); *"it is beautiful"* (Paola, 23). It could also modify the taboo perception: *"I might consider it taboo because it's not artistic"* (Alexandre, 26).
- *Consumer gender and age*, (N=13) some men and women agree that *"maybe it's also because I'm a woman and I'm more virulent when the female body is used in this way"* (Aude, 23) and that on the other hand *"it doesn't shock me as a man"* (Guillaume, 28), *"maybe it's because I'm a man"* (Leo, 23). The difference between the genders' attitudes seems to be linked by the type of visual used, in fact, by the type of taboo transgressed. The question of identification with the ad is also raised: *"I identify a little more with the fact that there is an actress, well a woman on the ad, it makes me connect more, identify a little more and therefore the message gets across a little better"* (Céline, 25). They also expressed that children and elderly people might not understand the humor, the breaking of taboos, the awareness and that it would probably shock them more, *"it must not be seen by children, elderly people who lived in another time and who may have a different mind from ours"* (Maxence, 30).
- *Consumer personality, values, and beliefs* (N=10), according to our respondents, attitudes depend on *"the degree of sensitivity of the people"* (Léo, 23), on their *"beliefs"* (Mélina, 23), their *"open-mindedness"* (Sylvain, 24)
- *Perceive proximity* (N=6), the issue of proximity is addressed by respondents when they explain that advertising is not taboo for them. Without perceived proximity, taboos show no relevant impact: *"I am not the target, so it has no impact on me"* (Lucie, 23); *"I do not identify with it"* (Celine, 25). On the contrary, too much identification and perceived proximity can foster negative emotions: *"I feel shocked, disturbed because it brings back bad memories, it projects me into the situation, I feel guilty, some of the behaviors I have while driving could cause this, I identify myself"* (Marine, 22). The issue of perceived proximity appears in our results only for cause-related advertisements, often linked to the issue of guilt about the behavior denounced in the advertisement.

Discourse orientation: taboos in advertising

When questioned about taboos in advertising, respondents evaluate themselves more unfavorably than when confronted with the stimuli itself. They appear to be rather favorable, according to them: *"We have to talk about it, it's not a taboo"* (Martin, 30). The desire to transgress is the source of the ambivalence. In the rest of the interview, when they indicate the taboos that others have, that they do not have, we notice that they know this taboo exists. Young people are willing to break taboos, to talk about everything (*"I don't have any taboos, we have to talk about everything because today everything exists, so we have to talk about everything"*, Melina, 23), which explains the common statement: *"there are no more taboos"*.

Respondents consider the use of shocking/taboo ads as an *"advertising weapon"* (Melvin, 25), to stand out, to attract attention or even to create buzz: *"more and more we understand that breaking taboos allows us to create buzz and so as a result it has become a bit popular"* (Paola, 23) Moreover, the breaking of taboos can be initiated by advertising: *"they really try to break the taboos I think, the more advertising advances and the more it has to change, to shock and so they are going to hit in what has never been done and so necessarily it progresses little by little, and little by little there are no more taboos."*(Valentin, 22) Young people want the disappearance of taboos and are in favor of breaking them in advertising *"There are taboos important to talk about and I think it's good that some ads do it"* (Aude, 23). According to the respondents, breaking the taboos by advertising could *"make people debate and react"* (Maël, 22) and thus *"improve behaviors"* (Martin, 30)

Gender comparison.

Men feel that they are seeing less and less taboo ads, unlike women. However, in terms of self-assessment of their own taboos, both men and women in our sample did not consider themselves subject to taboos because of their personality. All the men explain that others had taboos but that they had none. Women are more likely to justify their own taboos by the social norm *"like everyone else"* and to consider that it is necessary to talk about it, to feed the debate. When faced with taboo announcements in a social context, most women in our sample explain that they would tend to enter discussion/debate with the individuals around them, while the majority of men would act as if nothing had happened.

If we were to establish sexotypical behaviors, we would say that as suggested in the literature, women report adopting more unfavorable attitudes than men. When individuals express themselves on their *"usual"* reactions, we notice that the main reactions declared by women when confronted with a taboo breaking announcement are (1) shock (2)

fear, (3) embarrassment, discomfort, and (4) understanding during sensitization or in the case of taboo breaking aimed at changing mentalities. *A contrario*, men declare to (1) laugh, (2) understand the issue and the last position (3) to find themselves in a situation of embarrassment or discomfort. However, once confronted with stimuli, women do not have more negative reactions or more obstacles than men.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical perspective

Given the rise of digital, revolutionizing the habits of consumption of advertising and promoting the emergence of movements with progressive vocation, the question of the advertising taboo has remained insufficiently addressed by the academic world in recent years. The purpose of this work is to investigate the current attitudes of young people towards taboo breaking advertisements to provoke.

The facets of taboo among young people.

Based on the synthesis of the work conducted on taboo by Sabri, Manceau and Pras in 2010, we investigate the appearance and importance of the defining facets of the concept in the respondents' discourses. These works confirm that the taboo is still perceived today as a cultural production of society that depend on geographical areas (Prendergast and Chia Hwa 2003; Sabri-Zaaraoui 2007) and time (Wilson and West 1981) In our case, it is a social prohibition.

Concerning the facets that we question, the sacred aspect. The new taboos no longer originate from religion but rather from societies. Religion itself has become taboo. Parry and his co-authors already stated in 2013 that religion was an inappropriate topic in advertising. In response to the question of contagion of the advertising taboo towards the brand (Sabri, Manceau et Pras 2010): the negative contagion of a taboo transgression in advertising towards the brand has not been observed. These results are consistent with De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh (1996). Furthermore, there is a significant drop in the negative repercussions of the use of taboos in ads due to the perceived objective of the brand. In other words, when the brand is seen as having good intentions, in a progressive spirit, seeking to change mentalities, it can use taboos in its advertising communications.

Young people's reactions to taboo in advertising and moderators of attitudes

This study suggests that young consumers self-report more aversion to provocative advertising than they are. The negative feelings and obstacles expressed by respondents when they are not confronted with the stimulus reduce significantly once they are confronted with it. In the context of cause-related ads, positive attitudes and motivations are the majority. These results contrast with those of Vezina and Paul (1997) who indicated that consumers had a positive attitude towards provocation but reacted rather negatively once they were faced with it.

This work raises the importance of momentary context. Taboo is taboo when it is unexpected, impromptu when we face it without preparation, it catches us off guard that lead to negative emotions such as embarrassment, discomfort, and unease. In other words, if the individual is ready to face it, especially once he has prepared an argument or socially acceptable behavior, he can confront the taboo since it becomes controllable. This process is in line with the spread of transgressors. The taboo becomes less taboo once it has already been transgressed (Wilson and West 1981, 1992), because we become accustomed to it and mentally ready to deal with it, this includes knowing the ad, and having seen it before.

Subsequently, considering the context also raises the question of social presence. Proximity and 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 the social context. Taboos only appear in front of others, it's taboo when we develop the feeling that it is impossible to exhibit in a social context.

Some moderators known from the literature are confirmed such as humor (Sabri 2012b), the objective of the advertisement (Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004), congruence (Pope, Voges and Brown 2004) and sex of the person evaluating the advertisement (Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009; Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006; Parry et al., 2013; Prendergast and Chia Hwa, 2003; Theodorakis and Painesis, 2018; Vézina and Paul 1997). The gendered analysis confirms that as suggested in the literature, women self-assess more unfavorable than men. Nonetheless, we do not notice any difference when confronted stimuli. Women are also in favor of talking about it, of breaking down taboos and of talking about everything. In short, both young women and men remain rather favorable to the use of provocative advertisements insofar as the intention behind them is considered laudable or intended to change mentalities, progressive. Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006) questioned the moderating effect of aesthetics, humor and congruence, our results show that they reduce the perception of taboo and unfavorable attitudes in the context of provocative product-related advertisements.

The progressive momentum of society and the need to not 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 must be able to talk about everything, otherwise we would limit the evolution of thoughts and morals.

Managerial implications

From this work, important managerial contribution 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 that they have been experiencing since childhood. Thus, they adopt positive emotional reactions to advertisements that use taboo feeding debates. However, certain moderators such as the social context and moment, whether individuals are ready to witness a taboo scene or not, must be considered because they can have a particular impact on their 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 devoided of the presence of this audience. An advertisement transgressing a taboo whose objective is to raise awareness will provoke more favorable reactions than a product-related advertisement, with a monetary 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.

Limitations

This research has certain limitations, the study of taboos makes it difficult to collect data since the taboo, by definition, is a prohibition. Thus, talking about it requires transgressing certain norms. Taboo, a sensitive subject by nature, can leads to certain biases related to the difficulty of individuals to verbalize their taboos. Also, we question individuals about their experiences as spectators of advertisements, we are facing here a possible memory bias.

Further research

This work has raised new moderators, through individual semi-directive interviews, it suggests the importance of the social and momentary contexts on the individual's attitudes formation. If knowing the ad allows the individual to be ready, thus reducing the perception of taboo and consequently unfavorable attitudes towards the ad, then prior exposure to the ad, the repetition effect or warning the respondent should greatly improve attitudes. Further research should also verify perceptions and attitudes towards taboos directly in a social context. The study of the effect of social presence alone on the one hand and the effect of normative social pressure on the other hand would allow to better understand individual's attitudes and to propose managerial recommendations favoring positive attitudes towards provocative advertisements. Since young people have a strong tendency to be ambivalent, flexible, faced to taboos, it is conceivable that their opinions can easily be modified by social influence.

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Appendix 1

Taboos evolution

	Application	Apparition
Disappeared Taboos		
Sexuality	General + Advertising	6
Homosexuality	General + Advertising	6
Nudity	General + Advertising	4
Single-parent families and divorce	General + Advertising	3
Religion	General	3
Actual Taboos		
Racism	General + Advertising	10
Sexism	General + Advertising	8
Animal abuse	General	5
Cigarette ad	Advertising	3
Future Taboos		
Irresponsible behavior towards the environment	General	9
Meat consumption	General + Advertising	7
COVID19-related behaviors ⁴	General	3

⁴ Data collection carried out in March-April 2020 (first lockdown) in France