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Abstract:

This work focuses on the compliance pressure exerted by a group when evaluating an advertising stimulus that is perceived as taboo. What is the persuasive effect of the normative influence exerted by group members on the emotional and conative individual assessment of advertising using arbitrarily a taboo based on sexuality? We assess the impact of this influence on the attitude towards advertising, the attitude towards the brand and the purchase intention. The results show that the experimental subjects are approaching the norm imposed by the group, especially when the group is favorable. Experimental individuals maintain their initial opinion about the perception of the taboo but conform to their emotional evaluations and purchasing intentions, women, who perceive the taboo more, let themselves be more influenced than men and become less hostile to taboo when they find themselves in a social context, whether other individuals are in favor of it or not.

Keywords: Conformity, Advertising, Taboos

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

The volume of advertising information has exceeded consumer attention for many years (Anderson & De Palma, 2012). Drowned in a tunnel of successive and similar advertisements (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006), advertisers must find solutions to differentiate themselves. The use of provocation has been an increasingly popular option since the 1980s (Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004). Taboos allow to attract attention by the "shock" produced (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda, 2003; Pope et al., 2004; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson, 2001) and are often mobilized by provocative advertising. They set behavioral and conversational rules (Sabri, Manceau and Pras, 2010). Their transgression implies punishment, especially social punishment, since individuals who do not respect the rules dictated by the group are considered deviant. In this sense, groups can impose cognitive or emotional punishments (Abrams et al., 1990; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Individual judgment of taboo is based on a solid, non-malleable, internalized injunctive personal norm, even if it was in conflict with divergent judgments. At the same time, with the advent and development of social networks, rating sites and forums, individuals are increasingly confronted with the opinions of others. However, research in social psychology, in line with Asch's (1955), shows that individuals' judgments are modified when they are confronted with a group with different judgment than their own (Urberg, Değirmencioglu and Pilgrim, 1997; Park & Lessig, 1977). It is therefore interesting for marketing managers to know whether the cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral "resistance" of individual judgment, faced with an advertising stimulus aimed at breaking a taboo, would be strong enough to resist an opposing force, that of the pressure towards compliance exerted by the divergent judgments of group members. Indeed, we do not know whether the modification of an individual judgment due to pressure towards conformity and observed when the stimulus is harmless (i.e., in Asch's experience the evaluation of line lengths), is still exercised when it concerns the evaluation of a stimulus perceived as taboo.

Our research mobilizes the theoretical framework of normative social influence to examine this confrontation between the integrated subjective norm specific to a lonely individual, with a new norm imposed by a group. What will happen if a man or a woman is under pressure to comply contrary to his or her judgment by members of a group proposing to violate the social norm? Will this lonely individual modify his or her individual evaluation (emotional and conative) of the advertisement - which he or she perceives as taboo - to conform to an opposite social norm, or will the weight of his or her subjective norm associated with the taboo block this evolution? Our research aims to answer these questions.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

The advertising provocation refers to: "*the deliberate use of stimuli intended to shock at least a proportion of the public, both because they are associated with norms, values or taboos that are not usually transgressed in advertising and because they have a distinctive character or an ambiguity*" (Vezina & Paul, 1997). Taboo is at the heart of provocative advertising (Pope et al., 2004). It is defined as "*a cultural production, of a sacred (religious) or magical (profane) nature, which imposes 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.*" (Sabri et al., 2010). The use of taboo in advertising negatively impacts emotional and conative reactions (De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). Women are more hostile to taboos in advertising than men (Manceau & Tissier Desbordes, 2006; Sengupta & Dahl, 2008; Vezina & Paul, 1997), these results could be explained by differences in the taboo perception degree, women perceive it more than men (Sabri, 2007). Our first two hypothesis propose replications to test external validity of these previous results.

H1: "The more an individual (woman or man) perceives an advertising stimulus as taboo, the more unfavorable his attitude towards it is (Aad) (H1a), the more unfavorable his attitude towards the brand is (Ab) (H1b) and the more unfavorable his intention to buy the brand is (Pi) (H1c)."

H2: "As a whole, women perceive more taboo in sexual advertising stimuli, than men"

The following hypotheses place the individual in a social context. In group interaction, most individuals choose to behave in a socially acceptable way to avoid difficult situations. Social influence works both for behavior modification (Milgram, 1963) and during conversations (Asch, 1955). Based on these converging results, we expect that the power of the compliance effect will outweigh the constraint of the reluctance to change the individual judgment of a perceived taboo advertising stimulus. Hence the following hypotheses:

H3: "The norm of a group significantly influences the individual (woman or man) perception of the taboo character of an advertising stimulus (H3a), Aad (H3b), Ab (H3c) and Pi (H3d)."

Nevertheless, when confronted with a taboo stimulus, the pressure towards conformity exerted by members of a favorable group implies the rupture of an internalized social norm, which makes the individual situation very uncomfortable (Severens, Kühn, Hartsuiker and Brass, 2012). We therefore expect that when the advertising stimulus attacks a perceived strong

taboo, the influence of the group norm will be less strong than for a perceived weak taboo, the discordance being too high with the subjective norm that the individual has internalized since childhood (Sabri, 2012). Hence the following hypothesis:

H4: “The norm of a group has a stronger influence on individual (woman or man) judgment when the advertising stimulus is perceived as weakly taboo by the group, than when it is perceived as strongly taboo, concerning: Aad (H4a), Ab (H4b) and Pi (H4c).”

Since taboo creates an emotional ambivalence that results from the conflict between the pressure to conform to norms (being unfavorable to taboo) and giving free rein to one's impulses, individuals in a taboo-friendly group should be freed from this ambivalence and comply. In addition, once the taboo is broken, it should be perceived as less taboo (Wilson & West, 1995). Hence the following hypothesis:

H5: “The norm of a group has a stronger influence on individual (woman or man) judgment when a taboo advertising stimulus is perceived favorably by the group than when it is perceived unfavorably, concerning: Aad (H5a), Ab (H5b) and Pi (H5c).”

The issue of gender compliance has been very widely addressed in research and has led to many disagreements, both on whether or not there is a difference and why these differences exist (Cooper, 1979). During the first half of the 20th century the authors tended to agree on the consensus that females were more susceptible to be influenced than males (Eagly & Wood, 1991, for a review). However, there is no general position within the research community. This is why, in view of the current challenges relating to gender and equality that have been growing in society recently, particularly on the issue of women in advertising, it would be interesting to reproduce the analyses and link it to the controversial advertising matter, we hypothesize that:

H6. “More specifically, women compliance with the norm of a group is stronger than men concerning: Aad (H6a), Ab (H6b) and Pi (H6c).”

3. Methodology

3.1. Experimentation.

A sample of 22 individuals, including 8 men, marketing students, was selected. Data collection was carried out in three stages. First, individuals responded individually to an online questionnaire. In a second step, they were interviewed again, within a group of 3 or 4 accomplices. In group of 3, there were two women and one man, in group of 4, two women and

men. The choice of the number of partners is based on the recommendations of Asch (1955) and Gerard, Wilhelmy, and Conolley (1968). We made sure to create a minimal social bond between the naive subjects and the group members, thanks to a socialization phase that took place just before this second collection. The members of the group made, on the basis of a previously conducted random draw, judgments that were sometimes positive in response to the stimulus, sometimes negative. The experimental subjects heard the answers from each group member and then gave their answers orally, last. All of the measures in the first step were repeated in full, so that the differences between the individual norms/responses before the group meeting (Phase 1) and the differences between the norms/responses given during the group meeting (Phase 2) could be compared. In both collections, the order of advertising (stimuli images) was randomized. Finally, a third qualitative phase consisted of a debriefing allowing the individual to express his or her feelings during the group phase. This phase also identified whether some of the subjects understood the issues of the study.

3.2. Choice of advertising stimuli, dependent variables and manipulated factors.

The selection of the various taboo ads was made following a pre-test on a convenience sample (n = 25). We identified two ads considered highly taboo and two weakly taboo. The four stimuli selected feature sexual taboos, using females models, for non-tabooed products. We measured the perception of the taboo nature by assessing the degree of agreement with the judgment: "this advertising is taboo for me". Two two-level factors were manipulated: (1) the opinion of the group (affective and conative reactions - favorable vs. unfavorable); (2) the taboo nature of the stimuli (strong vs. weak). To control a possible intergroup selection bias, we chose to have only one group of accomplices who were subjected to the 4 experimental combinations, presented successively during the meeting. Each individual was therefore successively confronted with the same group, the opinions (favorable vs unfavorable) being crossed with the taboo stimuli (strong vs weak). We have 3 dependent variables: (1) attitude towards advertising (measured with the item "I love this ad" of the Holbrook and Batra scale, 1987), (2) attitude towards the brand ("I appreciate this brand" - Spears and Singh, 2004) and (3) intention to purchase, ("I would buy it" – Dodds, Monroe and Grewal, 1991). For each variable, we used a mono-item measure (6-point Likert scale) to avoid affecting the internal validity of the experiment, avoiding a maturation and/or discouragement bias caused by fatigue due to excessively long administration of the questionnaire (Cook & Campbell, 1979.). On the other hand, the authors of the measurements report extremely high reliability coefficients (ie. 0.99 for Aad, 0.97 for Ab and 0.9 for Pi) which obviously suggests extreme redundancy between the

items. In such a case, and for concepts that are easy to understand, Rossiter (2002) recommends that single-item scales be used.

4. Results

4.1. Verification of the perception of the levels of the experimental manipulations.

Prior to the experimental treatments, we had to exclude 4 respondents because they told us of their suspicion about accomplices who had "agreed" earlier. In fact, their responses were significantly different from those of other subjects (Aad : $p = 0.052$; Ad : $p = 0.107$; Pi : $p = 0.001$; Taboo perception : $p < 0.001$).

4.2. Impact of the perception of the taboo on the evaluations of an advertisement.

Regressions show that the perception of the advertising taboo has a significant and negative impact on attitude towards advertising (H1a: $\beta = -0.448$; $t = -4.19$; $p < 0.001$) and attitude towards the brand (H1b: $\beta = -0.270$; $t = -2.35$; $p = 0.022$). On the other hand, the impact on purchasing intent is not significant (H1c: $\beta = -0.193$; $t = -1.64$; $p = 0.105$). H1 is therefore partially validated. Comparisons of averages show that men find advertisements as a whole significantly less taboo than women ($t = -4.45$; $p < 0.001$). A complementary analysis studying each ad individually reveals that for each of our stimuli, the averages of women in response to the statement "This ad is taboo for me" are higher than those of men. More precisely, these results are significant for the two ads classified as slightly taboo following our pre-test (N=25): United Brands ($t = 25,74$; $p = 0,000$) and Naughty Lingerie ($t = 31,94$; $p = 0,000$) as well as for Tom Ford's ad ($t = 5,57$; $p = 0,028$), which is considered as a strong taboo. We accept H2.

4.3. Social influence of a group in the individual evaluation of the advertising taboo.

The norm of a group significantly varies the individual evaluations of a sexual advertisement considered taboo. An average test shows that when individuals face a group, they conform to the normative judgment established by the group, both for the attitude towards the announcement (H3b : $t = 2.32$; $p = 0.012$), the attitude towards the brand (H3c : $t = 1.86$; $p = 0.033$) than for the intention to buy (H3d : $t = 3.16$; $p = 0.001$) ; on the other hand, their perception of the taboo is not affected (H3a : $t = -1$; $p = 0.840$). These results partly validate the hypothesis put forward by H3. In addition, the further away the individual initial assessment is from the norm imposed by the group, the closer the individuals get to that norm at the group meeting in order to comply. Afterwards, the strength of the taboo has no effect on compliance with the group norm, mean difference tests give not significant results for affective evaluations,

attitude towards the advertisement (H4a: $t = 0.312$; $p = 0.756$) and attitude towards the brand (H4b: $t = 0.154$; $p = 0.878$) and for the conative evaluation (H4c: $t = -1.530$; $p = 0.131$). These results lead to the rejection of H4. Then, when the group is in favor of the taboo, compliance is significantly stronger than when the group is against concerning the attitude towards the advertisement (H5a : $t = 3.12$; $p = 0.001$), towards the brand (H5b : $t = 2.40$; $p = 0.009$), and towards the purchase intention (H5c : $t = 2.34$; $p = 0.011$). H5 is therefore validated. Finally, as we had considered, the influence of a group's norm on emotional and conative reactions to an ad using a sexual taboo is significantly stronger in women than in men concerning the attitude toward the ad (H6a : $t = -3.58$; $p < 0.001$), the attitude toward the brand (H6b : $t = -3.35$; $p = 0.002$) and the purchasing intent (H6c : $t = -2.09$; $p = 0.042$). H6 is accepted.

5. Discussion and perspectives

The validation of H1 reinforces the external validity of the results of previous studies: the use of a taboo in advertising leads to a more negative attitude towards the ad (De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996) and towards the brand (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). However, it has no significant effect on the purchase intention (De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996). The approval of H2 shows that women are more likely to perceive the taboo nature of advertising stimuli than men: where men do not see any transgression of norms, do not see the taboo, women see one.

The main contribution of our research is to show that the pressure for compliance exerted by members of a group also applies when it comes to evaluating provocative advertisements of a sexual nature, which are considered taboo by individuals. In other words, the pressure towards compliance exerted by a group's judgments outweighs the resistance of the individual judgment when confronted with the violation of a taboo, even if the experimental subjects had only a weak and short-term social relationship. The normative social influence is therefore very powerful. Thus, the results of Asch (1955) obtained for evaluations with little involvement (length of different lines) are repeated in a context involving, namely, resistance to the violation of an individual taboo: we show that the further away the initial individual perception was from that of the group (in other words, the greater the distance between the individual judgment and the norm), the stronger the compliance was. Furthermore, women conform more to the group norms than men.

On the other hand, we note that the strength of the taboo did not significantly impact compliance. This result could be explained by the binary nature of the taboo, whereas we had assumed that there are degrees (weak vs. strong) in the perception of a taboo, the perception would be binary: a stimulus is or is not perceived as taboo (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006).

We also note that groups that were in favor of the taboo provoked greater compliance than those that were against it. Since individual perceptions of taboo stimuli were generally negative, when the group's judgments were also unfavorable, the two entities were in fact in agreement. The experimental subjects therefore had no reason to change their minds, otherwise they would have contradicted the group's standard. Further analysis shows that women's compliance with a group is not affected by the group's unfavorable opinion. When surrounded by other individuals, women tend to rate favorably the advertising arbitrarily using sex, the brand concerned and to have a better purchasing intention than when they have to rate this advertising alone. In other words, women in a social context will become less hostile to taboo. If the accomplices they face are favorable, then they will become even more favorable exceeding all men's results.

Concerning the confrontation of opposing forces, namely, on the one hand, the pressure towards the cognitive, affective and/or behavioral stability of the individual, following the perception of a taboo, and on the other hand, the pressure towards change, inherent in the need to conform to a norm established by the group, we now know that it is the norm of the group that takes the position of force in the face of the prohibition associated with the taboo: the normative pressure of the group overcomes both (women and men) individual affective and conative resistance to taboo.

However, this research has different limitations. Its main weakness is the relatively small sample size and lack of heterogeneity in terms of gender and age. A possible learning bias may also have occurred, since the same stimuli were used during the individual and collective phases. In addition, the existence of possible moderations likely to impact compliance with the group standard should be explored by future research. Elements such as the intrinsic characteristics of each individual but also the specific characteristics of the group (proximity of members, attractiveness, presence of experts, consensus of opinions, etc.) could interact. It would also be interesting to ask whether compliance is simply the result of acquiescence to avoid negative consequences or rather the total internalization (Kelman, 1956) of a new norm.

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