

Marketing of the Unmentionables: Developing a Conceptual Framework of Taboo Products

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Abstract

Taboo products constitute a widespread yet undertheorized domain in consumer research. Despite their relevance to large and rapidly expanding markets—including mental health, FemTech, and end-of-life care—marketing research has primarily examined adjacent constructs like embarrassment, disgust, or vice goods, offering a fragmented account of taboo consumption. Drawing on an exploratory survey and insights from anthropology and sociology, this conceptual paper defines taboo products as marketed offerings perceived as potential sources of harm that transgress boundaries of acceptable behavior. It develops a taxonomy grounded in two core dimensions—harm and transgression—and positions taboo products as a socio-culturally constructed meta-category that cuts across traditional product classifications. The paper also introduces the Taboo Engagement Spectrum, which captures heterogeneity in visibility management and disclosure behavior. Together, these contributions provide a coherent framework for understanding how taboo status shapes consumer decision-making and offer implications for marketing strategy, public policy, and future empirical research.

Track: Marketing Strategy & Theory