

An Exploratory Study of the Use of Taboos in Advertising in Cameroon

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to present the recurrence of taboo in advertising in Cameroon by highlighting the different stagings often chosen by advertisers. A content analysis of 2335 ads from a magazine and a TV channel from 2002 to 2016 was carried out. The results show that only 1.02% of ads in these media depict taboos in a non-provocative way. Surprisingly, 91.67% of these ads came from TV. Female nudity and menstruation are the most frequently used taboos. In this context, this research points to the socio-cultural effects induced by the use of taboos by advertisers, limited by simple social prohibitions, which deserve to be studied in depth.

Keywords: taboo, advertising, magazine, television.

Jel code: M33.

1. Introduction

Many companies have resorted to using taboos in their advertising. While this strategy helps to increase brand awareness and recall (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004), it often causes discomfort among consumers, who sometimes boycott the company's products. Despite this effect, several studies on taboos assert their increasing use in advertising (Pope et al., 2004; Sabri, 2012a). However, little research has actually measured the recurrence of this practice. What's more, work on the subject has focused mainly on sexuality and nudity (Soley and Kurzbard, 1986; Lambiase et al., 1999; Reichter and Carpenter, 2004; Piron and Young, 1996; Kilbourne, 2005), which are just two of the multitude of taboos used in advertising. In addition to showing discrepancies, these studies show that the use of taboos in advertising differs from one country to another. Piron and Young (1996) compared German and American magazines. They found more sexual references in American ads than in German ones. Biwas, Olsen and Carlet (1992) conducted a comparative study of advertisements in France and the USA. The results show that ads with sexual connotations account for 23.9% of advertising in France, compared with only 8.6% in the USA. The work of Herbig (1998) corroborates the results obtained by Biwas, Olsen and Carlet in 1992. The presence of nudity in advertising, for example, is now greater in Latin countries such as France and Italy than in Anglo-Saxon countries (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 2006).

In Africa, the use of taboos in local advertising is well established. Sabri (2006), Diallo (2010) and Laadhar and Romdhame (2013) observed a few ads using sexual taboos in Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia respectively. In Cameroon, Amayéné (2020) identifies several ads using taboos such as witchcraft, female nudity and sexuality.

However, while advertisers have often used taboos, there is very little research in the field in our particular context in this way

No research has been carried out to answer the questions following: How do advertisers use taboos in their advertising? How often are taboos used in advertising? What kind of staging do advertisers prefer?

The aim of this research is to measure the frequency of taboo use in advertising in Cameroon over a period of 14 years, by highlighting all the taboos used and the different settings favored by advertisers. This research is important for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a much-needed indication of the prevalence of taboos in magazine and TV advertising. Secondly, it will enable us to compare representations of taboos and examine changes in this over time. Finally, this analysis will provide empirical data to enrich the debate on the use of taboos in advertising.

2. Literature review

2.1. How do you describe taboo?

Taboo is one of those rare concepts that seem familiar but are difficult to explain. Indeed, when faced with a conversation, an object or a behavior that is embarrassing or shocking, it's not uncommon to use the term taboo to describe it. But to better understand taboo, it's important to highlight all the facets that characterize it. To do this, we need to draw on the work of anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists. Originally associated with a behavioural prohibition, the meaning of taboo has evolved considerably over time. Many authors, from distant precursors such as Webster (1942), Van Gennep (1904), Reinach (1906), Frazer (1911), Freud (1912), Durkheim (1915) and Walter (1991) have proposed a definition and characteristics for taboo. Ellis (1829) describes taboos as personal and impersonal prohibitions, the violation of which is believed to automatically result in very serious sanctions for the guilty party and sometimes even for his or her relatives. These sanctions often include curses, serious illnesses and death. For Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (1999), taboo has two opposing meanings. On the one hand, that of the holy, the sacred, and on the other, that of the disturbing, the dangerous, the forbidden or the impure. The forbidden, the contagious and the severity of sanctions are characteristics found in 's description Amayéné (2020) of taboos in Cameroon. Following an exploration of eleven ethnic groups belonging to the five main cultural regions of Cameroon, he describes taboos as "cultural prohibitions of a religious or non-religious nature, and contagious linked to a behavior (or a conversation, or an animal, or a thing) whose violation automatically provokes severe sanctions unless purification rites are observed in cases where this is possible". This description, though rich, is ethnically rooted, which makes it difficult to exploit in marketing. Indeed, for professionals, one of the conditions for the success of this strategy is that the taboo be perceived and recognized by at least part of the audience. This constraint leads advertisers to opt for what Sabri et al (2010) call the weak form of taboo, which most often refers to what must not be said, done or shown because of its indecent, shocking or simply embarrassing nature. It is this latter description that has been retained for this work.

2.2. Taboos in advertising

Sabri et al (2010) propose four fields of research on taboos. Among these, two streams approach the use of taboos in advertising: the marketing of taboo products and the use of taboos in advertising.

The marketing of taboo products has been the subject of a large number of studies. Most of the work in this field focuses on the defilement or social and moral danger associated with these products. Pornography, funeral services, intimate hygiene products and condoms are all taboos that have been analyzed by researchers in this field with regard to Wilson and West (1981), Barnes and Doston (1990) and Merdji (2002). Early work in this field, like that of Wilson and West (1981), showed that unspeakable products were rarely marketed because of their sensitive nature, despite the often societal need to promote them. Most of the work that followed focused on advertising communication, with little attention paid to other marketing variables. These studies have analyzed the components of advertising likely to be deemed offensive, and have identified the individual factors (gender, age, cultural values, etc.) affecting consumer perception. Two main limitations have been identified in most of the work in this field. The first is that few of these studies have focused on taboo. The second common limitation is that they do not distinguish between products that constitute a purely conversational taboo

(condoms, funeral services, etc.) and those that have a behavioural impact (lightening beauty products, cosmetic surgery, etc.).

The staging of taboos in advertising is the field that has been the subject of the greatest number of studies on taboos in marketing. Indeed, Vezina and Paul (1997), Pope *et al.* (2004), Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (1999, 2005, 2006), Lavine *et al.* (1999), Zimmerman and Dalhberg (2008), Putrevu (2008), Sabri (2012a, 2012b, 2012c), Sabri and Obermiller (2012d) are authors who fall within this field. In general, these works focus on the provocative exploitation of a taboo in advertising. From then on, the conceptualization focuses on concepts other than the taboo itself, such as nudity (Dudley, 1999; Lombardot, 2004; Lombardot, 2007), sexuality (Dahl and Sengupta, 2008; Dahl *et al.*, 2010; LaTour, 1990; LaTour *et al.*, 1990), death (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999, 2005), incest (Merdji, 2002), religion (Laadhar and Romdhame, 2013). This practice involves using a societal taboo (suicide, incest etc...) to promote a product that has no connection with the taboo. For example, using sexuality to promote a soft drink or a clothing brand. An analysis of advertisements shows that sex and death are the taboos most often transgressed (Vezina and Paul, 1997). The main findings of work in this field show that advertising featuring taboos increases attention to and recall of the ad, but often leads to a negative attitude towards the ad itself (LaTour *et al.*, 1994; Vezina and Paul, 1997; Waller, 1999; Lombardot, 2007; Dahl and Sengupta, 2008). This research also highlights a set of moderating variables likely to influence the perception of taboo ads, such as gender, age, type of taboo, level of education, ad design, humour... But like the first field, the staging of taboo themes in advertising communication has several limitations. The main one is that the word taboo is often used without being defined or analyzed. Only the research of Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (1999, 2005), Sabri (2007a, 2007b, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2015), and Sabri and Obermiller (2012d) really deal with taboo.

Our research is part of a new approach that would complement the four fields proposed by Sabri *et al.* (2010). It involves highlighting the recurrent use of taboos in advertising. This approach involves highlighting both the number of ads for taboo products (sanitary towels, condoms, etc.) and ads featuring a taboo (death, violence, etc.) to promote a product that is not taboo in the media at a given time. A similar trend already exists in research on sexuality in advertising, with the work of authors such as Soley and Kurzbard (1986), Lambiase *et al.* (1999) and Piron and Young (1996).

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample selection

As part of this research, a set of advertisements published in Cameroon were analyzed. A total of 2,335 advertisements from a magazine and a TV medium between 2002 and 2016 were analyzed. These two media were chosen because they are among the most sought-after by local companies when they want to communicate.

The corpus of ads analyzed in this study was built up in two different ways. For the television ads, the archivist of the CANAL 2 INTERNATIONAL television channel provided us sequentially with a set of DVDs containing ads from various advertisers who had inserted them over the period from 2002 to 2012. Unfortunately, these were not all the ads published over this period. However, we viewed over 2,800 ads, including 935 different ads. The majority of HORIZON + magazine ads were obtained from the company's website. The other issues were in hard copy. These were copies found in archives or in the homes of relatives. We thus analyzed 1,400 advertisements inserted between 2009 and 2016.

3.2. Variables

For this research, 8 variables were used: (1) the source of the advertisement (Canal 2/Horizon+), (2) the year the advertisement appeared, (3) the company that inserted the advertisement, (4) the brand that was the subject of the advertisement, (5) the sector of activity in which the said brand operates, (6) the nature of the advertisement (taboo/non-taboo), (7) the type of taboo used in the advertisement, (8) the type of staging (provocative/non-provocative/humorous).

For the source, it was simply a matter of noting whether the ad came from the magazine or television. The year of publication was marked on the magazine and on each DVD cover. The name of the company that had inserted the ad often appeared in the various ads. When this was not the case, further research was undertaken to find out. On the other hand, the name of the brand being promoted always appeared in the advertisements. To judge whether an ad was taboo or not, it was first necessary to identify the taboo used in each case. The taboo could be clearly illustrated (e.g., the presence of naked people), suggested (e.g., infidelity), or stated in a phrase or voice (e.g., witchcraft). Advertising could also be deemed taboo in relation to the fact that the product being promoted, or an element in the advertising strategy, was taboo. Staging was considered provocative when the advertisement emphasized embarrassing, shocking or forbidden aspects. Otherwise, it was considered non-provocative. The setting was considered humorous when it brought at least one smile to the face of the researchers, or when the company had tried to make it appear so by using a comedian, for example. However, only those ads that met with unanimous approval in both groups were retained as humorous. The ads that were therefore retained as taboo and humorous were those that were judged as such by both groups of researchers.

3.3. Coding procedure

Unlike Lambiase et al. (1999) and Reichert et al. (2004), who worked solely on sexuality, no specific codification was chosen, given the unlimited number of taboo types. The study is limited to their identification and the way they are portrayed. All ads were analyzed separately by the two researchers, each accompanied by a group of five student researchers. Once the individual analyses had been completed, the researchers cross-referenced the different opinions and discussed, in particular, those that did not meet with unanimous approval. Finally, the ads were submitted to two advertising professionals for their opinion. Only then was the database for the analyses confirmed. This approach ensured that the taboos used to create the ads were correctly perceived.

4. Main Results

4.1. Taboos are rarely used in advertising in Cameroon...

Of the 2,335 ads we processed, only 24 (i.e., around 1% of the ads) featured a societal taboo. This is a far cry from the 40% obtained by Soley and Kurzbard (1986), when these authors only looked at sexuality. 02 ads came from the magazine and the other 22 from the TV channel canal 2 international.

- **With taboos that affect women...**

11 different types of taboo have been used by companies to promote their brands in selected media. These included female nudity, condom use (male and female), theft, infidelity, witchcraft, death, menstruation, violence, illness, AIDS and sexual weakness. Female nudity was used 06 times out of the 24 ads identified, representing 25% of all ads. Female nudity thus appears to be the taboo most frequently used by companies in Cameroon. This is partly explained by the type of product being advertised. Women's beauty products and sanitary towels make up the bulk of these products. The menstrual period has also been widely used, mainly to promote sanitary towels. This taboo is used in 12.5% of ads identified as taboo. If we add to these two taboos the use of the female condom, that makes 10 out of the 24 ads observed (or 41.6%) that use a taboo linked to women alone. Table 1 summarises this information.

4.2. ...In a non-provocative way.

02 of the 24 taboo ads were deemed provocative. These were for the money transfer company Express exchange and the car distribution company Macat. Express exchange chose a provocative depiction of violence in its advertising to promote its service. The ad shows a group of men heavily armed with guns and machetes beating and robbing passengers on a bus. Their menacing voices and expressly highlighted firearms reinforce the provocative aspect. It's a parody of the "road cutters" phenomenon that is rife in certain parts of Cameroon, notably in the north of the country. The company Macat uses death to promote its motorcycle helmets. The advertisement shows the bloodied bodies of several people, obviously victims of road accidents. These images, which may shock some people, are not veiled. Strange, given that death, violence and suffering are the most rejected taboos (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). However, it's worth noting that almost 92% of the ads,

i.e., the 22 remaining ads, adopted non-provocative stagings. Yet these ads sometimes used taboos as sensitive as illness, sexual weakness or witchcraft. Table 2 summarizes all the stagings used by companies over this period.

4.3. With more companies in the dermocosmetic sector

Only 18 companies have tried this practice in Cameroon. With 16.6% (i.e., 04 of the 24 companies identified) of companies having used taboos in their advertising, the dermocosmetic sector is the most represented. Promed Cameroun, which specializes in distribution, has the highest number of taboo ads (4 ads: 01 in the magazine and 03 on TV). These are ads for brands of sanitary towels. Promed Cameroun is followed by the National AIDS committee, CSMA (Cameroon Social Marketing Association) and Express exchange with 03, 02 and 02 ads respectively. Table 3 lists all the sectors that featured taboo in their ads over this period.

4.4. No momentum among companies

As shown in table 4 below, after 01 taboo ads in 2006, we had to wait until 2009 to find new taboo ads. All the taboo ads we identified are concentrated between 2009 (07 ads) and 2011 (08 ads). We also identified 07 ads in 2010 and just one in 2014.

Table 1. Different taboos portrayed in advertising

Types of taboo	Sexual weakness	Infidelity	Death	Disease	Female nudity	Menstrual period	Witchcraft	Condom use	Violence	Flight
Number of companies using it	1	1	1	2	6	3	2	4	1	3

Source : Authors

Table 2. Distribution of taboo ads by sector of activity

Sectors of activity	Number of taboo ads	Sectors of activity	Number of taboo ads
Food industry	1	Health	1
Association	2	Powdered soap	1
Audiovisual	1	Services	4
Automotive	1	Sanitary towel	4
Brewery	1	Telephony	1
Dermo-cosmetics	4	Money transfer	2
Beauty salon	1		

Source : Authors

Table 3. Trend in the number of taboo ads over the years

Year	2006	2009	2010	2011	2014
Trend in the number of taboo ads	1	7	7	8	1

Table 4. Main results of analysis of 2335 ads

Source	Year	Company	Brand	Sector activity of	Nature (taboo or not)	Type of taboo	Staging (provocative, non-provocative, humorous)
horizon+	2011	Promed Cameroon	Anytime	Sanitary towel	Taboo	Female nudity	Non-provocative

horizon+	2014	Michele's corporation	Makari	Beauty salon	Taboo	Female nudity	Non-provocative
canal2	2006	National AIDS Committee	National AIDS Committee	Services	Taboo	Condom use	Non-provocative
canal2	2009	Cnps	Cnps	Services	Taboo	Flight	Non-provocative
canal2	2009	Autosmart international	Claire express	Dermocosmetic	Taboo	Female nudity	Non-provocative
canal2	2009	Pasta mondo	Pasta mondo	Food industry	Taboo	Flight	Humorous
canal2	2009	Socadim	Geema	Dermocosmetic	Taboo	Female nudity	Non-provocative
canal2	2009	Tecno	Tecno 0707	Telephony	Taboo	Infidelity	Humorous
canal2	2009	TV+ Cameroon	TV+	Audiovisual	Taboo	Witchcraft	Humorous
canal2	2009	Acm	Protecti	Association	Taboo	Condom use	Non-provocative
canal2	2010	Maca	Macat helmet	Automotive	Taboo	Death	Provocative
canal2	2010	Biopharm	Malizi	Dermocosmetic	Taboo	Flight	Non-provocative
canal2	2010	Promed Cameroon	Hygieni	Sanitary towel	Taboo	Menstrual period	Non-provocative
canal2	2010	Laboratoires adr	Absolute white	Dermocosmetic	Taboo	Female nudity	Non-provocative
canal2	2010	Express exchange	Express exchange	Money transfer	Taboo	Violence	Provocative
canal2	2010	Express exchange	Express exchange	Money transfer	Taboo	Disease	Non-provocative
canal2	2010	Acm	Protecti	Association	Taboo	Female condom use	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	National AIDS Committee	National AIDS Committee	Services	Taboo	AIDS disease	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	National AIDS Committee	Cnls	Services	Taboo	Condom use	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	Men's coffee	Men's coffee	Health	Taboo	Sexual weakness	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	Sab	Castel beer	Brewery	Taboo	Nudity	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	Promed Cameroon	Kristel	Sanitary towel	Taboo	Menstrual period	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	Promed Cameroon	Anytim	Sanitary towel	Taboo	Menstrual period	Non-provocative
canal2	2011	Atlas negoce	Mada	Powdered soap	Taboo	Witchcraft	Non-provocative

Source : Authors

5. Discussion of results

The aim of this research is to measure the prevalence of the use of taboos in advertising in Cameroon, by highlighting all the taboos used and the different settings favored by advertisers. The results show that only

1.02% of the ads we analyzed featured taboos. This is a far cry from the 40% obtained by Soley and Kurzbard (1986), the 53% by Lambiase et al. (1999) or the 49% by Reichter and Carpenter in 2004, although these authors only observed sexuality. What's more, the results show no regularity that would allow us to conclude that there has been an evolution over time. There are several possible reasons for this. The first has to do with the type of media chosen. Magazines and television are not very permissive, and are regularly censored and sanctioned by the National Advertising council. The second reason is the high cost of insertion in these media, which limits the number of companies that advertise in them. Small and medium-sized businesses, which are often looking to raise their profile and explore new creative avenues, opt for other, more accessible media such as the Internet, leaflets and local cinema. The third reason is brands' lack of creativity. Few companies entrust their advertising creations to agencies. What's more, professionals often have little leeway for creative choice. Finally, the rigorous selection of ads deemed taboo by the authors also partly explains this low percentage. In fact, several ads were not selected because they were not unanimously recognized as taboo by both groups.

This research also revealed 11 taboos used in ads inserted in these media over this period. Contrary to the findings of Vezina and Paul (1997), death and sexuality were used very little (only 8% of ads). But advertisers were not provocative. The ads were taboo, for the most part, because of the product or cause being promoted. For example, of the 06 ads featuring female nudity, 04 were for dermocosmetic products, 01 for sanitary towels and the last for a beauty salon. The menstrual period was mainly used to sell sanitary towels.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to measure the recurrence of the use of taboos in advertising in Cameroon over a period of 14 years, by highlighting all the taboos selected and the different settings favoured by advertisers. Content analysis of advertisements seemed the most appropriate method. Two groups of researchers analyzed 2,335 advertisements. The results show that advertisers in Cameroon are still hesitant when it comes to using this practice. Only 1.02% of the ads we analyzed featured a taboo. However, the advertising of taboo products such as condoms, sanitary towels and skin-lightening products seems to be more recurrent than the exploitation of taboos to promote products that are not.

This work has several limitations, the main one being the limited number of media selected. It would be interesting to extend the research to several, media including the Internet, which is becoming increasingly popular with companies in Cameroon, partly because of its permissive nature and relatively accessible cost. Another limitation may be the operationalization chosen for taboo. The one chosen in this study does not allow us to take into account all the facets of taboo, sometimes reducing it to a simple social prohibition.

There are several avenues for further research. We could look into the relationship that might exist between corporate culture and the choice to use a taboo in advertising by a company in Cameroon. It would also be interesting to interview advertisers to understand their position on the use of taboos in advertising. We could also complement this research by measuring the impact of the use of taboos in advertising on consumer attitudes. This would provide a better understanding of the state of the practice in Cameroon.

7. References

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How to cite/reference this article: **AMAYENE TSALA Patrick, GUEPI-KAMBOU Audebert, An Exploratory Study of the Use of Taboos in Advertising in Cameroon, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech. 2025; 7(2): 130-138.**