

A Research Note on Gender and Taboo Advertisements: The Case of Spirit Airlines

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ABSTRACT

This research note is an exploratory investigation on the use of taboo themed advertisements and the differences in responses to those ads by gender. What is unique to the note is the ability to investigate using advertisements that have not been created for a fictitious product, but were in fact examples from a long running promotional campaign by a U.S. airline, Spirit Airlines. The research supports the belief that taboo themed ads may bring attention, but female responses to the taboo themed advertisements are negative and these feelings may carry over to attitudes toward the brand and lower intentions to purchase.

Introduction to Spirit Airlines

When then Spirit Airlines CEO Ben Baldanza was asked about the airlines strategy he replied “we're selling low prices, and compete for customers on the basis of price and price alone” (Satchell, 2013). As the airline moved to the strategy of being an ultra low cost carrier (ULCC) in the late 2000s, the quote reflects the belief that only price matters to the purchasing consumer. As part of the strategic shift, all aspects that added costs to the airline were investigated. Among the examples cited in articles about the airline was a story of how if one walked into the corporate headquarters, no receptionist was on duty, but a sign greeted visitors informing the guest that not having a receptionist saved 2 cents per passenger (Arnoult, 2007).

Being an ULCC meant all aspect of the airline’s business operations were targeted for cost control. Among the cost centers that faced cost reductions were the airline’s marketing costs. Baldanza stated that within a few years of becoming CEO that advertising costs were reduced 80% (Stoller, 2009). While the usual airline might spend anywhere from 2 to 4% on advertising media, Spirit lowered the airline’s spending to about 0.5% of its revenue on advertising media (Victor, 2012). By using advertising that the CEO readily admits was ‘edgy’ the ads became viral and helped the airline save money and deliver inexpensive fares. As Baldanza noted, “Spirit's advertising may be more colorful than some, but it isn't out of the norm when compared with many retailers' ads, Super Bowl commercials and the content of TV series” (Stoller, 2009). As

the airline had moved to the strategy of being an ULCC the statements reflect the belief that only price matters to the purchasing consumer. Anything done in the name of attracting attention via additional news reports or in the world of social media re-tweeting, re-posting or blogging about the ads, meant a goal was met to get the most reaction to the ads as possible with as little cost as possible (Nicas, 2012). Barry Biffle, the chief marketing officer at Spirit Airlines at the time the ads were run, generally stated his true belief that there's no such thing as bad publicity (Victor, 2012).

Taboo in Advertising

The research on taboo advertising and its effects evolved from the controversial advertising literature. As the researchers in the field examined the different aspects of what is controversial in advertising, and the different ad appeals and executions that could be controversial, the question of what was 'beyond' controversial was raised (for a review of issues in controversial advertising, please see Arnaud, et, al, 2018). Extending the research on what is controversial or what consumers may consider provocative lead to research that began to examine the concept of taboo in advertising. One of the first studies by Sabri (2012a), who developed a research stream in the area, started with an investigation into one area of taboo, the use of explicit sexual imagery. In this first article, Sabri defines taboo advertising as:

That which uses images words or settings to evoke a taboo for a proportion of the target audience. It can shock or offend by transgressing internalized norms or by triggering emotionally ambivalent responses, such as simultaneous excitement and guilt (p. 217).

Following from the controversial advertising research literature, Sabri recognizes that the concept of taboo can have two forms, the designation could refer to a taboo product or a taboo violating execution of the ad. Conducting a series of interviews with female subjects, a decision tree model was developed that reflected a subject's ambivalence or no ambivalence to the taboo sexual imagery which lead to 4 possible outcomes, of which 3 were to have a negative attitude to the ad. The study utilized a qualitative, interview technique, and a small sample of 22 female subjects, but factors such as age, family structure, and religiosity all played in role in leading to the negative outcomes. Additionally the interviews found that a negative contagion effect occurred, transferring the negative attributes of the taboo ad onto the product and thus created limited purchase intentions.

In researching the social science history of taboo, Sabri and Obermiller (2012) note that taboo is "a behavioral or verbal act that societal norms prohibit and generally considered to be publicly unmentionable" (page 870). Across the advertising context, the taboo perspective may come either from the product advertised or from the use of a taboo theme in the execution of the ad. Examining past research in the area of provocative advertising content, 16 taboo topics are

named: suicide, murder, death, abortion, hard-drug ingestion, nudity, sadomasochistic practices, gay sex, rape, zoophilia, pedophilia, sex with more than one partner, masturbation, transvestitism, parody of religious symbols, and physical abuse of women. The authors note that some public service ads had in fact addressed some of these issues in the past in efforts to address health issues such as AIDS and some of these themes had been used in product categories such as leather goods, luxury and high fashion products. This study by Sabri and Obermiller (2012) focused on the execution of the ad. Creating four different ad executions for a fictitious perfume, the execution strives to intermingle the taboo concepts of sex (sodomasochism) and death (suicide) as the executable elements to examine the impact taboo level on brand attitude and brand purchase intentions. Within the experimental executions, the 'strong' taboo ads were perceived as very taboo when the manipulation check was examined. This finding is of note as it supports the proposed model that strong taboo executions in ads have a negative impression on brand attitudes and intentions to purchase. However, the authors hypothesis that women were more likely than men to perceive taboo symbols in the ads was not supported. As the strong taboo ads were so strong, the ads were too strong to find a gender effect as both males and females had negative evaluations of the strong taboo treatment.

In a follow-up study, Sabri (2017) investigated the impact of different media contexts (i.e., press versus social media) on the effectiveness of controversial taboo ads. The research of taboo for this study relied on two taboo themes – sex in the form of sadomasochism and death in the form of suicide using black and white print ads for a fictitious perfume. To introduce the possible effects of the delivery medium the method of ad communication varied from a print ad to a Facebook page. The study revealed that communication medium seems to influence consumer perceptions of controversial ads. That in a social media sharing, receiving an ad from a 'friend' may lessen the taboo level of the ad. Respondents downplayed the taboo-ness of a viral controversial ad disseminated by way of the social networking site compared to a controversial ad embedded in a press article. However, findings also suggest that controversial viral advertising does not contribute to favorable brand attitudes and purchase intentions. The viral communication context does not isolate a brand from a negative evaluation (Sabri, 2017).

Continuing the investigation of the use sex and violence as taboo themes in ads, Theodorakis and Painesis (2018) created a series of 8 print ads mixing a control stimuli of no taboo themed ads with ads focused on sex, ads focused on violence and then ads with a mixed sex and violence execution. In discussing the use of taboo across fields of human behavior, the authors note that advertising has often treated taboo differently as the basis for provocation, distinctiveness, or controversial appeals in ad execution strategies. In the various treatments and manipulations the research describes gender is found to have a negative impact on the effect of taboo ads on perceptual, attitudinal and behavioral responses. Women generally across all the taboo themed ads treatments reacted more negatively than men, and especially

towards the ads with sexual stimuli as the focused taboo treatment. Addressing the use of taboo, the research finds that congruence with taboo themes may be appropriate in certain product categories or causes (public health). Although the use of taboo themes may generate more negative results when used with products that are traditionally less associated with taboos.

While the research reviewed so far has focused on the effect of sexual content and violence imagery to elicit taboo themes, other research has looked at the impact of humor on taboo themes. Sabri (2012b) first investigated how the level of taboo (low, medium and high) impacts attitude towards the ad and attention paid to the ad. In the study, Sabri found that a medium level of taboo themes may be best for soliciting attention for the ad. The study reported a curvilinear relationship is found that at the high level of taboo that scores for attention towards the ad did decrease from the medium level of taboo. Sabir's category for the ads created was a perfume product; therefore, the use of sexual imagery was used to manipulate the level of taboo and for the humor treatment a tagline for the print ad was created through a series of focus groups of women, the final target of the sample. Examining the results between the non-humor and humor groups the results support the belief that humor can both lower the perception of taboo and maintain attention towards the ad as the level of taboo increases. With the use of humor an advertiser may in fact maintain attention toward the ad even at a high level of taboo that may lower attention without the humor present.

Other research has examined if the use of humor will increase the likelihood of people to forward and share viral taboo themed ads. Lee, et al; (2017) study the impact of light versus dark on the reception and interpretation of a viral taboo themed ad and the willingness to forward and share such an ad across a person's social network. The findings do support that the nature of the setting, light versus dark, impacts the perception of humor on the taboo themed ad, with those in a dark setting finding the ad more humorous, but no matter the setting the groups in the offensive conditions with taboo themed content had a lower attitude toward the ad and the brand. Furthermore, while finding the taboo themed ads more humorous in dark condition, the impact of the humor was still not enough to increase the likelihood of sharing the offensive themed ads. While finding humorous, individuals recognize that sharing the offensive content may negatively reflect on their character, and so by not sharing someone is protecting their self-worth and is being considerate of others.

The literature presented notes that taboo appeals are likely to continue into the future as by the use of taboo attention is gained. Yet, the literature has also consistently found that strong levels of taboo can actually bring about negative feelings toward the ad, the brand and lower the intention to purchase. Additionally, the literature review supports that the effects found are even stronger for females. That leads to the hypothesis for this note:

H1: examining a subset of selected terms reflecting the feeling and evaluative aspects of the concept of taboo will find that females will have stronger negative feelings and evaluations of Spirit Airline advertisements.

This Study

The study was conducted at a private university in the Southeastern United States, including both students and non-students from a women’s community service organization. Respondents completed part of the survey, including demographics, personal travel behavior, and general beliefs about advertisements, before being presented with a series of advertisements Spirit Airlines had released over the years. The presentation was an 8-minute Spirit Airlines ad series, a mixture of print, web, and video advertisements developed and released by the airline. Distribution of the ads occurred by means of various promotional channels, including direct messages sent to members of the airlines \$9 fare club, those who had signed-up for the airlines daily promotional email or posted on the airlines web pages. Examples of ads with taboo content include “Bang Buck”, “The Weiner Sale”, “Improve your Travel Performance”, “No Smoking Sign is Off (in Colorado)”, “Go South”, “Check out the Oil on our Beaches”, “Many Islands Low Fair– MILF”, “MUFF Diving Destinations” and more. After exposure to the advertisements, respondents completed the remainder of the survey including scales assessing emotions and attitudes resulting from exposure to the ads. Between the survey and the presentation of the ads the task took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Examining the demographics of the respondents, 123 (47%) were male and 138 (53%) were female. Other demographic variables collected are presented below:

Income	Frequency	Percent of Respondents
\$0 – 24,999	39	15.5
\$25,000 – 49,999	39	15.5
\$50,000 – 74,000	52	20.6
\$75,000 – 99,000	39	15.5
Over \$100,000	83	32.9

Table 1:Incomes

As the students were asked to reflect the income range known from their family lifestyle and the respondents included non-students from a local community women’s service group, the number reported at over \$100,000 is not unexpected. The addition of the non-students into the respondent sample also accounts for the range of ages seen below.

Age	Frequency	Percent of Respondents
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18-24	174	66.9
25-34	56	21.5
35-44	15	5.8
45 & Older	15	5.8

Table 2: Ages

As this note focuses on the issue of taboo in advertising, selected items from the series of scales developed by Burke and Edell (1987) are used to get a response to the taboo aspects of the Spirit ads used as the treatment. The items selected for analysis came from the literature on taboo and reflect the respondents negative and evaluative feelings towards the Spirit ads seen. The items are scored on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being Very Strong to 5 Not At All. The table displays the negative evaluative items with mean score by gender and the F score and significance found when examining the item using the Means function in SPSS.

Item	Female Mean	Male Mean	F	Sig.
Disgusted	2.64	3.68	44.012	.000
Offended	2.84	3.84	37.505	.000
Sad	4.04	4.27	2.69	.105
Irritatng	2.98	3.64	15.802	.000
Terrible	2.73	3.27	9.870	.002
Worth Remembering	3.85	3.25	14.063	.000
Humorous	2.77	2.30	7.934	.005

Table 3:Female Means

Except for the item Sad, all the items are found to be significant and in the direction expected. The female respondents consistently scores are lower, reflecting stronger negative and evaluative feelings towards the Spirit ads. There is only one item above were the men’s mean score is lower, reflecting a stronger belief that the ads were more humorous to men than to females.

To investigate whether the taboo content impacts the intent to purchase to items purchase two items were asked about future behavior. The scale for the items was on a 1- Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree scale.

Item	Female Mean	Male mean	F	Sig
I am likely to consider flying Spirit Airlines the next time I fly	2.05	2.40	5.235	.023
I am likely to visit the Spirit Airlines website to purchase a ticket	2.03	2.39	5.560	.019

Table 4:Items

The results are in the direction expected and are significant. While for both males and females the mean scores are not high, still for females the scores are lower, demonstrating a lower purchase intention.

For a measure of the impact of the ads on the respondents and their attitudes toward the ads, two questions were asked. The scale for the items was on a 1- Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree scale.

Item	Female Mean	Male Mean	F	sig
I liked the Spirit Airlines message	2.12	2.72	16.767	.000
I found the Spirit Airlines message appealing	2.08	2.71	19.458	.000

Table 5:Items Contd.

The results here are in the direction expected and are significant. For the females in the sample the scores are noticeably different than the males and a negative attitude towards the ads is found.

Implications

The results presented in literature review from past taboo studies and the results of this exploratory examination of the data support the hypothesis that women negatively perceive sexually oriented taboo advertisements. Since the ads for this study were collected, Spirit has changed their branding and advertising significantly (Kurtz, 2016). While still at times harking back to the past, as the airlines base fare is branded the “bare fare”, the continuous use of sexual innuendoes and sexual imagery has been discontinued. One possible explanation for this can be seen in the role that women are now playing in the decision process when airline selection occurs. In an airline segmentation study produced by *pwc consulting* (2013), nine identifiable airline consumer segments are named. Out of the nine segments, four are female. The table below presents a few of the highlights of the segments.

pwc Consulting - Female Dominated Customer Traveler Segments

Segment Name	Passenger Type	# Of Trips (RT)	Annual Travel \$ Spent	Research	Discourages After Bad Experience %
Efficiency Erin	Business Elite	28	\$12 to \$48K	Tablet laptop	52%
Deal-seeking Debbi	Business price-sensitive	8	\$1 to \$6K	Smartphone laptop	49%
Vacation Vicki	Leisure experience-seeking	2 to 3	<\$1K	Smartphone tablet	49%
Practical Polly	Leisure price-sensitive	4 to 5	\$1 to \$5K	Smartphone tablet	56%

Table 6:Segment Names

Of the segments named in the table, most airline analysts would agree that an ULCC airline does not target Efficiency Erin, due to the wanting of elite status. The other segments named, Deal-Seeking Debbie, Vacation Vicki and Practical Polly would very much be within the customer groups the airline is trying to attract. If running ads that possibly have the effect of alienating a large portion of the possible customer base, who are recognized as being the decision maker for a large portion of leisure travel, the airline will begin to feel the results.

Additionally, during the period of the early 2010s as the notoriety of the Spirit ads had increased (Nicas, 2012) and were being constantly critique and criticized on blogs (EX: <https://jezebel.com/spirit-airlines-advertises-discounts-with-overt-pussy-j-1506895035>) the airline also had to deal with a spate of articles that noted its problems with complaints. Mr. Baldanza said that the carrier needed to just do a better job of the explaining the business and operational model of the airline and that would ease the public situation the carrier faced (Wittkowski, 2014). However, the ownership of the airline had heard enough, and on January 5, 2016, Mr Baldanza resigned his position and a new CEO was appointed (Carey, 2016). With the change in leadership, there quickly appeared a change in tone of the ads.

Conclusion

In the area of taboo themes and execution there exists much research opportunity (Larsen, et al; 2017). The difficulties faced are that the nature of the topics may stop researchers from investigating. Additionally, due to the topics, getting respondents to engage and drop their personal barriers can be difficult. While only an anecdotal occurrence, the researchers noticed as conducting the study across different groups various reactions occurred. In mixed gender settings, when the room had both male and female students, while the male students would laugh aloud at some of the ads, the female students would look slightly bemused. When the survey administration occurred in an all-female setting, whether students or members of the

service club who participated, the visible reactions were quite different and one could see the negative reactions of the women. The use of personal interviews and video follow-up is noted by Larsen, et al (2017) as one of the means of getting beyond the barriers that may exist in fully developing the taboo research findings and the researchers now can only wish they had the opportunity to follow-up on the interactions seen.

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