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## Taboos and advertising communication in Tunisia: when socio-cultural limits are crossed

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### Abstract

The advertising image obeys a limited framework: the format of the poster or the frame of the advert. Paradoxically, however, it is this relatively small boundary itself that makes the poster or advert a place of escape rather than confinement. It encourages a journey beyond the confines of space and time, because it is centrifugal rather than closed.

In an increasingly competitive environment, this advertising image must attract the consumer's attention (Campbell, 1995; Pieters et alii, 2002). There are several possible ways of achieving this objective. One of these is to portray taboos and play on the concept of provocation. Crossing sociocultural boundaries and breaking

taboos is a genuine advertising strategy.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural limits, taboos, advertising discourse, implicit message

### \* Introduction: Boundaries and taboos

Boundary and taboo are two closely related concepts. A taboo is defined as a boundary establishing what is or is not acceptable because of cultural or religious beliefs. It is a form of boundary that regulates the behaviour of individuals in a given socio-cultural context.

However, we know that the term "limit" has its Latin etymon "limes-limitis", which refers to a "line that separates two contiguous lands or territories". But doesn't this boundary,

edge or limit imply, in addition to the idea of 'end', that of beginning? Isn't it true that the word 'limitrophe' encompasses the sense of 'end' and 'beginning' at the same time?

In fact, the border does not always imply a kind of stop or brake, because denotation is not indissociable from connotation. This is how what is perceived in an advertising image generates an imaginary discourse through a spiritual interplay of representations from a number of angles: cultural, philosophical, semantic, sociological, etc. In this sense, the advertising image, like any image for that matter, constitutes a space of representations where the traps designed to catch the unconscious multiply with the number of 'unspoken' by the explicit image. If it weren't for the implicit, if it weren't for the 'unhooking' by means of a certain allusion in the gesture, in the line, in the structures used, in the shape, in the colours and values, etc., if it weren't for these techniques which allow taboos to be sidestepped, the creativity of the Tunisian advertiser would be limited because it would come up against our traditions, our customs and our culture in general.

Borders, of course, but only for the "here and there", because the "elsewhere" is not necessarily governed by the "here". What is tolerated in one society may be prohibited "elsewhere".

In this context, we propose to look at how the Nana brand of sanitary protection has helped to break down the taboos associated with menstruation through advertising based on new socio-cultural codes.

How are taboos defined? How has Nana crossed established socio-cultural boundaries and contributed to a paradigm shift in the advertising discourse around sanitary protection? What is the role of the implicit advertising message when dealing with a sensitive subject?

#### **\* Taboos and the advertising message**

##### **\* Definition of a taboo**

The concept of taboo has been the subject of an abundant literature, especially in anthropology, sociology and psychology, which has enabled us to gain a better understanding of it.

The term taboo comes from the Polynesian word "tabu", which means "sacred"<sup>1</sup>. According to the various definitions in the literature, the concept of taboo is associated with the concept

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2002

of the forbidden and prohibition. According to the anthropologist Webster<sup>2</sup>, the taboo is essentially behavioural. It prevents the performance of a specific behaviour. This definition of taboo was enriched by the sociologist Walter Tony<sup>3</sup>, who attributed to it a conversational character that tends to restrict the freedom to talk about certain subjects for "social, moral or religious reasons".

The sacred dimension of taboo has also been raised by sociologists and anthropologists. For some anthropologists, such as Bergson (1932), taboo is sacred and religious in nature, while for others, such as Frazer (1911), there is no difference between the sacred and the profane when it comes to this concept. As for sociologists, such as Durkheim (1915), a distinction has been drawn between sacred taboos and magical taboos, i.e., those associated with men.

The social dimension of the taboo was put forward by Cazaneuve. According to him, it is a "prohibition that cannot be justified rationally, but which is the rule in a given social group"<sup>4</sup>. For Freud, and according to his psychoanalytical approach, the taboo represents a culturally and historically situated prohibition. It is a "cultural production"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, an object is defined as a taboo in relation to the society in which it exists. It may not be so in another.

If we refer to the work of Sabri et al (2010), we can have a definition of the taboo that is global, integrating several aspects of this concept and reflecting its complexity: "the taboo is a cultural production, of a sacred (religious) or magical (profane) nature, which enacts behavioural and/or conversational prohibitions, associated in the individual with an affective ambivalence, and whose transgression is likely to provoke sanctions because

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<sup>2</sup> Hutton WEBSTER, *LE TABOU ÉTUDE SOCIOLOGIQUE*, Traduction de Jacques Marty, version numérique

<sup>3</sup> WALTER Tony, *Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?* 1991, in [\[https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038591025002009\]](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038591025002009), consulté le 26 Mai 2019.

<sup>4</sup> CAZANEUVE Jean, *Sociologie du rite*, Paris, P.U.F., 1971, p.47

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Totem et Tabou*, 1912, traduit en 1923, édition numérique in [\[http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/freud\\_sigmund\\_2/totem\\_tabou/totem\\_tabou.html\]](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/freud_sigmund_2/totem_tabou/totem_tabou.html), consulté le 01, Aout 2018, p179

of the contagious nature of the taboo". Sabri et al acknowledge the existence of universal taboos (incest, cannibalism and murder). They recognise the cultural dimension of taboo and affirm, like Freud, that it is a cultural production dictating behavioural or conversational prohibitions. This prohibition is historically rooted. As a result, taboos can be created or destroyed (Wilson and West, 1995). These researchers also emphasise the contagious nature of taboos, drawing on the work of anthropologists such as Frazer (1911). Indeed, any person (or object) who comes into contact with a tabooed person (or object) is in turn immediately tabooed.

**\* The taboo and the advertising message: the case of the Nana Tunisie 2022 campaign**

Despite their forbidden nature, taboos are very present in society. They are frequent in advertising and

sometimes provoke demonstrations or acts of vandalism, as in the case of *H&M*<sup>6</sup> following an advertising campaign deemed racist. There has been an increase in the number of advertisements that transgress taboos such as sexuality, death, nudity and so on. This practice used to be restricted to the luxury and fashion industries<sup>7</sup> (Vézina and Paul, 1997). However, the practice continues to spread to other types of products.

Advertising professionals are particularly interested in the concept of the taboo because of its provocative nature. According to Vezina and Paul (1997), provocation is defined as "the deliberate use of stimuli intended to shock at least part of the audience, both because they are associated with norms, values or taboos not usually transgressed in advertising, or because they are distinctive or ambiguous". We therefore note the presence of certain subjects such as nudity, sexuality,

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<sup>6</sup> On 7 January 2018, the H&M brand provoked the anger of several customers around the world over an advertisement showing a black child wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the slogan "Coolest monkey" in the jungle.

<sup>7</sup>In the early 90s, the Benetton brand used taboo themes in its advertising campaigns. campaigns.

Photographer Oliviero Toscani, its creative director, launched these provocative campaigns on subjects such as civil wars in Africa, Aids, sexuality in a religious environment and racism. This brand was followed by others such as Dior, Yves Saint Laurent and Gucci.

death and religion in advertising campaigns.

In Tunisia, these subjects are considered highly sensitive. Their explicit or suggestive representation in advertising is often banned, censored or criticised. Indeed, advertising in Tunisia is subject to strict rules that prohibit the display of certain themes considered inappropriate. Advertisers must therefore be careful about the images they choose. They must be in keeping with the values and cultural norms of Tunisian society.

In this context, we can cite the example of the advertising campaign for the "Nana" brand of sanitary protection, which was launched in Tunisia in 2021 and caused controversy for having depicted women in swimming costumes, which does not respect Tunisian cultural norms. As a result, the brand withdrew its advertising and apologised to its target audience for violating its cultural and religious norms. This controversy highlights the sensitivity of the representation of nudity in advertising in Tunisia.

This is not the first time that the Nana brand of feminine hygiene products has caused controversy in Tunisia or elsewhere. In 2021, it launched an international advertising campaign called "Vive la vulve" (Long

live the vulva), which dealt with a sensitive subject that had until then been taboo: women's menstruation.

The campaign includes TV ads, posters and digital media on social networks. Its aim is to "break" taboos about women's sexual health and encourage women to accept their bodies, and more specifically their vulvas.

However, in Tunisia, this campaign is reserved for social networks, given the conservative nature of the Tunisian target audience. Indeed, the image of menstrual blood remains shocking and unacceptable on television. Advertisers have therefore opted for digital media, given that Tunisians are increasingly connected and open to the world.



Figure1: extracts from Nana Tunisia's digital campaign

Many cultures, including Tunisia, consider menstruation to be a taboo subject. However, advertising for sanitary protection brands has made great strides over the years. As in Nana's case, they are now able to tackle the subject more openly.

Advertising about menstruation comes up against a taboo, a social and cultural ban. The phenomenon is shrouded in negative notions associated with secrecy, silence, constraint, secrecy, shame, dirtiness, disgust and so on. If we look back at the origin of the terms used to describe rules, we realise that until the 16th century they were known as *catimini*. Coming from the Greek *Katamênia*, this word means "each month". However, over the years, the word slipped into meaning "in secret". Moreover, menstruation is avoided both by being named and by being seen in the social arena. Menstruation is associated with impurity in religions. In the Koran, for example, women are forbidden to pray; in Buddhism, they are forbidden to enter temples; in the Bible, it says "Thou shalt not touch an unclean woman". For all these reasons, brands of sanitary protection have developed an advertising campaign aimed at menstruating women that neither tells nor shows menstruation. Nana offers a different take on the

advertising discourse associated with menstruation and women's health around the world. In Tunisia, Nana's digital campaign addresses this biological phenomenon as a normal, non-taboo subject. The brand depicts the pain associated with this phenomenon through a variety of illustrations, displaying blood, talking about endometriosis and conjugality, and so on.



**Figure 2: Some of the topics discussed on the Nana brand's social networks**

This feminist discourse goes beyond the limits imposed by the cultural codes of Tunisian society. It breaks down the taboos associated with menstruation and gives a new representation of it, where it is exposed as it is really experienced. It's a paradigm shift that frees the

advertising discourse on menstruation and women's bodies from the constraints imposed by society.

In effect, by starting with a discourse on menstruation, Nana aims to disseminate another discourse on the liberation of women's bodies by staging the reality of menstruation and broadening the constraints associated with existing taboos. In Tunisia, this campaign represents a revolution and a radical moral and cultural change. This brand has redefined the boundaries around menstruation and sanitary protection.

It should be noted that advertisers must respect the socio-cultural norms of their target audience. Menstruation and the discourse surrounding it are a sensitive subject in Tunisia. So, it's important to think carefully about how to approach the subject so as to be in harmony with local norms when creating advertising campaigns.

**\* Limits and overstepping them: the implicit advertising message**

Nana chose to launch its campaign on social networks in Tunisia as a communication channel. Social networks are a way for internet users to connect with each other. With the arrival of Web 2.0, these tools have undergone a major revolution, enabling direct dialogue, facilitating

contact and providing access to free services. This brand has avoided the traditional media (TV and radio), whereas in European countries it has broadcast an advertising spot on TV channels during this campaign. This makes it possible to reach potential consumers in a flexible and personal way so as not to provoke indignation.

Added to this is the general use of animations and illustrations. This also tends to lessen the negative emotional impact of the taboo. This stylised form of representation tackles the subject in a more symbolic way, making the message more acceptable to the target audience. Indeed, real images can be considered offensive and "indecent" for the local culture. Illustrations also help to represent emotions in a more visual and metaphorical way and to stage situations that may be difficult to film, such as the inside of the womb. They also help to represent abstract concepts in a clear and memorable way.

Finally, it's an original way of giving the brand a stylish and unique image. It has a distinctive visual aesthetic that stands out from the competition. Menstruation is staged in a creative way. By going beyond the sociocultural limits imposed, Nana has helped to break down existing taboos about menstruation and women's

sexual health. In this way, she plays an educational role in tackling sensitive and important subjects.

Advertisers have long been aware of the opportunity to break certain taboos in an advertising image, and have no intention of letting go of this manna which has a definite impact on consumer behaviour as long as it is possible to do so through the phenomenon of connotation. Moreover, this phenomenon does not seem to affect advertising alone, but seems to spill over into all areas of mass communication. Barthes states in this regard that "when we read our newspaper, when we go to the cinema, when we watch television and listen to the radio, when we glance at the packaging of the product we are buying, it is almost certain that we only ever receive and perceive connoted messages"<sup>8</sup>.

Sometimes the object of discourse, sometimes the subject of discourse, the advertising image is the space most conducive to taboo elements in Tunisian culture, because it uses the 'visible' and the 'hidden' in a game of opacity permeable to all the secondary meanings that are almost automatically grafted onto the main

meaning. Isn't it true that the more incomplete an image, the more open it is to interpretation? When awareness is lacking, missed actions take over! In this sense, the advertising image, like any other image, constitutes a space of representations where the traps designed to catch the unconscious multiply with the number of 'unspoken' by the explicit image.

In the field of advertising, the phenomenon of connotation, or 'unhooking' as Roland Barthes called it, is of vital importance, not only because it forms the very basis of the advertising intention, but also because it comes to the rescue of the creative in any representation that has to do with the field of taboos, and above all the field of sex and sexuality. We all know that menstruation is a taboo subject in Tunisia, and its depiction in an advertising spot or poster comes up against all kinds of prohibitions. If it weren't for the implicit, if it weren't for the 'unhooking' through a certain allusion in the gesture, in the line, in the shapes, in the colours and in the values (if it weren't for these techniques that make it possible to sidestep sexual taboos, this area would be out of reach for the Tunisian

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<sup>8</sup> BARTHES Roland, *L'aventure sémiologique, le message publicitaire*

advertising creative because our traditions, our morals and our culture in general forbid it. With this in mind, Nana Tunisie has opted for a digital campaign based on animation, illustrations and metaphor.



**Figure 3: Using metaphor to avoid taboos**  
 The commercial motivation is thus supported by arguments that touch the consumer personally and introduce them to a dream world that contrasts with the harsh reality of the world.

Barthes believes that the connotative language of advertising serves to offer buyers a dream. It is therefore clear that it is the denoted message, which acts as the signifier of the advertising signified, that is responsible for conveying the human dimension of advertising. The language of advertising in the image of the same name is conveyed by word and image, always with the same goal in mind: to achieve that great liberation of images that is the hallmark of poetry, and which cannot be achieved without the help of rhetorical figures, metaphors, wordplay - in short, all the "double" signs that have the power to evoke latent signifieds that themselves refer back to the great dreamlike themes of humanity.

### \* Conclusion

Thanks to the advertising campaigns of Nana and other hygienic protection brands such as Always and Kotex, there has been a paradigm shift in the advertising discourse relating to menstruation. For a long time, advertising portrayed menstruation as a socio-cultural taboo. Filled with negative judgement, discretion, shame, taboos and censorship, the way in which this biological phenomenon is viewed is the result of a socio-cultural heritage that prohibits any depiction of menstruation in advertising. The new

discourse promoted by Nana in Tunisia frees women and erases the limits that used to surround them. Her advertising campaigns have become a place for opening up and destroying the constraints on women's bodies. It's a militant discourse bringing new codes.

Daring to break taboos, as Nana has done, raises more global issues such as women's physicality and, more specifically, the liberation of women's bodies. This tends to radically change the way society in general looks at women.

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