

Digital natives women, a new target for provocative advertising ?

Abstract: This work investigates the effect of provocative ads, via individual taboo perception and via perceived shock in others, on the effectiveness of an advertisement among young people. We mobilized a sample of 97 people belonging to the generation of digital natives, very exposed to shocking images and others' opinions on the Internet. We manipulate ad execution (provocative or not) and product category (product or cause). Respondents were interrogated through an online questionnaire on 6 randomly distributed real ad stimuli. For each product category: one provocative female and one provocative male model, pre-tested as taboo, and one non-provocative ad. We test whether ad execution (provocative or not) is a predictor of ad effectiveness, both directly and indirectly via (1) self-reported taboo perception and (2) perceived shock in others. We test the moderating effects of (1) the product category and (2) the respondent's gender on these relationships. Digital natives appear unfavorable to provocation, Provocative execution reduces ad effectiveness, measured here by the attitude towards the ad, towards the brand/association and the purchase/donation intention. Results show that ad execution has an impact on ad effectiveness, even among digital natives, via the individual perception of the taboo and via the perception of the shock in others. The product category moderates the direct effect of the execution, the effect of the individual taboo perception and of the perceived shock in others on effectiveness. Provocative product-related ads are considered more shocking to others and appear less effective. Women perceive the level of taboo more and consider more that others would be shocked but this does not translate into lower ad effectiveness. In fact, provocative cause-related ads have a significantly better ad effectiveness among women.

Key-words : “Provocative Advertising”, “Digital Natives”, “Advertising Effectiveness”, “Gender”, “Taboo”.

Introduction

Vezina and Paul (1997) define provocative ad as: "*a deliberate appeal, within the content of an advertisement, to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience, both because they are associated with values, norms or taboos that are habitually not challenged or transgressed in ad, and because of their distinctiveness and ambiguity.*" (p.179). Provocative ad is not a recent phenomenon, it's already been the focus of many research across years (Dahl & al., 2003; De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996; Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006; Parry & al., 2013), but the competition for the attention of consumers in ads is as or more intense nowadays, so it's still very common strategy. In 2022, Calvin Klein has made Instagrammers react with an ad showing a pregnant trans man embraced by his girlfriend. Camaïeu added photos of women with bruises on the face in the product descriptions of its online sales platform, to make known 3919 listening platform (violence against women). Controversial and taboo appeals are a common practice in viral ad (Sabri, 2017) and provocative content in viral ad could influence audience "*to pass along the content to others*" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; p.29).

This research is based on two statements: on the one hand, digital natives have accessed the internet from an early age (Gallardo-Echenique & al., 2015), thus have been particularly exposed to shocking images (Porter & Golan, 2006), which could have accustomed them to the breaking of taboos in ads (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). Moreover, they are particularly targeted (Putrevu, 2008; Reichert, 2003). On the other hand, they have also been very exposed to others' opinions with the web 2.0 (Helsper and Eynon, 2010). So, we wonder whether the ad execution (provocative / non provocative) via the individual taboo perception and the perceived shock in others, could have an impact on individual affective (attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand) and conative attitudes (intention to buy/donate), grouped here as: ad effectiveness. This research is therefore interested in the ad effectiveness of provocation among digital natives. More precisely, we test if the ad execution (provocative/non-provocative) mediated by (1) the individual perception of the taboo and by (2) the perception of the shock in others have an impact on the ad effectiveness. We test whether the use of provocative ad increases young people's individual taboo perception and their perceived shock in others, and whether these affect the ad effectiveness. We check whether the product category (cause/product) and the gender of the respondent (man/woman) moderate these relationships.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Several research deal with provocative advertisements, also called shocking, controversial, transgressive, offensive, or taboo ads (see Lee & al., 2020; Sabri & al., 2010), using sexual/erotic, death/fear appeals (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006), or more generally "*provocative images, words or situations that utilise or refer to taboo subjects or that violate societal norms or values*" (Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008; p.294). It is accepted that the use of provocation allows to capture the attention of consumers and favours recognition and recall (Dahl et al., 2003; Vezina & Paul, 1997; Wirtz & al., 2018). Myers and co-authors (2020) found, with eyes tracking datas, that "*as taboo increases, the product image and logo elicit greater attention and faster initial fixation*" (p. 184). These considerable advantages, given the current ad space, make this strategy very attractive for managers, hence its increase for all types of products and industries (Arnaud & al., 2018). Despite the theoretical and managerial importance, the most recent studies on ad provocation reveal that the results regarding the effectiveness of these advertisements remain "mixed" (Arnaud & al.,

2018) and “inconclusive” (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021), so far the academic world has not reached a consensus on the impact of a provocative ad (Myers & al., 2020) and debate is still open (Kadić-Maglajlić & al., 2017). Taboo perception, consumers’ attitudes and intentions seem to depend on many different contextual factors both internal to the consumer (gender, age, involvement...) and external to the consumer (product-category, humour, congruence...) (Brown & al., 2010; Christy & Haley, 2008; Dahl & al., 2010; Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006; Prendergast & Hwa, 2003; Putrevu, 2008; Sabri, 2012b; Vezina & Paul, 1997). More recently, studies shown that psychological and social distance (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018, 2022) same/opposite gender effects with ad’s model (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021; Wirtz & al., 2018) general belief of controversial ad and emotions (Arnaud & al., 2018) congruence, familiarity and disgust (Lee & al., 2020) could have an impact on consumer’s responses and, thus on ad effectiveness. These works do not directly address digital natives. Though, age differences have been the purpose of several studies, young people are considered less offended to ad provocation for both nudity and unnecessary fear (Prendergast & Hwa, 2003). They are seen as more accustomed to violence and sex (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006), more ambivalent towards taboos (Sabri et al., 2010) and showing more positive reactions to provocative strategies (Vezina & Paul, 1997). They are more positive than their elders, but do they still perceive the controversy? Is the advertising effectiveness still unfavorable? Understanding the effects of provocative ad execution on youth is crucial since they are the primary target (Putrevu, 2008; Reichert, 2003).

This work will address digital natives (also called Generation Y, Millennials, Net generation...) who, according to most of the authors, were born since the beginning of the 80s (for a review, see Gallardo-Echenique & al., 2015). Helsper and Eynon (2010) noted that the rise of Web 2.0 could have created a second generation, born from 1990 onwards, differing from the first one by their familiarity and their immersion in the 2.0 digital world. They grew up during the development of the documentary Web and during the birth of the social Web. Social media allows individuals, associations, and businesses to create, publish, share, and interact with content online. All content they want to. Porter and Golan (2006) said that “*The “anything goes” environment of the World Wide Web” appears to encourage viral advertisers to create violent and sexually charged content*” (p.36), at the same time, the digital natives were growing up. Digital natives have been particularly present and active on social networks for a long time. With 75% of teens using social networks in the 2000s and over 93% in 2009 (Lenhart & al., 2010), digital natives' youth have been highly connected. Hanan, Moulins and Portes (2020) reported that provocation provokes strong reactions on social networks, which can either create positive word-of-mouth and therefore consumer ambassadors or conversely provoke boycotts. Prendergast and Hwa (2003) found that controversial ads are less tolerated online than in other traditional media. Media with a large audience would generate (e.g. internet) higher levels of offence (Christy & Haley, 2008). Results are uncertain, Sabri (2017) found no difference in brand attitude for purchase intention between taboo ads shown online or in print, moreover she found a reduction in the level of perceived taboo for online ones.

Moreover, provocative ad relies on the shock resulting from a deliberate norm violation to capture attention (Dahl & al., 2009). Questions remain, particularly regarding the relationship between the social norm and individuals' emotions and attitudes (Arnaud & al., 2018; Sabri, 2012a). Sabri and Obermiller (2012) found that the violation of taboos in ads triggers social normative pressure that reduces purchase intent. But provocative ads have been insufficiently explained by norm violation (Lee & al., 2020). To our knowledge, no study has examined the effect of perceived shock in others in consumer’s responses following exposure to provocative ad. Yet, others’ opinion is particularly relevant in the case of digital natives, which have pre-disposition towards public life (Velasco, 2020), since they are portrayed as focused on social interaction and connectivity (Gallardo-Echenique & al., 2015).

RQ1. We test whether provocative ads increase individual perception of taboo (Mediator 1, called M1), others' shock perception (Mediator 2, called M2) and reduce ad effectiveness even among digital natives. Then, if there is a mediating effect of the M1 and of M2 on ad execution-effectiveness relationship (see Models with relationship hypotheses in Appendix 1).

Category. Among offensive ads, Barnes and Dotson (1990) distinguish two dimensions: the offensive product, also called "unmentionable" (Wilson & West, 1981), and the provocative execution: the advertisement is considered as offensive because of the themes and creative execution, not because of the product. We will focus on this second category: provocative execution. Several research deal with provocative ad and taboo stimuli for non-taboo products, topics or practices (clothes, perfume,...) (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018) we will call them "product-related". Then, there are ads whose strategy is to provoke but with the aim of raising awareness (road safety, AIDS, smoking...) (e.g., Wilson & West, 1992), we will call them "cause-related". Comparing the use of mildly erotic vs. nonerotic stimuli on attitudes, Pope, Voges and Brown (2004) found better attitudes for cause-appeals than for ads promoting standard consumer product. Parry and co-authors (2013) and Nam, Iyes and Frith (2015) also indicate that a provocative ad coming from Non For Profit organization or defending a social cause will produce more favorable attitudes.

RQ2. Are provocative cause-related ads perceived as less taboo? Do they lead to a better ad effectiveness than product-related ads? We check whether the category has a moderating effect on: the impact of ad execution on M1, on M2 and on ad effectiveness, then on the impact of M1 and M2 on ad effectiveness.

Respondent's Gender. Despite some contradictory results often explained by moderators such as fit (Putrevu, 2008) or intensity (Wyllie & al., 2015), women are generally considered an inappropriate target for the use of provocative stimuli (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006), particularly in sexual appeals, (Wirtz & al., 2018). Sengupta and Dahl (2008) detected, under constrained processing, that men preferred explicitly sexual ads while women showed more negative attitudes towards them.

RQ3. Do digital natives women consider provocative ads tabooer and think more than others will be shocked than men? Does provocation provoke a better ad effectiveness in men? We check if gender has a moderating effect on : the impact of ad execution on M1, on M2 and on ad effectiveness, and on the impact of M1 and M2 on ad effectiveness.

Method

Dissemination procedure & sample. Respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis from the University's database of students and Alumni. We informed them, at the beginning of the questionnaire, of the potentially shocking aspect of the images they were going to view, of the anonymity of the answers as well as of the possibility to withdraw from the survey at any time. Several waves of the online questionnaire were conducted, with randomized distribution of 4, 5 or 6 stimuli, due to response time and questions redundancy. There were a total of 484 observations from 97 respondents. The sample was composed of 54 women and 43 men. All of the respondents are French and (born between 1990 and 2002) belong to the second generation of digital natives (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). The majority of respondents are students, 51 in initial training and 38 in continuing education, the other respondents are full time employees (3) or managers (5).

Pre-test & Stimuli. Prior to data collection, 69 respondents (from the same generation) rated the level of perceived taboo of 27 randomly distributed ads including three control ones.

Among ads perceived as tabooer, we selected two ads (male/female model) promoting or defending the same product or cause. There is no significant difference between the male and female models. So, all stimuli are real ads and we manipulate the ad execution and the product category. For each category (male perfume and animal abuse in the textile industry), two are pre-tested as taboo, one of them shows a female model and the other a male model, to avoid a bias due to a same/opposite gender effect as already identified (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021), finally the last ad of each category is a non-provocative ad.

Measurements instruments. All measures are 6-point Likert scales with no neutral response (1: Strongly Disagree; 6: Strongly Agree). We measure the individual perception of taboo via a single item as in other studies investigating the controversial aspect of advertisements (Kadić-Maglajlić & al., 2017). We check the level of taboo perceived by the individual via the item "This advertisement is taboo for me" (Sabri-Zaaraoui, 2007). Complementarily, recent work indicates that young people consider that for them "nothing is taboo" but that, for others, it is shocking (Destoumieux & al., 2021). Therefore, we ask respondents to rate whether "some people would find this ad shocking." We measure ad effectiveness, in the sense of Lavidge and Steiner (1961) via attitude towards the ad (Ranganathan & Henley, 2008), attitude towards the brand (Spears & Singh, 2004) - "association" for cause-related ads - and purchase intention (Dodds & al., 1991), operationalized by the behavioral intention to give (Coyle & Thorson, 2001) for cause-related ads. Given the large number of stimuli and dependent variables, we selected two items with extremely high reliability coefficients in the scales to avoid a maturation bias and/or discouragement caused by fatigue (Cook & Campbell, 1979). A reliability analysis with the Spearman-Brown coefficient was conducted for our two-items scale (Eisinga & al., 2013), results are satisfying (Aad = 0.910; Ab = 0.863; Pi = 0.801). We create a new variable "Ad Effectiveness", this measure (six items) results from the averaging of attitudes towards the ad, the brand and purchase intention ($\alpha=0.865$). Complementarily, we check the correct perception of the ad execution (provocative or not) via the perceived controversial aspect of the advertisement (Kadić-Maglajlić & al., 2017; Chen & Berger, 2013) Manipulation check was significant (Mnonprov = 2.43; Mprov = 5.13 $t=-22.910$; $p<0.001$). We control for knowledge, prior to collection, of the brand and the advertisement, consumption of the product sold (perfume) or implicated (fur/wool) and sensitivity to the product or the cause.

Results

We check the effect of the ad execution (provocative or not) on ad effectiveness (Aad, Ab, Pi), via the individual taboo perception (model 1) and via the others' shock perception (model 2). We question the moderating effect of product category and respondent gender.

In a first step, we verified, for the ad execution-effectiveness relationship, the simple mediation effects of the individual perception of taboo and of the perceived shock in others, using Hayes' Process Model 4, with 5000 Bootstrap resamples. Results confirm that ad execution significantly affects ad effectiveness (direct effect= -0.4427; $t= -3.8748$; $p<.0001$; 95%CI= - 0.6672, - 0.2182) and via individual taboo perception (indirect effect= -0.3078; 95%CI= -0.4265, -0.1926). **H1a, H1b and H2 are supported**. When we indicate the perception of others as a mediator, we lose the direct effect (direct effect= -0.3164; $t=-1.7862$; $p= 0.0747$; 95%CI= -0.6644, 0.0317), **H5b is thus rejected**, but ad execution does indirectly affect the effectiveness according to the perceived shock in others (indirect effect= -0.4341; 95%CI = -0.7513, -0.1329) allowing us **to accept H5a and H6**. As predicted, provocative stimuli elicit greater individual taboo perception (Mprov= 3.01; Mnonprov= 1.59; $t= -12.959$;

$p < .001$), greater perceived shock in others ($M_{\text{prov}} = 5.23$; $M_{\text{nonprov}} = 2.16$; $t = -23.943$; $p < .001$), and lower ad effectiveness ($M_{\text{prov}} = 2.98$; $M_{\text{nonprov}} = 3.73$; $t = 6.906$; $p < .001$).

In a second step, we tested whether the two potential moderators, product category and respondent's gender, affect the mediations tested previously. We conducted a series of full moderated mediation with two Hayes' Process Model 76 with 5000 bootstrap resamples (see Appendix 2). **Category** (cause/product) did not moderate, although close to, the effect of ad execution on the individual level of perceived taboo ($B = -0.6211$, $t = 1.8674$; $p = 0.0625$; $CI = -1.2747, 0.0324$) (**H3a refused**), the execution-category interaction affects the perceived shock in others ($B = -1.3955$; $t = -5.8253$; $p < 0.001$; $CI = -1.8662, -0.9248$), we **accept H7a**. Respondents believe that others would be more shocked for provocative product-oriented ads. The interaction between execution and category has a significant effect on ad effectiveness **supporting both H3b and H7b**. Provocative cause-oriented ads reveal better ad effectiveness ($M_{\text{product}} = 2.84$; $M_{\text{cause}} = 3.11$; $t = -2.567$; $p = 0.011$). On the other hand, product category moderates the relationship between individual perception of taboo and ad effectiveness ($B = -0.1630$; $t = 2.4299$; $p = 0.055$; $CI = -0.2949, -0.0312$) and relationship between perceived shock in others and ad effectiveness ($B = -0.2130$; $t = -2.2563$; $p = 0.0245$; $CI = -0.3984, -0.0275$), **H3c and H7c are supported**. **As expecting for H4a & H8a**, there is an interaction between the ad execution and the gender of the respondent resulting in different levels of individual taboo perception ($B = 6.6159$; $t = 2.1447$; $p = 0.0325$; $CI = 0.0516, 1.1801$) and on perceived shock in others ($B = 0.7881$; $t = 3.8104$; $p < 0.001$; $CI = .3817; 1.1945$). It turns out that, as suggested by the literature, women perceive more taboo ($M_{\text{men}} = 2.79$; $M_{\text{women}} = 3.20$; $t = -2.653$; $p = 0.008$). We find that they also perceive the ads as more shocking to others ($M_{\text{men}} = 5.13$; $M_{\text{women}} = 5.32$; $t = -2.105$; $p = 0.036$). In the context of provocative ads, respondent gender was not a moderator of ad effectiveness ($M_{\text{men}} = 2.91$; $M_{\text{women}} = 3.02$; $t = 0.318$). In fact, the gender of the respondent does not impact either the direct ad execution-effectiveness relationship or the effect of mediators on ad effectiveness, all confidence intervals contain 0, resulting in the **rejection of H4b, H4c, H8b, H8c**.

Discussion

This research contributes to existing understandings of taboo themes and provocative advertising with a particular focus on young people, digital natives. They have had access to the internet since a very young age (Gallardo-Echenique & al., 2015) and are the target of provocative ads (Putrevu, 2008). The omnipresence of shocking images on the web (Porter and Golan, 2006), as well as in movies (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006) could have accustomed digital natives. Moreover, rather than simply checking their individual perception of the level of taboo in the ad, we also measure and verify the mediating effect of the perceived shock in others. We thus questioned the effect of perceived shock in others to verify whether, like the perception of taboo for oneself, the perceived shock in others is a mediator of the impact of the ad execution on ad effectiveness. Then, we test the moderating effects of category and respondent gender on the direct execution-effectiveness relationship, and on the indirect effects via individual perception of taboo and via perceived shock in others.

Despite their exposed childhood, the results show that provocative ads reduce ad effectiveness even among digital natives. Product-related provocative advertisements increase the perception of taboo and lead to lower advertising effectiveness. Women perceive more the taboo but they do not cause a lower ad effectiveness, they report a significantly better ad effectiveness for cause-related. This result reminds the findings of Pope and co-authors (2004) regarding the preference for cause-related mildly-erotic ads, and the more favorable attitude of

women towards these ads. Ad execution affects ad effectiveness via individual perception of taboo and perceived shock to others. Provocative ads are considered tabooer for oneself, more shocking to others and reduce ad effectiveness. It should also be noted that the perception of individual taboo and the perceived shock of others vary substantially in the same way, we find the same effects except for the non-significant interaction between ad execution and product category on the perception of individual taboo ($p = 0.0625$)

The main limitation of this study concerns its sample, which is very small but comparable to other similar studies (e.g., Putrevu, 2008). We were interested in young people's reactions due to their proximity to digital by testing ad effectiveness via an online questionnaire that played the ads on a screen. We did not insert a particular header or logo allowing the respondent to identify a particular platform, social network or website, it would be interesting to understand differences in consumers' reactions towards provocative ad on Twitter, Tik Tok, Facebook, or on LinkedIn.

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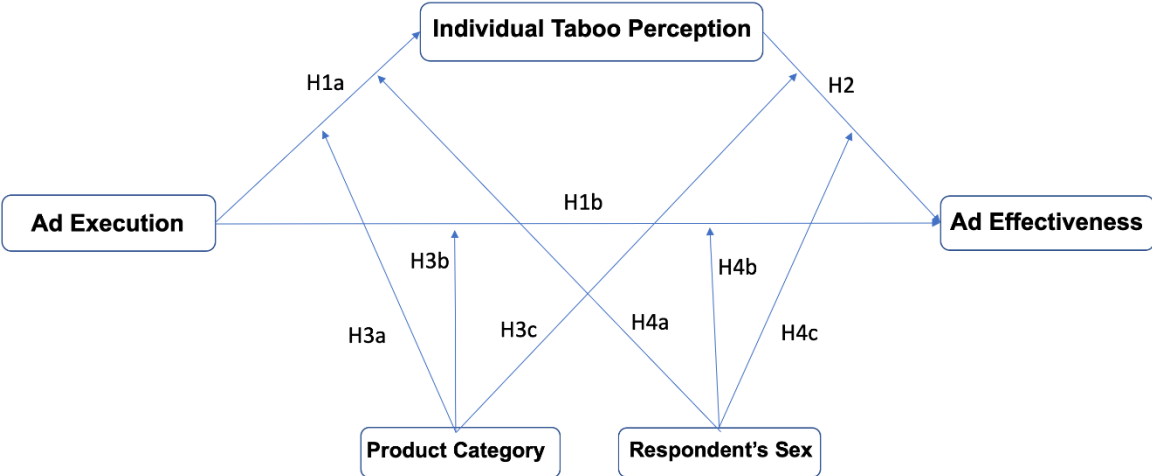
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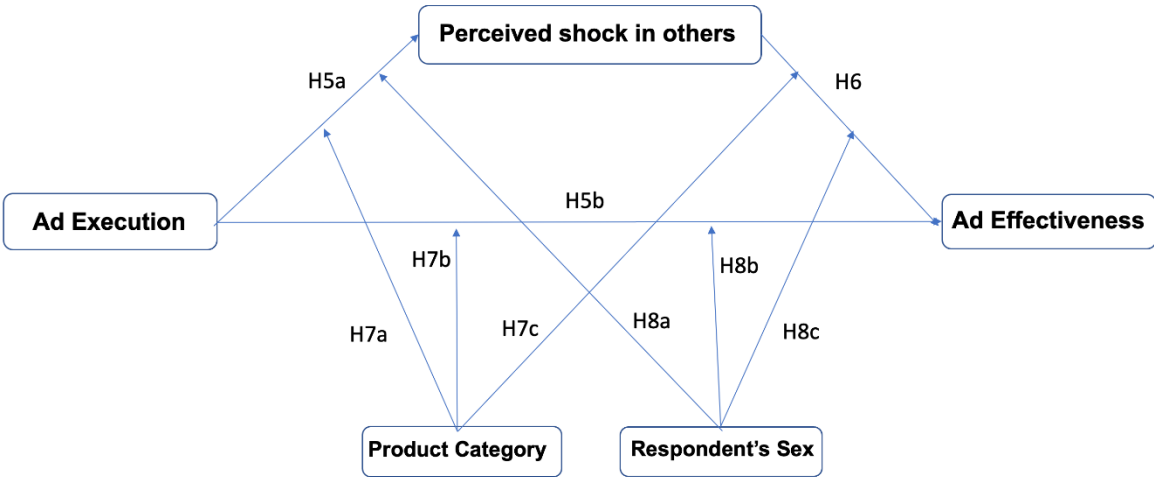
Appendices

Appendix 1 : Models with relationship hypotheses

Model 1



Model 2



Appendix 2 : Moderated mediation model 76

Model 1

| | Individual taboo perception (M1) | | | | Advertising effectiveness | | | |
|-----------------------|---|---------|-------------|----------------|--|---------|-------------|-----------------|
| | B(SE) | T | P | 95CI | B(SE) | T | P | 95CI |
| Constant | 1.6905 (0.5435) | 3.1101 | 0.0020 | 0.6224 2.7585 | 4.0175 (0.4481) | 8.9653 | <0.001 | 3.1370 4.8980 |
| Sex (W) | -0.2049 (0.2507) | -0.8170 | 0.4143 (NS) | -0.6976 0.2878 | -0.0622 (0.2116) | -0.2938 | 0.7690 (NS) | -0.4780 0.3537 |
| Category (Z) | 0.1787 (0.3020) | 0.5916 | 0.5544 (NS) | -0.4148 0.7721 | 0.0700 (0.2459) | 0.2848 | 0.7759(NS) | -0.4131 0.5532 |
| Execution (X) | 1.3513 (0.6248) | 2.1628 | 0.0310 | 0.1236 2.5789 | -1.6063 (0.4875) | -3.2948 | 0.0011 | -2.5643 -0.6483 |
| X*(W) | 0.6159 (0.2872) | 2.1447 | 0.0325 | 0.0516 1.1801 | 0.1888 (0.2293) | 0.8324 | 0.4107 (NS) | -0.2615 0.6393 |
| X*Z | -0.6211 (0.3326) | -1.8674 | 0.0625 (NS) | -1.2747 0.0324 | 0.6029 (0.2590) | 2.3274 | 0.0204 | 0.0939 1.1119 |
| Individual taboo (M1) | | | - | | -0.0076 (0.1324) | -0.0576 | 0.9541 (NS) | -0.2677 0.2524 |
| M1*W | | | - | | 0.0212 (0.0670) | 0.3162 | 0.7520 (NS) | -0.1105 0.1528 |
| M1*Z | | | - | | -0.1630 (0.0671) | -2.4299 | 0.0155 | -0.2949 -0.0312 |
| Model summary | R ² = 0.2009; F(5,478) = 24.032; p<0.001 | | | | R ² = 0.1886; F(8,475) = 13.7975; p<0.001 | | | |

Model 2

| | Perceived shock in others (M2) | | | | | Ad effectiveness | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---------|--------|---------|---------|------------------|---------|-------------|---------|---------|
| | B(SE) | t | p | 95CI | | B(SE) | t | p | 95CI | |
| Constant | 1.5790 (0.3915) | 4.0333 | 0.0001 | 0.8097 | 2.3482 | 3.4648 (0.6266) | 5.5296 | <0.001 | 2.2335 | 4.6960 |
| Sex (W) | -0.5896 (0.1806) | -3.2649 | 0.0012 | -0.9445 | -0.2348 | -0.0607 (0.2777) | -0.2187 | 0.8270 (NS) | -0.6064 | 0.4850 |
| Category (Z) | 1.2422 (0.2175) | 5.7111 | <0.001 | 0.8148 | 1.6696 | 0.4649 (0.3326) | 1.3979 | 0.1628 (NS) | -0.1886 | 1.1184 |
| Execution (X) | 3.5777 (0.4500) | 7.9508 | <0.001 | 2.6935 | 4.4619 | -1.9390 (0.7359) | -2.6348 | 0.0087 | -3.3851 | -0.4929 |
| X*W | 0.7881 (0.2068) | 3.8104 | 0.0002 | 0.3817 | 1.1945 | 0.1236 (0.3567) | 0.3466 | 0.7291 (NS) | -0.5773 | 0.8246 |
| X*Z | -1.3955 (0.2396) | -5.8253 | <0.001 | -1.8662 | -0.9248 | 0.9063 (0.3659) | 2.4770 | 0.0136 | 0.1874 | 1.6253 |
| Perceived shock (M2) | | | - | | | 0.1617 (0.1991) | 0.8120 | 0.4172(NS) | -0.2295 | 0.5528 |
| M2*W | | | - | | | 0.0139 (0.0923) | 0.1504 | 0.8805 (NS) | -0.1675 | 0.1953 |
| M2*Z | | | - | | | -0.2130 (0.0944) | -2.2563 | 0.0245 | -0.3984 | -0.0275 |
| Model summary | R ² = 0.6641; F(5,478) = 189.0103; p<0.001 | | | | | | | | | |
| | R ² = 0.1315; F(8,475) = 8.9884; p<0.001 | | | | | | | | | |