

THE IMPACT OF SHOCKING ADVERTISING TO CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR

Regina Virvilaite¹, Migle Matuleviciene²

^{1,2}*Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania*

crossref <http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.em.18.1.3643>

Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior. Scientists have proved that shock tactics in advertising influence consumer buying behavior. The paper analyses the main components of shocking advertising, which cause positive or negative attitude to shocking advertising, influencing consumer buying behavior. Theoretical research studies have confirmed that positive or negative consumer attitudes to shocking advertising are influenced by socio-demographic and cultural-social factors - religiosity, moral principles, age, gender, individualism-collectivism, high-low context language. It has been developed a theoretical model of the link among the socio-demographic and cultural-social factors, consumer perception of shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior, which can be used for further practical studies.

The type of the article: *Theoretical article.*

Keywords: *shocking advertising, consumer buying behavior, consumer perception of shocking advertising, socio-demographic factors, cultural-social factors.*

JEL Classification: *M37.*

1. Introduction

Considering increasing of supply, the growing number of commercials in nowadays media and consumption growth, companies are forced to search for new advertising solutions to achieve cognition, distinctiveness and positive impact on the advertised brand sales. Consumers react differently to advertisements, therefore, advertisers attempt to distinguish by influencing consumer emotions and intention to buy, invoking non-traditional way - shocking advertising, as one of the most effective ways to increase brand sales. According to Javed and Zeb (2011), "unexpected factor is the main ingredient that turns a normal advertisement into shock advertisement" (p. 1).

Shocking advertising, as one of the ways to attract consumer attention became popular quite a long time ago. Chan *et al.* (2007) argues that shocking advertising has been around for 25 years. Sabri (2012) argues that shocking advertising started in about 1980, through the AIDS crisis. One of the initiators of shocking advertising was the company "United Colors of Benetton", which shocked the world with its controversial advertisements. The main support element of the "United Colors of Benetton" has always been shocking advertising, which was one of the most important marketing solutions in international markets, which determined the success for the company (Crestanello & Tättar, 2010).

As shown by the previous experience, it is important for companies to explore the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior to increase their profit. However, the link between shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior is considered to be suitably unexplored and insufficiently detailed. Plenty of researchers have made an attempt to investigate the influence of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior, however have not reached the consensus. There is a lack of detailed and generalized information about the impact of shocking advertising on consumer buying behavior. Further theoretical studies require a detailed theoretical analysis, better identification and generalization of basic components which influence and how they influence consumer buying behavior. This paper investigates a systematic and generalized approach

of many scientists to the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior.

The problem of this research: Does the shocking advertising impact the consumer buying behavior?

The aim of this research: Theoretically substantiate the impact of shocking advertising on the consumer buying behavior.

2. Theoretical review of the concept of shocking advertising

The conception of shocking advertising vary from attracting audience to criminal activity promotion, according to shocking advertising elements, which Dahl *et al.* (2003) summarized and singled out as disgusting images, sexual references, profanity/obscenity, vulgarity, impropriety, moral offensiveness and religious taboos (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of shock appeals

Offense Elicitor	Description
Disgusting images	References to blood, body parts or secretions, orifices, especially urinary/fecal, gases, odors, disease, parasites, bodily harm (e.g., dismemberment), death and decay
Sexual references	References to masturbation, implied sexual acts, sexually suggestive nudity or partial nudity
Profanity/obscenity	Swear words, obscene gestures, racial epithets
Vulgarity	References to crude or distasteful acts by humans or animals, such as nose picking, farting, licking, humping, or drinking from the toilet
Impropriety	Violations of social conventions for dress, manners, etc.
Moral offensiveness	Harming innocent people/animals, gratuitous violence or sex, alluding to people or objects that provoke violence (e.g., Hitler), violating standards for fair behavior (e.g., shooting a person in the back), putting children in provocative situations (e.g., sexual, violent), victim exploitation
Religious taboos	Inappropriate use of spiritual or religious symbols and/or rituals

Source: Dahl *et al.* (2003).

The shocking advertising elements are basement for various researches. Some theoretical studies were conducted trying to single out different elements, however Dahl *et al.* (2003) made a major contribution to the studies of shocking advertising.

The findings of Dahl *et al.* (2003), based on Baron and Byrne (1977); Vezina and Paul (1994), based on Childers and Houston (1984), Andersson and Pettersson (2004) revealed an important contribution to shocking advertising when the key components of shocking advertising were identified. With reference to the scientists, shocking advertising contains distinctiveness, ambiguity and transgression of norms and taboos. Andersson and Pettersson (2004) justified the benefit of these three components with a statement that distinctiveness is the biggest challenge for advertisers - advertising, which is similar to other advertisements may lose shocking advertising power, despite its content. Ambiguity in advertising is the component that causes a lot of advertising interpretations in the consumer's mind. Plenty of researchers state that ambiguity can increase a shocking degree whereas shocking advertising without ambiguity is rejected by the consumer without consideration. Transgression of norms and taboos are comprehended as particular rules that an individual must follow. According to Dahl *et al.* (2003) and Andersson and Pettersson (2004), based on Vezina and Paul (1994), shock tactics are effective when an advertisement displays what is generally perceived as taboo. To summarize, in order to be effective, shocking advertising must contain these three discussed components.

The analysis of scientific literature has revealed that these three main components of shocking advertising cause a positive or negative view on shocking advertising (Dens *et al.*, 2008; Sabri, 2012), however has not reached consensus. Krstic (2007) and Sabri (2012) state that shocking advertising positively or negatively influences consumers' sympathy or antipathy for

shocking advertising. Only a few of scientists speak up for shocking advertising positive emotional impact on consumer perception of shocking advertising. This was confirmed by Andersson and Pettersson (2004), based on Vezina and Paul (1994); Krstic (2007) and Sabri (2012). However, Dahl et al. (2003); Andersson and Pettersson (2004), based on Shimp (2003); Sabri and Obermiller (2011), based on Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006); Dens *et al.* (2008); Ortega-S (2011) speak up for shocking advertising negative emotional impact on consumer perception of shocking advertising. According to Andersson and Pettersson (2004), negative emotions are aroused in relation to violating rules, personal or public norms, beliefs or irresponsible behavior. A deeper approach to shocking advertising emotional expression is given by Ortega-S (2011), who argues that negative emotions encourage consumers to buy an advertised product so as to remove negative emotions. Negative consumer view on shocking advertising is generally associated with moral, social norms and taboos. However, scientists propose socio-demographic and cultural-social factors as one of the most important determinants in understanding shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior.

3. The influence of socio-demographic and cultural-social factors on consumer perception of shocking advertising

Theoretical research studies confirmed that positive or negative consumer attitudes to shocking advertising is influenced by socio-demographic and cultural-social factors - religiosity, moral principles, age, gender, individualism-collectivism, high-low context language. A significant contribution towards this research was investigated by Prendergast and Hwa (2002); Andersson and Pettersson (2004); Sengupta and Dahl (2008); Dahl *et al.* (2009); Liu *et al.* (2009), based on Hofstede's (1991); Sawang (2010); Brugiére and Barry (2011); Sabri (2012). According to the scientists, consumer perception of shocking advertising can be influenced by religiosity, individuals emotional ambivalence, moral principles, age, gender, individualism-collectivism cultural dimension and high-low context language.

It was found out that major religiosity influences more negative attitudes to shocking advertising whereas religiosity defines commitments to be observed (Sabri, 2012) and moral principles frequently has a negative impact on consumer buying behavior (Andersson & Pettersson, 2004), but in most cases, the consumer will not stop using advertised goods, even if advertising breaks their moral or social principles (Brugiére & Barry, 2011). Prendergast and Hwa (2002), Liu *et al.* (2009), Brugiére and Barry (2011), Sabri (2012) empirical researches revealed that older consumers were more likely to refuse the advertised goods, Sengupta and Dahl (2008), Dahl *et al.* (2009) proved that shocking advertising has a bigger negative impact on women than on men. Investigating cultural-social factors in consumer buying behavior, Sawang (2010) found out that stronger collectivism influences negative impact on consumer buying behavior whereas individualism has a positive impact on consumer buying behavior. In connection with cultures, a low context language influences more positive attitudes to shocking advertising than a high context language (Liu *et al.*, 2009). Socio-demographic factors that influence the perception of shocking advertising, are presented in Figure 1.

With reference to socio-demographic and cultural-social factors, emotions of the consumer can be positive, negative or both positive and negative at the same time - individuals emotional ambivalence. Sabri (2012) defines individuals emotional ambivalence as the condition, when two contradictory emotions display at the same time. In this instance, when watching shocking advertising with children or parents, the consumer wants to switch off the TV channel or leave the room against respect to religion or education. However, they do not see anything wrong with watching a shocking advertisement being alone.

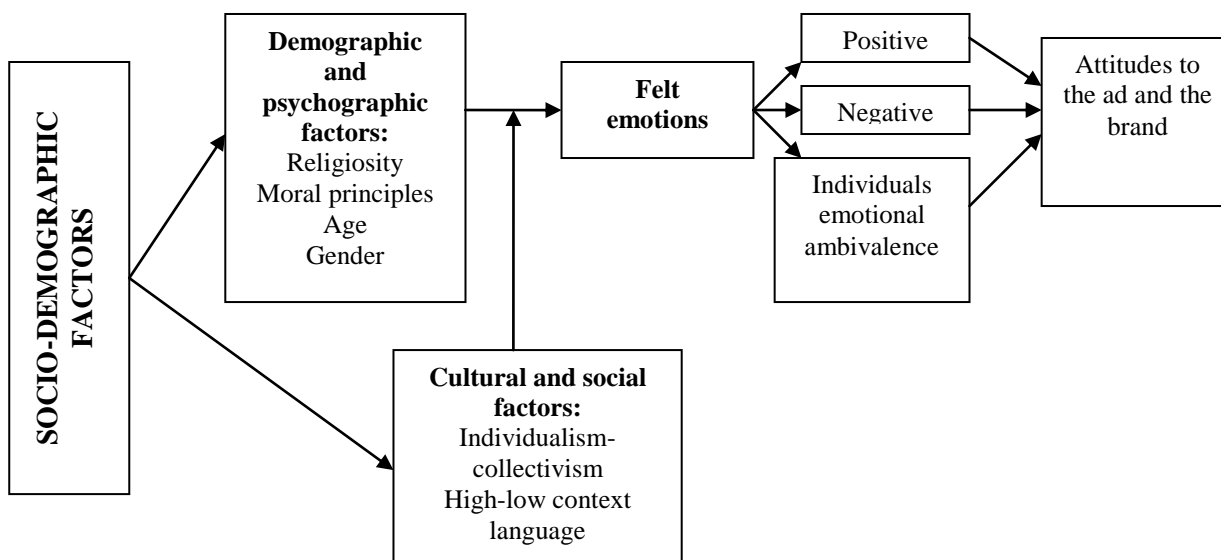


Figure 1. The influence of socio-demographic and cultural-social factors to consumer perception of shocking advertising (adapted by the authors with reference to Sengupta and Dahl (2008), Dahl *et al.* (2009), Liu *et al.* (2009), Sawang (2010), Sabri (2012))

In order to understand the influence of socio-demographic and cultural-social factors to consumer buying behavior, it is necessary to analyze how consumer perception of shocking advertising affects buying behavior.

4. Theoretical approach of the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior

The emotions, caused by shocking advertising, stimulate the consumer to choose or not to choose the advertised brand. The analysis of scientific literature revealed that consumer buying behavior is divided into positive and negative, according to consumer perception of shocking advertising. According to Waller (2005), positive consumer behavior includes purchasing the advertised brand or disseminating positive information "from mouth to mouth" while negative consumer behavior comes through ignoring, resistance and disseminating negative information about advertising or advertised brand. Scientists have not reached consensus about positive or negative impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior, however Waller (2005) criticizes the negative view on the impact to consumer buying behavior, arguing that if the impact was purely negative, shocking advertising would be refused to use as one of the implements to increase brand sales.

The findings of Parker and Furnham (2007), Ortega-S (2011), Sengupta and Dahl (2008), Andersson and Pettersson (2004), Javed and Zeb (2011), Salimi (2012) revealed that positive consumer buying behavior comes through distinguishing advertised brand from other competing brands and increasing sales volumes, while Prendergast and Hwa (2002), Chan *et al.* (2007), Krstic (2007), Wight and Newstead (2010), Sabri and Obermiller (2011), Sabri (2012), Kerr *et al.* (2012) investigated that negative buying behavior causes decreased sales volumes, consumer refusal of using advertised brand and even consumer complaints.

A simple and accurate method of assessing the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior is the monitoring of increased or decreased sales volumes, but in order to clearly understand the reasons of consumer buying behavior, it is appropriate to evaluate socio-demographic and cultural-social factors - religiosity, moral principles, age, gender, individualism-collectivism, high-low context language. These socio-demographic and cultural-social factors were chosen according to a large number of research findings, which were accomplished by many

scientists all over the world.

Religiosity. Sabri (2012) investigated that consumer buying behavior depends on religiosity – more religious people tend not to recognize shocking advertising and also advertised brand. This is particularly apparent in Muslim countries. The findings of Sabri (2012) revealed that consumers of Morocco have emotions such as shame, guilt, confusion when seeing shocking advertising. They say that this kind of advertisement violates religious principles and to speak out about advertising is inappropriate, contrary to French consumers, who are less religious and more liberal. Sabri (2012) concludes that in order for shocking advertising is perceived positively, consumers should be less religious. According to the results, it could be stated that more religious consumers will have a negative view on shocking advertising and it will negatively impact on consumer buying behavior and vice versa.

Moral principles. Sabri (2012) revealed an internal conflict between morality and personal values, stating that shocking advertising does not significantly affect consumer perception of shocking advertising. The main reason why consumers tend not to buy advertised goods is the morality level in their culture and country. If morality level in the country is high, consumers will have a negative attitude to shocking advertisements, which will negatively affect their buying behavior. As noted above, Moroccan consumers would not buy advertised goods in contrast to French consumers. None the less than religiosity, moral principles also influence a positive or negative consumer perception of shocking advertising that consistently impacts on positive or negative consumer buying behavior.

Age. Age is a very significant factor, influencing consumer perception of shocking advertising. According to Liu *et al.* (2009), younger consumers have more positive attitude to shocking advertisement than older consumers. This is confirmed by Prendergast and Hwa (2002) who found out that consumers over the age of forty were more likely to refuse advertised goods than younger consumers. The findings of Brugiere and Barry (2011) revealed that young consumers will have a positive view to shocking advertising and it will not have negative impact to their buying behavior – conversely, older consumers, who with one accord stated that they would not like to be identified with the advertised brand, so will better choose other brands.

Gender. Sengupta and Dahl (2007, 2008); Dahl *et al.* (2009) has found out that there are differences in understanding shocking advertising between men and women. Women's negative reaction to sexual context shocking advertising depends on finesse and compatibility of moral and social principles in shocking advertising. Conversely, finesse and compatibility of moral and social principles in shocking advertising do not affect men's negative perception of shocking advertising. Dahl *et al.* (2009) revealed that proper selection of shocking advertising context can positively affect consumer perception of shocking advertising in a gender aspect.

Individualism – collectivism. The analysis of previous researches has shown that dominating individualism or collectivism in the culture affects consumer perception of shocking advertising. Sawang (2010) and Ifezue (2010) conducted an empirical research to analyze consumer perception of shocking advertising in American and Asian context. There is higher individualism dominating in American culture, while Asian culture is more collectivistic. Sawang (2010) and Ifezu's (2010) research revealed that American consumers have more positive view to sexual context shocking advertising while Asian consumers have a negative view to this kind of advertising. It is explained by a greater attachment to moral principles in Asian culture than in American one. Higher moral principles influence negative consumer perception of shocking advertising that consistently impacts on negative consumer buying behavior and vice versa.

High – low context language. A high – low context language is not so significant as other dimensions, which influence consumer buying behavior. However Liu *et al.* (2009) revealed that cultures with a high context language are collectivistic – consumers prepare to get indirect advertising, while in individualistic cultures a low context language dominates - consumers prepare to get direct advertising. These trends influence the consumer's positive or negative view to shocking advertising – a high context language in collectivistic countries promotes negative consumer buying behavior while a low context language in individualistic countries – positive

buying behavior.

In order to understand how shocking advertising impacts on consumer buying behavior a theoretical model of the link among the socio-demographic and cultural-social factors, consumer perception of shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior was developed (see Figure 2).

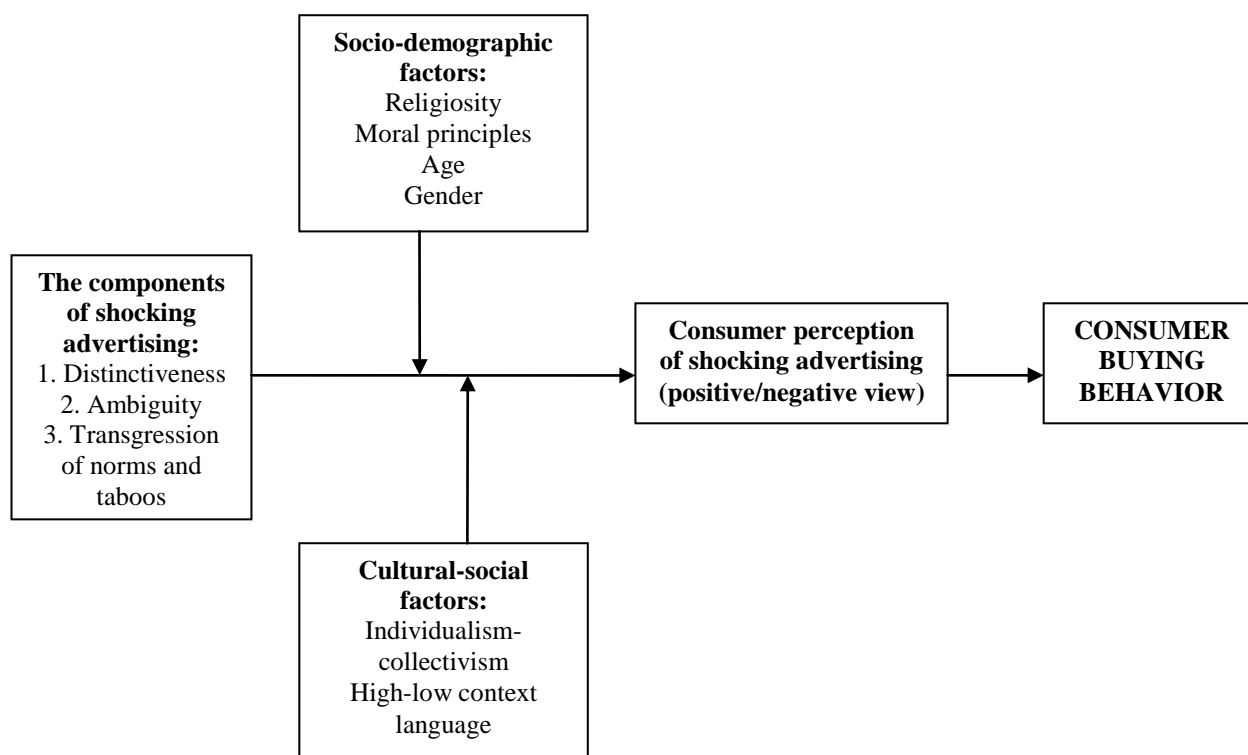


Figure 2. A theoretical model of the impact of shocking advertising to consumer buying behavior

The theoretical model was developed with reference to the key components of shocking advertising (Dahl *et al.* (2003), based on Baron and Byrne (1977); Andersson and Pettersson (2004), based on Childers and Houston (1984), Severn *et al.* (1990), Vezina and Paul (1994)), studies of the socio-demographic and cultural-social factors which impact on consumer perception of shocking advertising (Liu *et al.* (2009), based on Hofstede (1991); Sengupta and Dahl (2008); Dahl *et al.* (2009); Sawang (2010); Sabri (2012)) and studies of positive and negative emotional impact to consumer (Dens *et al.* (2008) and Sabri (2012), based on Kotler and Armstrong (1987), Aaker (2002), Stevens *et al.* (2003), Janssens *et al.* (2007); Dens *et al.* (2008), based on Edell and Burke (1987); Dahl *et al.* (2003); Andersson and Pettersson (2004), based on Shimp (2003); Waller *et al.* (2005); Sabri and Obermiller (2011), based on Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006); Ortega-S (2011)). The theoretical model graphically represents the main components of shocking advertising in relation to consumer positive or negative perception of shocking advertising, which is influenced by additional moderators - socio-demographic and cultural-social factors. The model also represents a relationship between a positive or negative perception of shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior.

5. Discussion

Summarizing the empirical research findings and in conclusion, there is sufficient empirical evidence to suggest the shocking advertising impact to consumer buying behavior. Dahl *et al.* (2003) better than other scientists specified the most shocking advertising elements, identified as disgusting images, sexual references, profanity/obscenity, vulgarity, impropriety, moral offensiveness and religious taboos, which are considered to be the basement for the key components

of shocking advertising. According to the theoretical research studies, the key components of shocking advertising are distinctiveness, ambiguity, transgression of norms and taboos. These three main components of shocking advertising cause a positive or negative consumers' view on shocking advertising.

Different scientists differently justify consumer perception of shocking advertising but most of them agree that the consumer's positive or negative attitude to shocking advertising is affected by the main moderators: socio-demographic and cultural-social factors - religiosity, moral principles, age, gender, individualism - collectivism, high - low context language.

The theoretical research confirmed that a positive view on shocking advertising impacts on positive consumer buying behavior and vice versa. The link between shocking advertising, consumer perception of shocking advertising and consumer buying behavior, influenced by socio-demographic and cultural-social factors was theoretically developed in the theoretical model, which was created according to the analysis of the scientific literature.

References

- Andersson, S. & Pettersson, A. (2004). Provocative advertising. The Swedish youth's response: master thesis: marketing and e-commerce / Lulea University of Technology. Sweden.
- Brugiere, A. G., Barry, R. (2011). A new marketing strategy for a new luxury market: shock advertising and porno chic in social networks. The French market: bachelor thesis: business administration, marketing / Halmstad University. Sweden.
- Chan, K., Li, L., Diehl S., Terlutter, R. (2007). Consumer's response to offensive advertising: a cross cultural study. *International marketing review*, 24 (5), p. 606-628. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02651330710828013>
- Crestanello, P. & Tattara, G. (2010). A global network and its local ties. Restructuring of the Benetton group. *Working paper. Department of Economics in Ca' Foscari University of Venice*, 11, p. 1-21.
- Dahl, D. W., Frankerberger, K. D., Manchanda, R. V. (2003). Does it pay to shock? Reactions to shocking and nonshocking advertising content among university students. *Journal of advertising research*, 43 (3), p. 268-280. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0021849903030332>
- Dahl, D. W., Sengupta, J., Vohs, K. D. (2009). Sex in advertising: gender differences and the role of relationship commitment. *Journal of consumer research*, 36, p. 215-231. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/597158>
- Dens, N., De Pelsmacker, P., Janssens, W. (2008). Exploring consumer reactions to incongruent mild disgust appeals. *Journal of marketing communications*, 14 (4), p. 249-269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527260802141231>
- Javed, M. B. & Zeb, H. (2011). Good shock or bad shock: what impact shock advertisements are creating on the mind of viewers // Marketing & Programme Leader International Business: Annual Conference on Innovations in Business & Management [London, 2011, January 26-27]. London, University of East London, p. 1-12.
- Krstic, T. (2007). Attitudes toward shock advertising of Western-European and Serbian university students with regard to public health context (anti-smoking and anti-HIV/AIDS campaigns): master thesis: marketing / University of Nottingham. United Kingdom.
- Liu, F., Cheng, H., Li, J. (2009). Consumer responses to sex appeal advertising: a cross-cultural study. *International marketing review*, 26 (4-5), p. 501-520. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02651330910972002>
- Ortega-S, A. A. (2011). Effectively offending to sell: consumer response to shocking visual merchandising presentations: master thesis: department of design and merchandising / Colorado State University. United States.
- Parker, E. & Furnham, A. (2007). Does sex sell? The affect of sexual programme content on the recall of sexual and non-sexual advertisements. *Applied cognitive psychology*, 21, p. 1217-1228. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/acp.1325>
- Prendergast, G. & Hwa, H. C. (2002). Offensive advertising on the web: Asian insights. *BRC working papers series*, p. 1-21.

- Sabri, O. (2012). Preliminary investigation of the communication effects of “taboo” themes in advertising. *European journal of marketing*, 46 (1/2), p. 215-236. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/03090561211189301>
- Sabri, O. & Obermiller, C. (2011). Consumer perception of taboo in ads. *Journal of business research*, 65 (6), p. 869-873. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.01.009>
- Sawang, S. (2010). Sex appeal in advertising: what consumers think. *Journal of promotion management*, 16, p. 167-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10496490903578832>
- Sengupta, J. & Dahl, D. W. (2008). Gender-related reactions to gratuitous sex appeals in advertising. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 18, p. 62-78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2007.10.010>
- Waller, D. S. (2005). A proposed response model for controversial advertising. *Journal of promotion management*, 11 (2/3), p. 3-15. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J057v11n02_02
- Wight, S. & Newstead, K. (2010). Ad-haters: why do they hate the ad and will they still buy the brand? // Division of business: ANZMAC 2010 - Annual Conference [New Zeland, 2010, 29 November - 1 December]. New Zeland: University of Canterbury, p. 1-8.