

Taboo Marketing in Consumer Behavior: A Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Perspective on Hotel Accommodation Decisions

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The Asian Conference on Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This research investigates the influence of taboos on customer decision-making and behavior, specifically applying the “death taboo” concept to hotel accommodations. A death taboo in this context refers to customers encountering information or phenomena related to a death having occurred in the hotel. Even without objective service failures, such encounters trigger psychological responses that impact customer experience and decisions. It conducted two experiments with 300 participants to explore changes in customer satisfaction, switching intention, switching costs, and repurchase intention (hotel retention). It is manipulated three death taboo scenarios: word-of-mouth (WOM) about a past death, personal experience (PE) of strange phenomena, and a mixed scenario combining both. These represented low, middle, and high death taboo contexts, respectively. Results indicate that encountering a death taboo significantly reduces customer satisfaction, particularly in the high (mixed) taboo context. Fear levels varied significantly across scenarios (Mix > PE > WOM), influencing satisfaction in low (WOM) and high (mixed) contexts, but not the middle (PE). In low taboo situations, customers consider switching costs rationally; however, stronger death taboos cause fear to override rational considerations of switching costs. This study demonstrates how the death taboo complexly influences customer behavior, showing a transformation from psychological change to explicit action, providing empirical contributions to marketing and customer decision theories.

Keywords: taboo, consumer decision-making, hotel accommodation

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Introduction

This study aims to investigate the impact of socio-cultural taboos on the consumer decision-making process and subsequent consumer behavior. For instance, common practices such as avoiding certain activities during the Lunar Ghost Month or fearing change during years ending in the number nine reflect how taboo factors can induce avoidance behaviors, thereby leading to significant shifts in purchasing decisions.

Previous research within marketing has predominantly focused on the broader influence of religious beliefs on consumer decision-making (Fam et al., 2004; Hirschman, 1983; Sun et al., 2012). Studies explicitly addressing taboos have largely concentrated on the advertising effectiveness of taboo lexicon and imagery (Sabri, 2012; Ursula, 2002). While anthropologists frequently study the definitions, classifications, and cultural implications of taboos—such as funeral rites (Van Gennep, 1904)—these investigations often extend to specific marketing contexts like the selection of funeral service providers or pre-need contracts. The primary ambition of this research, however, is to reintegrate the construct of taboo into the analysis of general consumer behavior, specifically by delineating its role within the marketing domain of the consumer decision-making process. Consequently, this study deliberately excludes specialized consumption activities or explicitly religious issues.

Furthermore, research in the advertising field that examines the attitudes of consumers toward the use of taboo terms or the symbolic meanings behind taboo images (Sabri, 2012) addresses what is classified as secondary taboos. These are logical derivations stemming from primary taboos, which refer to the original sources of taboo, such as specific persons, events, or objects (Ursula, 2002). Therefore, this research positions primary taboos as its focal theme, bypassing the discussion of taboo language in marketing activities to prioritize the examination of primary taboos' influence on consumer behavior.

Prior to establishing the formal research framework, an informal focus group interview was conducted to explore the association between universal consumption experiences and taboos (using “death” as the extended taboo concept). The findings revealed that during leisure travel, the behavior of selecting hotel accommodation inherently means being situated in an unfamiliar, non-residential location. The fact that some hotels have a history of death events or major accidents (whether factual or rumored) constitutes a prominent taboo during accommodation. Consequently, this study utilizes hotel accommodation behavior during tourism to practically discuss the significance and role of taboos within the consumer behavior process.

Within hotel accommodation behavior, which encompasses processes such as satisfaction, switching intention, and repurchase intention, this study seeks to operationalize and measure these key consumer decision-making behaviors. By utilizing the specific scenario of consumers encountering the “death” taboo—specifically that someone has previously died in the occupied room—during the accommodation process, this research aims to explore subsequent changes in consumer satisfaction. It further links this taboo encounter to switching intention (changing hotels or rooms), switching costs, and repurchase intention (revisiting the hotel). Ultimately, this investigation represents a concrete academic endeavor to integrate the taboo concept into the analysis of consumer decision-making behavior, thereby supplementing the currently under-researched area of taboo marketing and contributing to the expansion of this academic discourse.

Literature Review

Within the research domain of hotel accommodation behavior, this study abstracts the key variables of consumer satisfaction and positions switching intention—specifically, the intention to change rooms or hotels following a taboo encounter—as the critical bridge connecting the taboo issue to consumer behavior. This pathway culminates in repurchase intention, representing the ultimate consumer behavioral outcome (the desire to revisit this hotel). The inclusion of this definitive link is intended to provide hotel industry practitioners with concrete strategic reference for effectively managing such sensitive taboo encounters. Furthermore, this research framework integrates the variable of fear level. Given that the inherent qualities of taboos, characterized by perceived danger and a sense of impending punishment (Ernst et al., 2010), are prone to inducing anxiety and apprehension, this psychological reaction is hypothesized to facilitate a connection with subsequent behavioral responses.

Despite the significance of taboo encounters, empirical research explicitly examining their relationship with consumer satisfaction remains scarce. Notably, in the realm of conflict management, Roloff and Ifert (1998, 2000) demonstrated that the explicit declaration of taboo topics within a communication dynamic is negatively correlated with satisfaction with conflict resolution. This finding suggests that if a taboo context is rendered explicitly salient to an individual, it potentially leads to a decrement in perceived satisfaction. Extrapolating this logic to the traditional marketing perspective on consumer satisfaction (Ernst et al., 2010; Hess et al., 2014), when a consumer encounters a taboo scenario—such as the knowledge that someone has died in their hotel room—it may be perceived, regardless of the objective veracity, as a flaw in the provided service environment. Similar to discovering a product defect or poor product performance, this perceived defect is expected to significantly impact consumer satisfaction levels (Ernst et al., 2010; Hess et al., 2014). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that a significant variance in consumer satisfaction will exist between the pre-taboo and post-taboo encounter scenarios. Drawing upon these theoretical underpinnings, the following research hypothesis is proposed:

- H1: There is a significant difference in consumer satisfaction levels between the pre-taboo and post-taboo encounter scenarios.
- H2: Varying degrees of taboo scenarios will lead to significantly different levels of fear.
- H3: Consumer satisfaction has a significant negative effect on switching intention.
- H4: Switching intention has a significant negative effect on repurchase intention.

Methodology

A total of 300 undergraduate students majoring in Business Administration from a private university were recruited to participate in this study. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions, ensuring a balanced distribution of 100 individuals per scenario.

Experimental Procedure and Scenario Manipulation

The experimental procedure began by asking the participants to imagine they were planning a vacation and had checked into a specific local hotel. A pre-test manipulation (Scenario I) was introduced, in which the hotel was described in detail, highlighting its upscale amenities,

room features, and proximity to the resort beach. To enhance the manipulation, high-quality images of the clean, beautiful, and luxurious guest rooms were presented.

Upon completing the reading of the pre-test scenario and room description, participants' initial satisfaction levels were measured (Satisfaction I). Following this initial assessment, participants were randomly exposed to one of three distinct taboo scenario manipulations. These conditions were designed to investigate the varying impact of different taboo sources:

- 1) Online Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Condition (Group A)
- 2) Direct Experience Condition (Group B)
- 3) Combined Condition (eWOM and Direct Experience) (Group C)

Measurement Instruments

Consumer satisfaction was assessed using scales adapted from Hess et al. (2014) and Ernst et al. (2010). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Satisfaction was measured at two time points: once before and once after the primary taboo scenario manipulation. This repeated measures design was employed to facilitate a comparison of the variance in consumer satisfaction levels pre- and post-taboo encounter.

The level of fear was measured using the fear scale developed by Champion et al. (2004). This eight-item instrument includes statements such as: “When I encounter this situation, I would feel very afraid,” “When I encounter this situation, I would feel very nervous,” and “When I encounter this situation, I would feel uneasy.” All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Switching intention was measured using modified items adapted from previous studies by Heesup et al. (2011) and Liu et al. (2014).

Results

Regarding consumer satisfaction, a significant difference was observed pre- and post-manipulation for Group A (online word-of-mouth) ($t = 8.348, p < .001$), with the pre-manipulation mean satisfaction score ($M = 4.0117$) exceeding the post-manipulation mean score ($M = 3.3090$). Similarly, Group B (direct experience) exhibited a significant difference before and after manipulation ($t = 9.082, p < .001$), where the pre-manipulation mean satisfaction ($M = 3.9242$) was greater than the post-manipulation mean ($M = 3.3688$). Furthermore, for Group C (combined online word-of-mouth and direct experience), a significant pre- and post-manipulation difference in satisfaction was found ($t = 10.500, p < .001$), with the pre-manipulation mean score ($M = 3.9115$) higher than the post-manipulation mean score ($M = 3.1289$). These results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1, confirming that a significant difference exists in satisfaction levels before and after encountering a taboo scenario.

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the effect of the three taboo scenarios on participants' fear levels. The results revealed a significant difference in fear levels across all three conditions ($F = 4.608, p < .05$). Post-hoc analysis indicated that the fear level for Group C (combined online word-of-mouth and direct experience) ($M = 4.21$) was significantly higher than that of Group B (direct experience) ($M = 3.25$) and Group A (online word-of-mouth) ($M = 2.05$). Furthermore, Group B ($M = 3.25$) exhibited a

significantly higher level of fear than Group A ($M = 2.05$). Consequently, Hypothesis 2, which states that “varying degrees of taboo scenarios will significantly differ in their ability to induce fear,” is supported.

Regression analyses were performed to test Hypotheses H3, H4. The results show H3 and H4 are supported.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned research findings, it can be inferred that the role taboos play within the consumer behavior process is dynamic. Consumers may sometimes categorize them as one of many influencing factors in the purchasing process, while under other circumstances, taboos can exert a specific, subjective influence at the psychological level. Consequently, future research could analyze the dynamic behavioral transitions regarding taboo issues throughout the consumption process and explore the underlying influencing factors. Methodologically, experimental manipulation combined with interview methods could be employed. Drawing upon these results, practical recommendations suggest that when related specialty products possess taboo connotations, marketers need to implement relevant interventions based on changes in the consumer's consumption process. Further exploration into the relationship between relevant marketing interventions and taboos could serve as a topic for subsequent research discussion.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the National Science and Technology Council of Taiwan (NSTC 114-2410-H-030-016 -SSS) for supporting this research.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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