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Foreword

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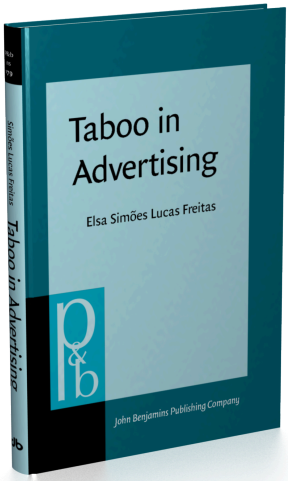

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Taboo in Advertising
Elsa Simões Lucas Freitas
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Foreword

Much of the popular attention to advertising is focused on a few ads that challenge taboos, for instance on the treatment of sex, bodily functions, or death. If one turns to the monthly reports of complaints about advertising in Britain, whether in the press or in broadcasting, a number of them deal with images, words, or suggestions that someone considers indecent or transgressive. In 2005, the most complained about ads in Britain included one for KFC showing call centre workers talking with their mouths full, and one for Pot Noodle that 'featured a man with a brass horn down his trousers' (www.asa.org.uk). More people complained about these ads than about ads that seemed deceptive, unfair, or even dangerous. Press reports on ads focus a disproportionate amount of attention on a few taboo-breaking ads, such as those for Benetton, Diesel, or FCUK, and in reproducing the posters and repeating the offending scenes, they contribute to public awareness of those ads, those brands, and the cultural boundaries that are being maintained.

Newspaper reports, talk at parties, and denunciations from campaigning groups refer to shock, decency, community standards, and advertising traditions as if the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is effective for the advertiser were obvious and well-known. But are they? The public discussion tends to circle around the same phrases, without much detailed attention to ads and the ways they are interpreted. There have been some more analytical treatments of specific ads in some of the academic studies of advertising language: for instance, Torben Vestergaard and Kim Schrøder in *The Language of Advertising* have a chapter on the gender ideology of ads for sanitary protection; Guy Cook writes about the uses of sexuality in ads for perfume and cars in *The Discourse of Advertising* (2nd ed, 2001); and I have written about AIDS/HIV campaigns in *Words in Ads* (1984). Academics in linguistics, sociology, media and cultural studies, and marketing keep coming back to the ads that explore the uses of words that are supposed to remain unsaid and images that are supposed to remain unseen, because they are the kinds of texts that show how societies are organised and how they are changing.

Despite these studies, there has been surprisingly little serious and extensive analysis of these taboos as they shape the texts of ads, both those ads that avoid causing offence and those that court it. What makes a specific topic or reference taboo (as opposed to just being unpleasant, controversial, or unpopular with some people)? Are the various topics of taboos, from toilet paper to funeral directors,

related to each other, or are they just a jumbled list of social discomforts? How do advertisers who have to deal with these topics if they are to market their brands at all, for instance sellers of condoms or sanitary protection, get their messages across without causing unnecessary offence? And why would any ad for a product that doesn't have any taboos attached (a car, a coffee, an ice cream, a gas utility) deliberately invoke a topic that is supposedly unmentionable? How do visual and aural modes work with verbal modes when taboo is avoided or invoked? And if the invocation of taboo is indirect, how are the texts interpreted?

Elsa Simões Lucas Freitas provides the first systematic monograph devoted to these questions. There are several reasons why this book makes a useful addition to the many books that take up one or another taboo ad in the course of talking about other issues. First, she goes beyond the few well-known controversial cases and has a wide range of examples, for all sorts of products, using all sorts of textual strategies, reminding us just how many ads and product categories have some taboo at issue. She deals with print, outdoor and television ads. The best of her ads in print show us how much an advertiser can do with just a few words and a picture, for instance in the ad for the dog obedience school. The television ads, on the other hand, show how taboo can be expressed or suppressed by the simultaneous use of a variety of modes – written and spoken language, sound effects and music, actions, gestures, and expressions, camera angles, movements, and editing – in texts that are almost too complex to be described in print. As with all the best writing on advertising, a reader comes away with both a new respect for the skills and ingenuity of advertisers, and new anxieties about the potential effects of ads in society.

The book is also notable in using both Portuguese and British examples. There have been book-length studies comparing ads from different countries. But this book is not, for the most part, a study in cultural contrasts; the differences are there, but are too complex and subtle to allow for easy generalizations. Since many of the agencies involved are parts of international networks, and the clients are often multinational brands, it is perhaps not surprising that the two bodies of ads are often similar, and that they include some campaigns that were run in both countries. But there are also differences in the treatment of taboo that emerge when a reader familiar with one set of ads comes across striking examples from the other. The indirectness and wit of the best British ads is well-known, but I was surprised to find the Portuguese more relaxed about some sexual issues, and also less likely to indulge in rudeness as humorous in itself. Similar issues would presumably arise with other bodies of ads – French, Portuguese, Singaporean, or Indian – wherever the advertising industry has to deal with competition for attention by sophisticated use of media. There is room for more work on how the taboo ads reflect and reproduce cultural differences, in these and other cultures, and how they follow and perhaps effect cultural changes by embodying cultural tensions.

This systematic overview and detailed analysis of ads in two cultures provides a useful basis for further studies. The particular ads she discusses may quickly pass out of circulation, but the issues she discusses will remain relevant to each new ad campaign that tests the boundaries of what is considered decent and acceptable.

Greg Myers
Lancaster University