



Exploitative and degrading advertising research 2013 - overview

In 2013 the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) commissioned research to explore community perceptions about the use of sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading in advertising. This research, conducted by Colmar Brunton Social Research, also assessed current community attitudes toward specific issues and importantly assessed the Advertising Standards Board's (the Board) alignment with prevailing community standards in relation to this issue.

The exploitative and degrading advertising research 2013 specifically relates to Section 2.2 of the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) **Code of Ethics**, which states:

Advertising or marketing communications should not employ sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading of any individual or group of people.

Section 2.2 of the Code of Ethics was introduced in January 2012 in response to **community concern** regarding the objectification of men, children and women in advertising. Since its introduction, the exploitative and degrading provision attracted complaints of approximately **14 per cent** of all cases considered in 2012. The aim of this research was to further explore this issue and provide a valuable resource for advertisers, the Board and community members.

The exploitative and degrading advertising research included quantitative testing of community reactions to 12 advertisements which were considered by the Board in relation to Section 2.2 of the Code of Ethics since January 2012. In an additional qualitative research stage, nine advertisements were explored by focus groups, including three which groups had not previously seen.

Research results in brief

Research results indicate that Board decisions in relation to the use of sexual appeal in an exploitative and degrading manner were aligned with community opinions. It also indicated that the community had a high awareness of the ASB and recognised the importance of the work of the ASB.

In relation to sexual appeal in an exploitative and degrading manner in advertising, the research findings suggest:

- community opinions and Board decisions were aligned in nine of the 12 advertisements tested during the quantitative stage, with mixed community reactions for the remaining three.
- factors considered by the community in determining advertisement acceptability included the medium in which the ad appeared, audience restrictions and relevance of the imagery to the product or service being advertised.
- particular concern about images which are able to be viewed by children in the public domain such as billboards, as opposed to other media forms such as internet where the audience may be restricted.
- consistent variations in acceptability in response to the advertisements shown depending on gender and age. Respondents aged 45 years and over were more likely to consider advertisements unacceptable compared to 18-44 year olds. Females were also more likely to consider these advertisements unacceptable as opposed to males.
- concerns about advertisements depicting actors, particularly women, who appear to be under 18 years of age.
- the use of sexual appeal in advertising to be unacceptable when ads were able to be viewed by children, if the ad showed sexual acts, if the product was aimed at younger people, children or families, and if there was no direct relevance to the product being advertised.

General research findings

General community perceptions and opinions tested in 2013 indicated:

- a significant majority (74%) of respondents saw the work of the ASB as important.
- spontaneous awareness of the ASB as a complaints organisation continues to remain high at 63%.
- the majority of community members (75%) would make a complaint to the ASB if they were extremely offended or concerned by an advertisement.
- the community has a strong agreement with each section of the Code of Ethics, ranging from 81% to 86% agreement.
- the general public with no concern about paid advertising standards significantly increased from 59% in 2012 to 64% in 2013.

Children in advertising

Focus group discussion explored the use of children in advertising. The consensus was that it was unacceptable to use children in advertising for adult products such as sex, drugs or alcohol, or when the product advertised was not related to children or to family use. Groups found the use of children in advertising acceptable if the product is relevant to the child, when children are undertaking childlike activities, and when parents have consented to using their children in the advertisements.

Sexualisation of children in advertising is **not acceptable** and will always be regarded as exploitative and degrading under the Code of Ethics. In focus groups, community members found two advertisements featuring children unacceptable. In these, girls were posed in a way which the groups believed to be suggestive and inappropriate for their age.

Social media advertising

In the quantitative stage of the 2013 research, some members of the community were uncertain whether the Code of Ethics would apply to advertising material on the internet and social media websites such as Facebook.

Subsequently, in the qualitative stage, focus group results showed that the community was in agreement that social media advertising, including advertiser and user generated content on Facebook pages, should be considered under the Code of Ethics. Focus groups agreed that the same standards in advertising should apply to all forms of media—both traditional and social media.