Community Perceptions Research

2024

Research objectives

- Explore general perceptions of advertising.

- Explore what Australians find concerning in advertising.

- Determine levels of awareness and understanding of Ad Standards and the advertising rules.

- Investigate perceptions of inappropriate or offensive language in advertising.

- Investigate perceptions of violent or scary content in advertising.

Approach
Sample & methodology

Stage 1 – Qualitative deep dive

- 10 online & in-person focus groups
- Mixed aged, gender, location
- Culturally & Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and First Nations groups
- General discussion about advertising issues, attitudes towards language and violence in advertising

Stage 2 – Quantitative validation

- National online survey
- N = 2,037
- Representative of the Australian population based on age, gender, location
- General questions on advertising issues, use of language in advertising, perceptions of violence in advertising

How do Australians feel about advertising?

What do Australians expect from advertising?

- Many claim to be disengaged from advertising

- But we are constantly exposed and still take notice

- We care that ads are held to high standards

- Because we don't get to choose what we see and hear

- Which means regulation is reassuring

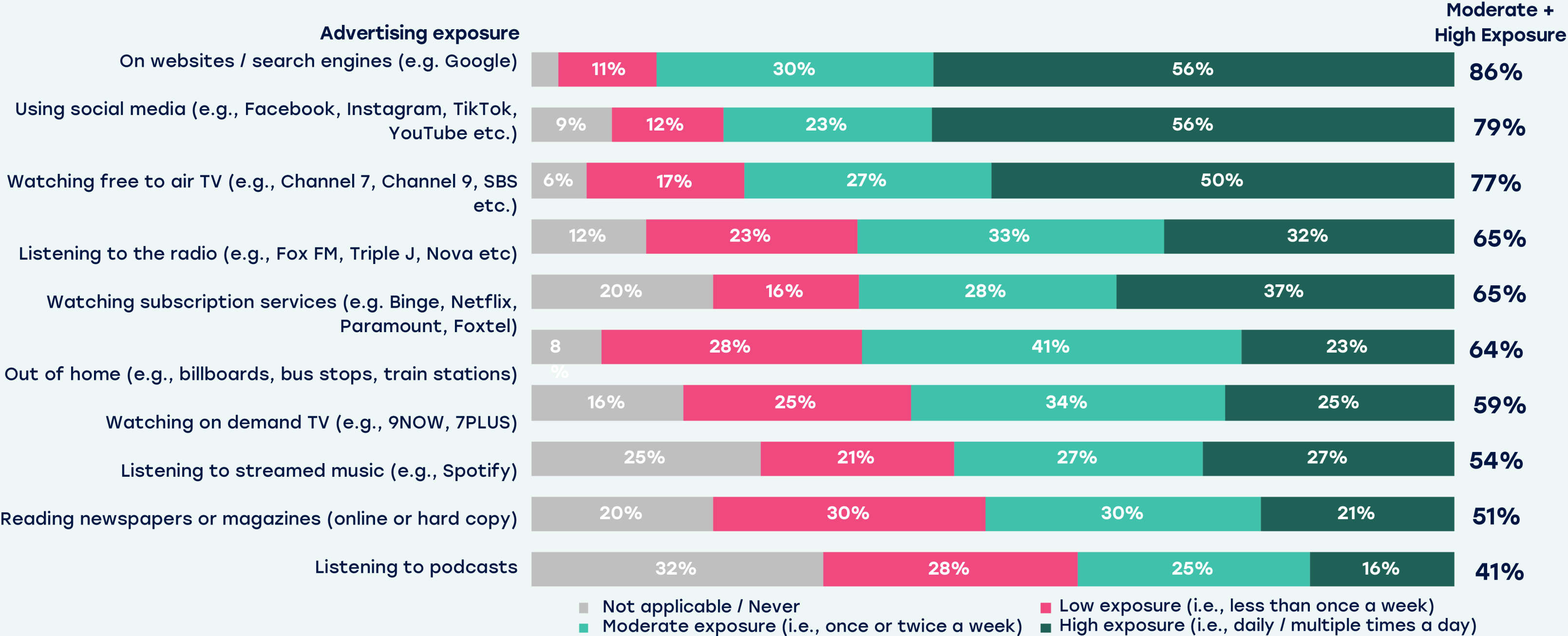- Because advertising needs to reflect community standards

There are concerns that standards are slipping because content that once would not have been acceptable is now seen in advertising. Although, advertising is now more sensitive on other issues.

But...

People also recognise that standards in society change over time, so advertising will move with the times.

People are frequently exposed to advertising across a range of channels.

Most commonly, people have high exposure to advertising through online channels or free to air TV (at least once daily). Online channels include websites, search engines, and social media. Most people have at least moderate exposure to advertising out of home, watching on-demand TV, or listening to the radio (once or twice a week).

Advertising exposure

Moderate + High Exposure

Channel	Not applicable / Never	Low exposure	Moderate exposure	High exposure	Moderate + High Exposure
On websites / search engines (e.g. Google)		11%	30%	56%	**86%**
Using social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube etc.)	9%	12%	23%	56%	**79%**
Watching free to air TV (e.g., Channel 7, Channel 9, SBS etc.)	6%	17%	27%	50%	**77%**
Listening to the radio (e.g., Fox FM, Triple J, Nova etc)	12%	23%	33%	32%	**65%**
Watching subscription services (e.g. Binge, Netflix, Paramount, Foxtel)	20%	16%	28%	37%	**65%**
Out of home (e.g., billboards, bus stops, train stations)	8%	28%	41%	23%	**64%**
Watching on demand TV (e.g., 9NOW, 7PLUS)	16%	25%	34%	25%	**59%**
Listening to streamed music (e.g., Spotify)	25%	21%	27%	27%	**54%**
Reading newspapers or magazines (online or hard copy)	20%	30%	30%	21%	**51%**
Listening to podcasts	32%	28%	25%	16%	**41%**

- Not applicable / Never
- Low exposure (i.e., less than once a week)
- Moderate exposure (i.e., once or twice a week)
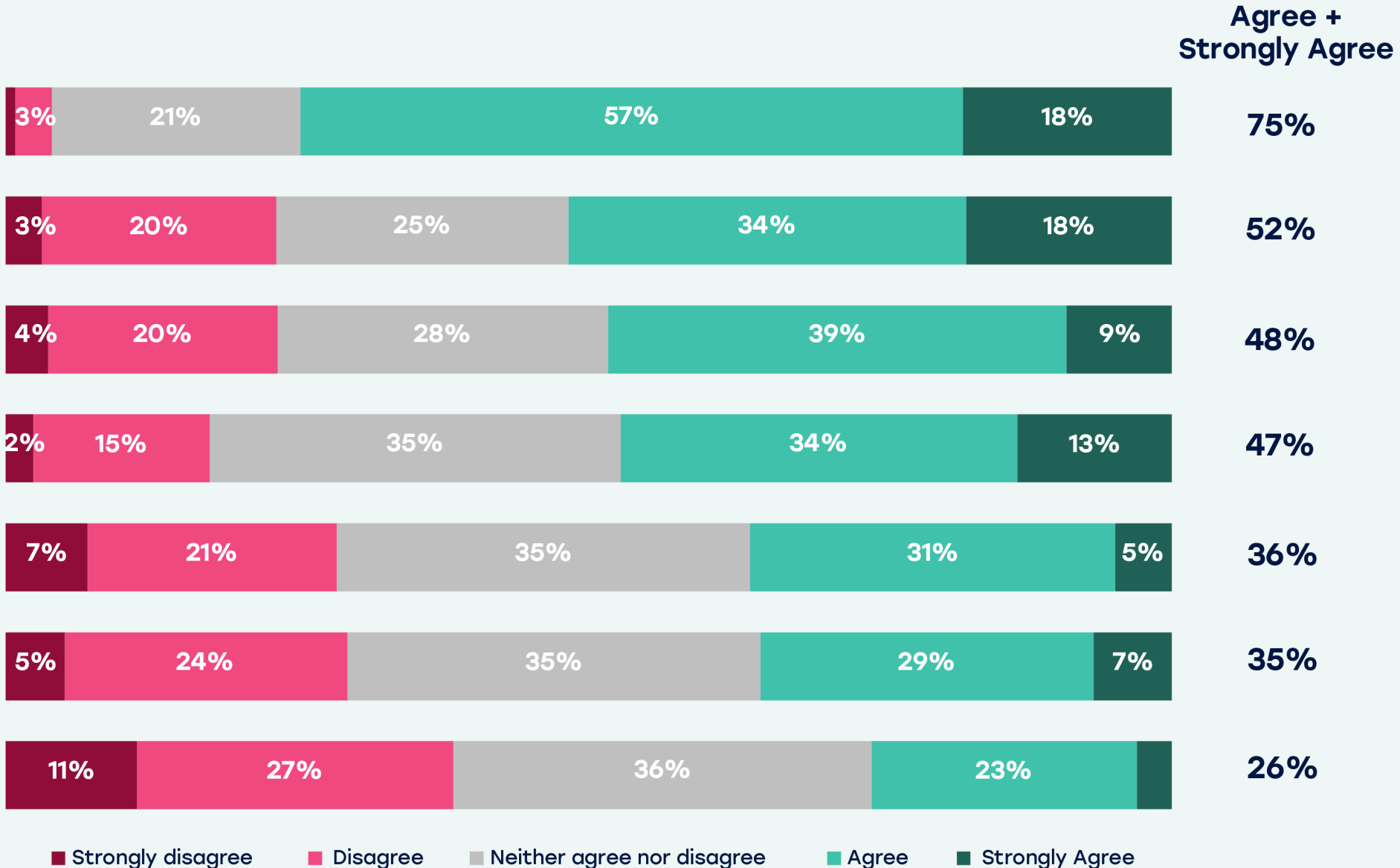- High exposure (i.e., daily / multiple times a day)

Most people agree advertising should reflect community standards, and don't generally trust advertising.

Only 24% indicated they are concerned about the content they see in advertising, but 75% agree that advertising should reflect community standards. This is higher among people aged 50+ and females, and lower among people aged 16-24 and males.

Trust is higher among people aged 25-49 and CALD people, and lower among people aged 50+ and non-CALD people.

Trust is also significantly higher amongst people who are aware of Ad Standards - 52% agree + strongly agree.
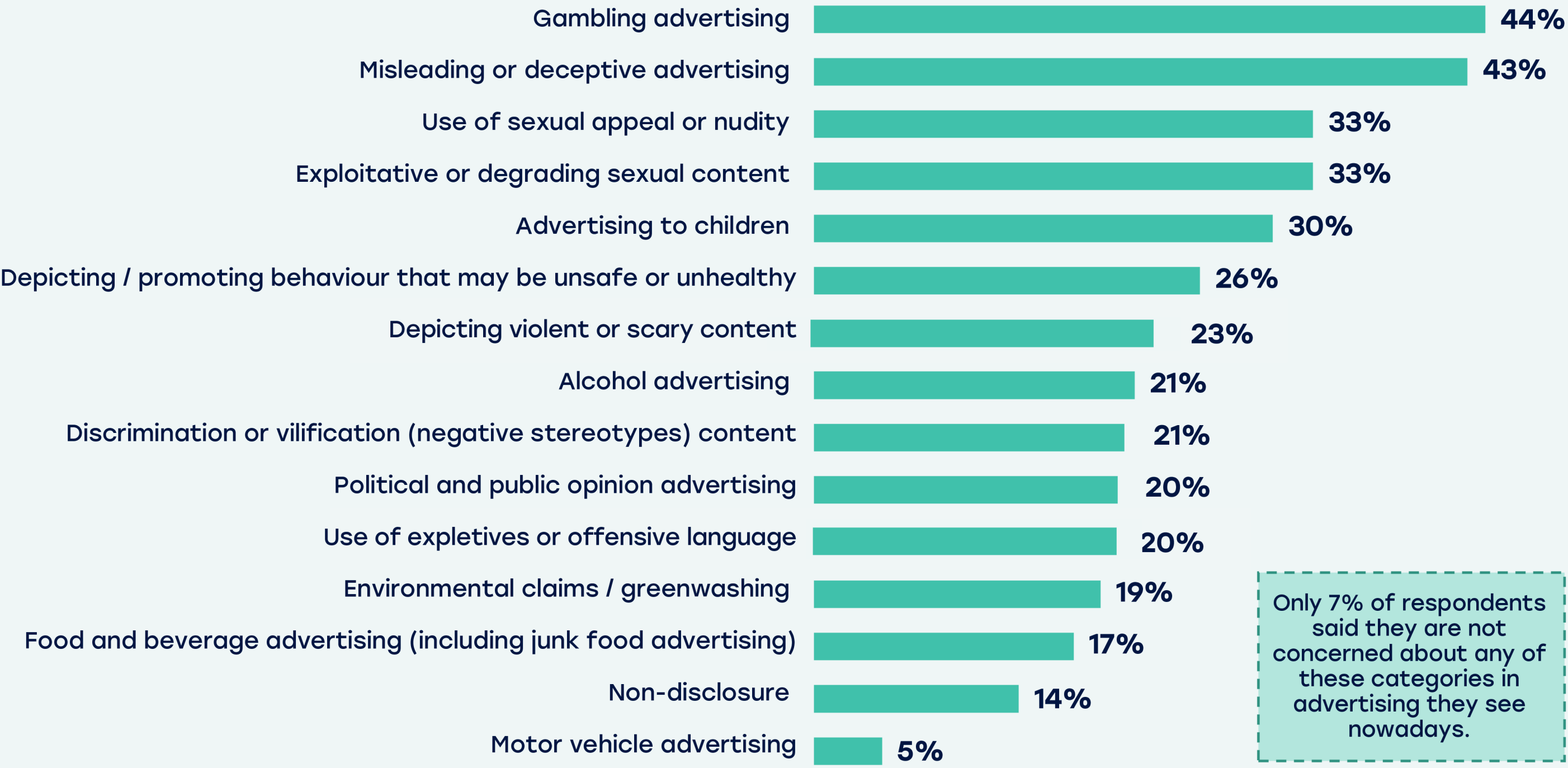
Attitudes towards advertising

Agree + Strongly Agree

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree + Strongly Agree
It is important that advertising meets / reflects community standards	3%		21%	57%	18%	**75%**
I generally don't pay attention to advertising	3%	20%	25%	34%	18%	**52%**
I am rarely concerned about the content I see in advertising	4%	20%	28%	39%	9%	**48%**
Advertising is less entertaining / interesting now than it used to be	2%	15%	35%	34%	13%	**47%**
I see people like me represented in advertising	7%	21%	35%	31%	5%	**36%**
Compared to 3 years ago, I am more concerned about the content I see in advertising now	5%	24%	35%	29%	7%	**35%**
I generally trust the advertising I see and hear	11%	27%	36%	23%		**26%**

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Source: B3. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: Total sample, n= 2,037
Note: Labels less than 4% are removed for clarity.

# Gambling advertising and misleading/deceptive advertising are of most concern.

Category	Percentage
Gambling advertising	44%
Misleading or deceptive advertising	43%
Use of sexual appeal or nudity	33%
Exploitative or degrading sexual content	33%
Advertising to children	30%
Depicting / promoting behaviour that may be unsafe or unhealthy	26%
Depicting violent or scary content	23%
Alcohol advertising	21%
Discrimination or vilification (negative stereotypes) content	21%
Political and public opinion advertising	20%
Use of expletives or offensive language	20%
Environmental claims / greenwashing	19%
Food and beverage advertising (including junk food advertising)	17%
Non-disclosure	14%
Motor vehicle advertising	5%

Only 7% of respondents said they are not concerned about any of these categories in advertising they see nowadays.

Most Australians believe that there are rules for advertising but fewer are familiar with Ad Standards.

Awareness of advertising rules

4%

50%

46%
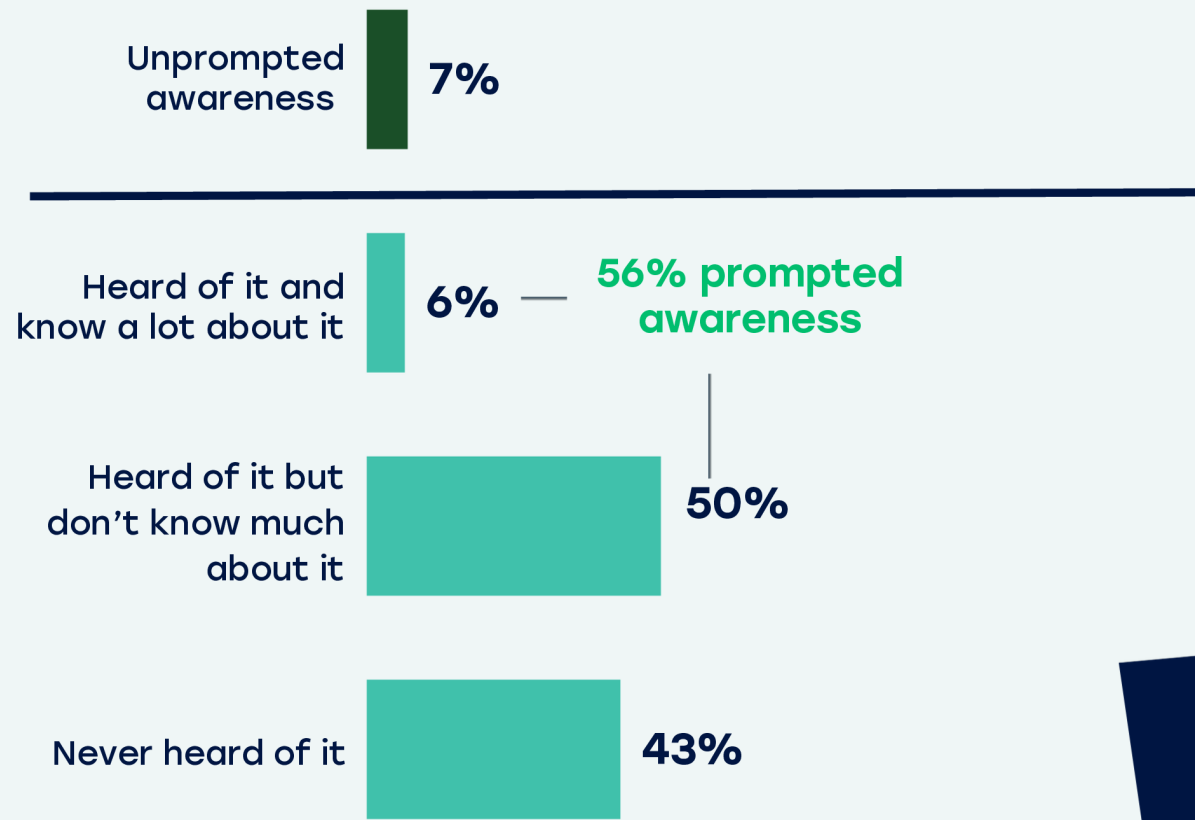
96%
are aware that there are rules about advertising that advertisers must follow
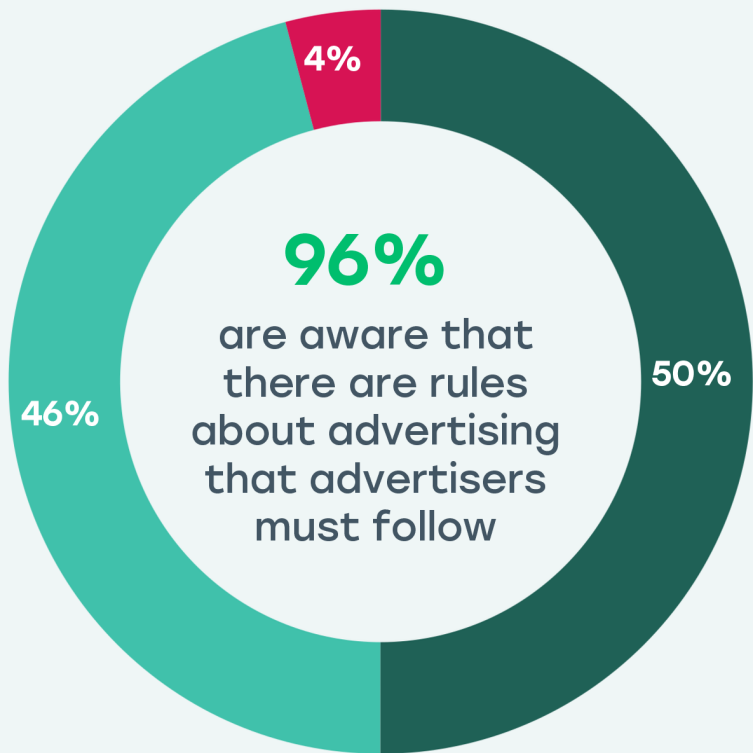
■ Yes - definitely ■ Yes - I think so ■ No

Higher certainty among those aware of Ad Standards (61% 'yes definitely') vs those who had never heard of Ad Standards (35% 'yes definitely')

Awareness of Ad Standards

Unprompted awareness **7%**

Heard of it and know a lot about it **6%** — **56% prompted awareness**

Heard of it but don't know much about it **50%**

Never heard of it **43%**

While 7% of people named Ad Standards as the authority to complain to about ads, 9% nominated ACCC and 4% nominated ACMA

Importance of Ad Standards

89% of Australians believe that Ad Standards is important

| 7% | 35% | 54% |
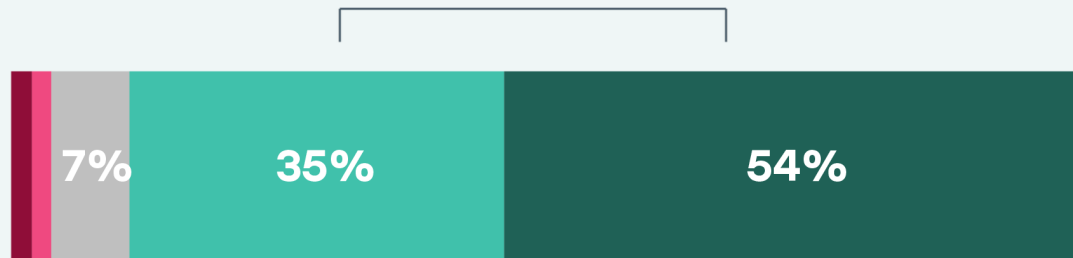
■ Very unimportant
■ Somewhat unimportant
■ Neither important or unimportant
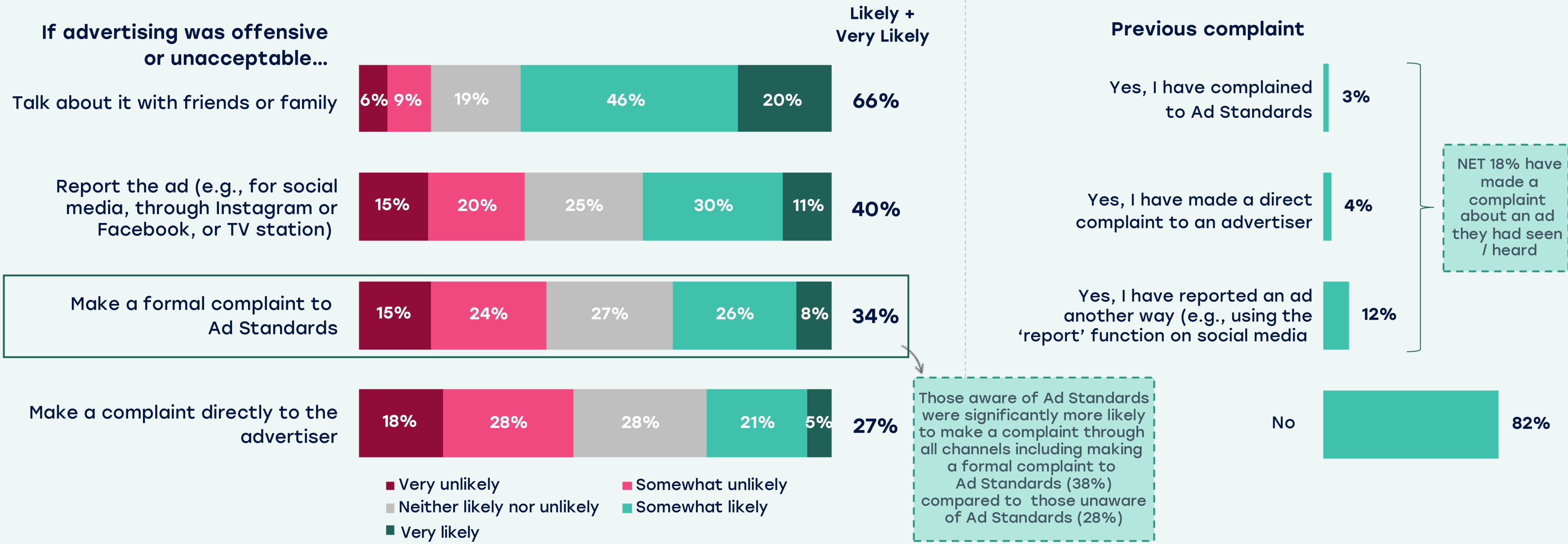■ Somewhat important
■ Very Important

Description of Ad Standards shown in survey:

Ad Standards handles complaints about advertising.

The rules for advertising are listed in the AANA Code of Ethics. The rules cover issues like discrimination, sexual appeal, violence, language, and health and safety. There are also specific rules for advertising to kids, making environmental claims, food and beverage advertising, car advertising and gambling advertising.

If an advertiser breaks the rules, the ad must be changed or removed.

People are more likely to talk about advertising they found offensive or unacceptable with family or friends than complain through formal channels.

If advertising was offensive or unacceptable...

Likely + Very Likely

Previous complaint

	Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely	Likely + Very Likely
Talk about it with friends or family	6%	9%	19%	46%	20%	66%
Report the ad (e.g., for social media, through Instagram or Facebook, or TV station)	15%	20%	25%	30%	11%	40%
Make a formal complaint to Ad Standards	15%	24%	27%	26%	8%	34%
Make a complaint directly to the advertiser	18%	28%	28%	21%	5%	27%

Legend:
- ■ Very unlikely
- ■ Somewhat unlikely
- ■ Neither likely nor unlikely
- ■ Somewhat likely
- ■ Very likely

Previous complaint

Yes, I have complained to Ad Standards	3%
Yes, I have made a direct complaint to an advertiser	4%
Yes, I have reported an ad another way (e.g., using the 'report' function on social media	12%
No	82%

NET 18% have made a complaint about an ad they had seen / heard

Those aware of Ad Standards were significantly more likely to make a complaint through all channels including making a formal complaint to Ad Standards (38%) compared to those unaware of Ad Standards (28%)

Source: C5. If you saw or heard advertising that you found offensive or thought was unacceptable, how likely are you to...?; C6. Have you ever made a complaint about an ad you had seen or heard...?
Base: Total sample, n= 2,037; Aware of Ad Standards, n=1,155; Unaware of Ad Standards, n=882.
*Note: % of those likely to submit a formal complaint to Ad Standards is likely inflated as this question was asked after respondents were prompted with information about Ad Standards and its role.

There are key factors which can immediately influence how we feel about ads which might be straying close to the 'line'.

Audience 'control' over what they see

- Participants in the group discussions were more concerned about ads if they felt audiences had less control over their exposure, in that they weren't able to switch, skip or block ads.

- Out of home advertising can feel particularly untargeted. Parents were concerned about children seeing swear words and then having to explain why the language was not acceptable, as well as not being able to shield children from inappropriate imagery.

- When ads are more targeted, people in the group discussions were more lenient in their judgements. There was also acceptance that some ads would be ok on TV later at night, but unacceptable during the day.

"I think things like radio ads, bus stops, signage, that's all in the public domain. So, if there are things that we don't say or do in the public domain, they shouldn't be on ads. It's not like when you watch TV or are on the internet and you can just switch it off" Male, 30-45, CALD

Perceived influence on children

- The impact of advertising on children was a key consideration, even amongst young participants who weren't parents. Participants were concerned about normalisation of anti-social language or behaviours through advertising, especially when children have less ability to discern context.

- When advertising steps over the 'line' it was seen as making it harder for parents to instil values and discourage negative behaviour. There was concern about desensitisation that could have unintended consequences for families or society as a whole.

- Influence on children is a key reason why there is a difference between how acceptable people viewed ads from their own perspective, versus when they considered what was acceptable for the community.

"It's when they are lowering the acceptable standards and values. And push boundaries so that our kids go 'yep that's cool'. I don't like it when the kids think it's normal" Male, 40-55

Tone and humour

- Tone and humour can make all the difference to how an ad is perceived. When the tone is perceived to be light-hearted and lacking in any negative intent, people are more likely to feel that it is acceptable, even when skirting close to the 'line'.

- There were clear indications that people could overlook potential strong language or violence when the ad is clever or funny.

"It can be funny if there is light-heartedness to it. An ad with violence can be ok depending on the tone you are going to use" Female, 30-45, CALD

People can have strong opinions of advertisers and the advertising industry when ads do step over the 'line'.

"There's a lot of different ways to be creative without having to go for the shock factor or something that's unrelated to be controversial... I believe that sometimes they know what they are doing... what they are intending on doing is trying to break the rules" Male, 25-35

Shock tactic

Bad reputation   Reflects badly

Lazy   Poor decision   Dumb

Unnecessary

Pushing boundaries   Provocative

Lack of ideas   Unacceptable

Turn off

Community perceptions of language in advertising

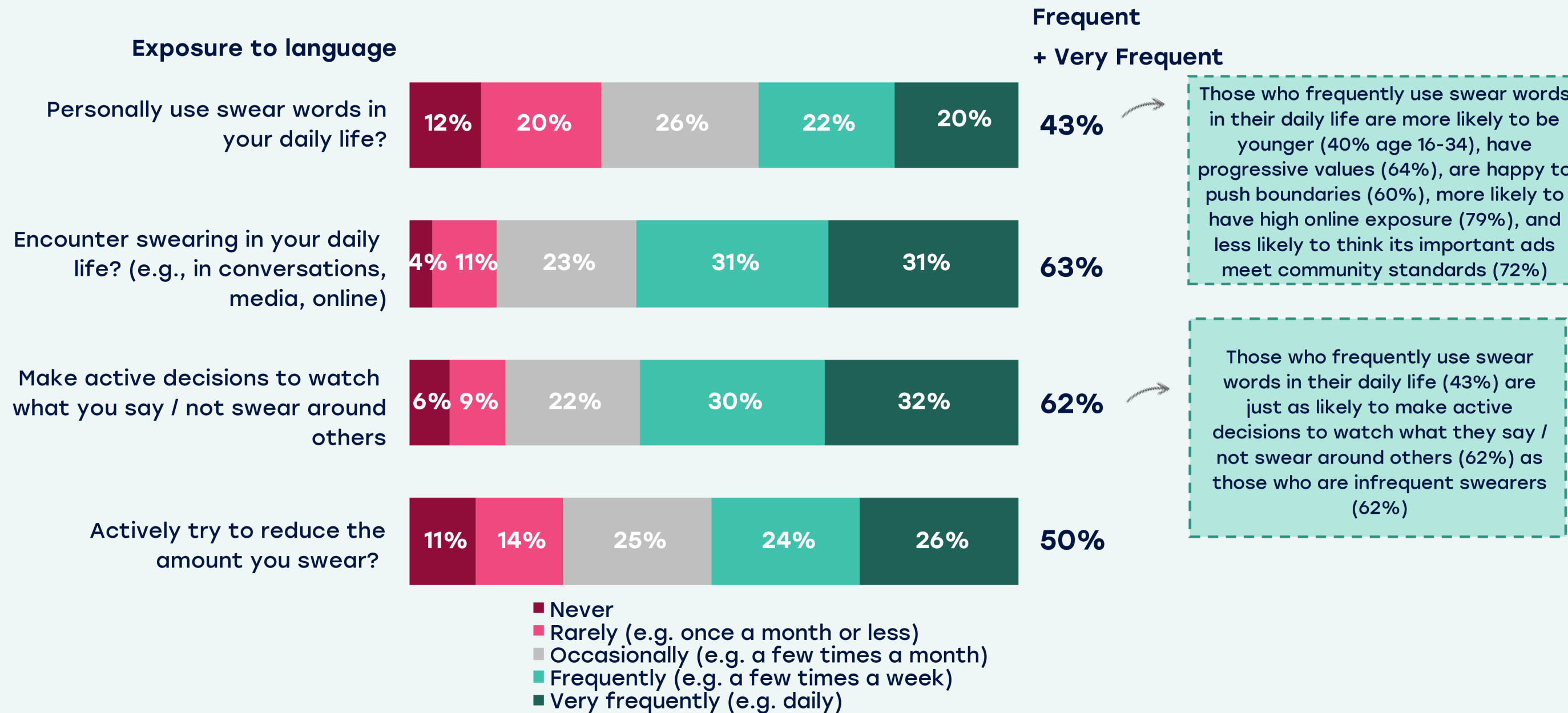# Language in advertising holds a mirror up to society.

When language steps over the line, it can challenge how we see ourselves as a society – because language reflects our values and social norms.

The community wants advertising to be responsible by not exposing children to strong language because we don't want it normalised. We recognise that some language is more offensive to others than it might be to ourselves.

Participants in this research believed that we need to maintain higher standards in advertising than what might be used or heard in their daily life, because it needs to continue to reflect what is good for society as a whole.

"There's stuff that does not need to be used in a public context, where it's broadcast to a wide variety of people in the community. Then it needs to be more conservative, because we shouldn't be offending anyone just to sell products" Male, 50+

Strong language is used or heard by many of us, every day, but that doesn't make it ok for advertising.

Exposure to language

Frequent + Very Frequent

Question	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very frequently	Frequent + Very Frequent
Personally use swear words in your daily life?	12%	20%	26%	22%	20%	43%
Encounter swearing in your daily life? (e.g., in conversations, media, online)	4%	11%	23%	31%	31%	63%
Make active decisions to watch what you say / not swear around others	6%	9%	22%	30%	32%	62%
Actively try to reduce the amount you swear?	11%	14%	25%	24%	26%	50%

Legend:
- Never
- Rarely (e.g. once a month or less)
- Occasionally (e.g. a few times a month)
- Frequently (e.g. a few times a week)
- Very frequently (e.g. daily)

> Those who frequently use swear words in their daily life are more likely to be younger (40% age 16-34), have progressive values (64%), are happy to push boundaries (60%), more likely to have high online exposure (79%), and less likely to think its important ads meet community standards (72%)

> Those who frequently use swear words in their daily life (43%) are just as likely to make active decisions to watch what they say / not swear around others (62%) as those who are infrequent swearers (62%)

"Swearing is absolutely part of life; you hear it everywhere. But there's a time and a place and we don't need to be making it more acceptable" Female, 30-45 "

"I say don't swear because it makes you look cheap, and you lose respect. Don't be that person that others look at and wonder why you are speaking like that" Female 40-55
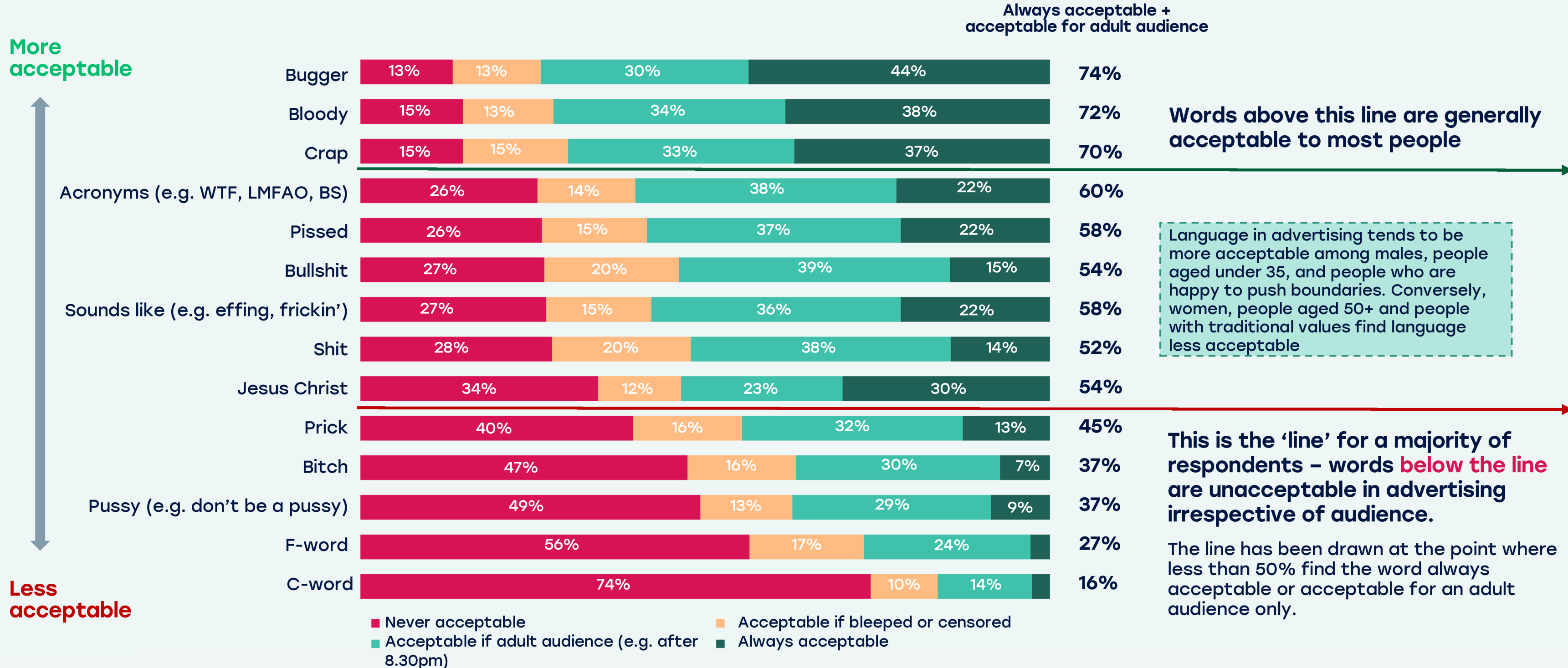
"It's fine when you're down at the gun club, or you're out the back of the workshop, but not when you're in the front room when there's other people around" Male, 40-55

"When we're up bush with the boys, everyone is swearing and all that, talking shit. But I say to my boys, not when we're back at home, we don't talk like that" Male, 30-45

There's a clear line when it comes to words that are unacceptable.

More acceptable

Less acceptable

Always acceptable + acceptable for adult audience

Word	Never acceptable	Acceptable if bleeped or censored	Acceptable if adult audience	Always acceptable	Always acceptable + acceptable for adult audience
Bugger	13%	13%	30%	44%	74%
Bloody	15%	13%	34%	38%	72%
Crap	15%	15%	33%	37%	70%
Acronyms (e.g. WTF, LMFAO, BS)	26%	14%	38%	22%	60%
Pissed	26%	15%	37%	22%	58%
Bullshit	27%	20%	39%	15%	54%
Sounds like (e.g. effing, frickin')	27%	15%	36%	22%	58%
Shit	28%	20%	38%	14%	52%
Jesus Christ	34%	12%	23%	30%	54%
Prick	40%	16%	32%	13%	45%
Bitch	47%	16%	30%	7%	37%
Pussy (e.g. don't be a pussy)	49%	13%	29%	9%	37%
F-word	56%	17%	24%		27%
C-word	74%	10%	14%		16%

Words above this line are generally acceptable to most people

Language in advertising tends to be more acceptable among males, people aged under 35, and people who are happy to push boundaries. Conversely, women, people aged 50+ and people with traditional values find language less acceptable

This is the 'line' for a majority of respondents – words below the line are unacceptable in advertising irrespective of audience.

The line has been drawn at the point where less than 50% find the word always acceptable or acceptable for an adult audience only.

Legend:
- ■ Never acceptable
- ■ Acceptable if bleeped or censored
- ■ Acceptable if adult audience (e.g. after 8.30pm)
- ■ Always acceptable

Language standards evolve over time.

Even if there are higher expectations of what is acceptable in advertising, there is recognition that language is dynamic and that tolerance levels in the community can change.

In the group discussions, younger participants clearly showed a higher level of openness to strong language – not just because they are younger, but because for some people the meaning and intention in words has changed.

There was a higher level of comfort with use of the f-word and even the c-word, even though there was recognition that older people may not feel the same way.

Conversely older people commented on how words like 'bloody' and 'crap' would have been unacceptable decades ago but are now commonplace and inoffensive for most.

Participants from CALD backgrounds noted that standards are different in Australia compared with other cultures – in that Australian society is less strict about language and so advertising is also less strict.

"I think we have to think about when language can be hurtful. I'm 54 and I'm a lesbian and things have changed for me about what I can call myself…I think there needs to be guidelines for acceptable language, but language is changing so we might need to also adapt and evolve" Female, 50+

"I've grown up in a different environment, where explicit language is really a part of what I hear every day" Female, 18-24

"I feel we probably have a more relaxed viewpoint on swearing compared with an older generation. I feel like that word (c-word) is becoming a little bit more trendy at the moment, whereas people like my parents get really offended by it. But I'm not offended" Female, 18-24

"I'm still quite new to Aussie culture, but I see that even when something is serious we make a joke of it. But where I come from, we are very serious and we never take things this lightly" Female, 30-45, CALD

"Our generation has grown up different, we didn't swear much when we were younger and we taught our kids the same way. There's so much social media and stuff around that we are not doing the teaching (of values) anymore. The grandkids are being taught by their peers and whoever's on social media" Male, 60+

"I think language censorship is like pretty whack in terms of I think it should all be fine, considering just all the violence and like the sexual stuff in like songs. So, I think the double standard is crazy. I think you should be able to say whatever you want" Male, 25-35

"I come from an Asian family where we were brought up with not using bad words at all. So, I'm raising the way I have been raised. But when they go to school, they feel surprised because the kids in the school use it. If you ask my kids about the same ad, they don't even feel any problem with words like bloody and freaking because they hear it in their daily life" Male, 30-45, CALD

"I think about the fact that there used to be words that attacked people who were intellectually or sexually diverse and we've lost those because of social changes. I also think we have to lower our expectations of some of these words because sometimes that's just how people vent" Male, 30-45 CALD

It's what you say, how you say it and why you say it that matters.

The qualitative research revealed that while it is easier to judge whether certain language in advertising is acceptable or unacceptable, there are nuances in reaching this decision.

There are clearly words that are not acceptable, but what matters is also why they are not acceptable.

Risk of offence, tone, context and the advertiser's intention influence perceptions of whether language in an ad was acceptable.

Strongest influence on whether the language is acceptable

Considerations when language is close to 'the line'

Offensiveness

There are some words which, for most people, are never acceptable in advertising. The risk of offence to others was considered, even if it the word might not be personally offensive. This is the first hurdle in determining acceptability.

Tone

Tone can matter as much as meaning. The same word can be acceptable, or unacceptable, depending on how it is expressed. A word can feel more acceptable when said in a light-hearted way, compared with when it is perceived as demeaning or aggressive.

Context

When and where language is used can make strong language more permissible. If people can see themselves saying something similar, in the same context, the language becomes more relatable.

Intention

There's low tolerance for language that is perceived to be used intentionally for shock value. This can lead to accusations of 'lazy' advertising and push back against the idea that the advertiser is merely trying to provoke a reaction.

Community perceptions of violence in advertising

How do we perceive and define violence?

In the qualitative research, the word 'violence' immediately brought to mind acts of intimidation and / or harm inflicted by someone towards another that could cause physical or emotional injury.

'Violence' was mainly associated with domestic violence, community violence or other criminal violence.

There are people within the community for whom violence in advertising will never be acceptable.

The word 'unnecessary' was commonly used alongside concerns about desensitisation and glorification of violence. Some are also worried that violence in advertising could be triggering and distressing.

Normalisation of violence, insensitivity to social issues and triggering audiences are top of mind issues in relation to violence in advertising.

Only a minority of people are consuming content that may be violent or scary on a regular basis – most are rarely or never interested.

However, exposure to violent or scary content across all media channels / mediums was generally low.
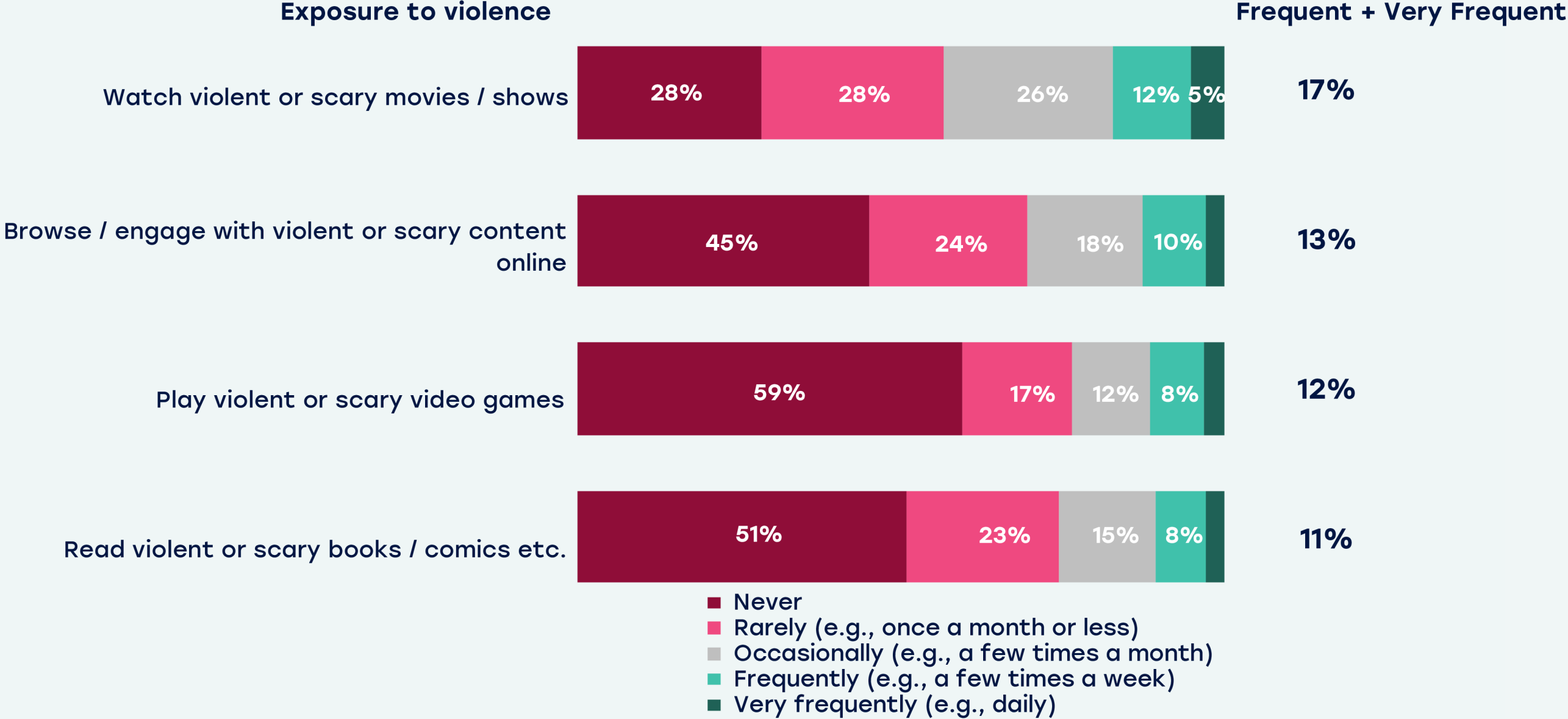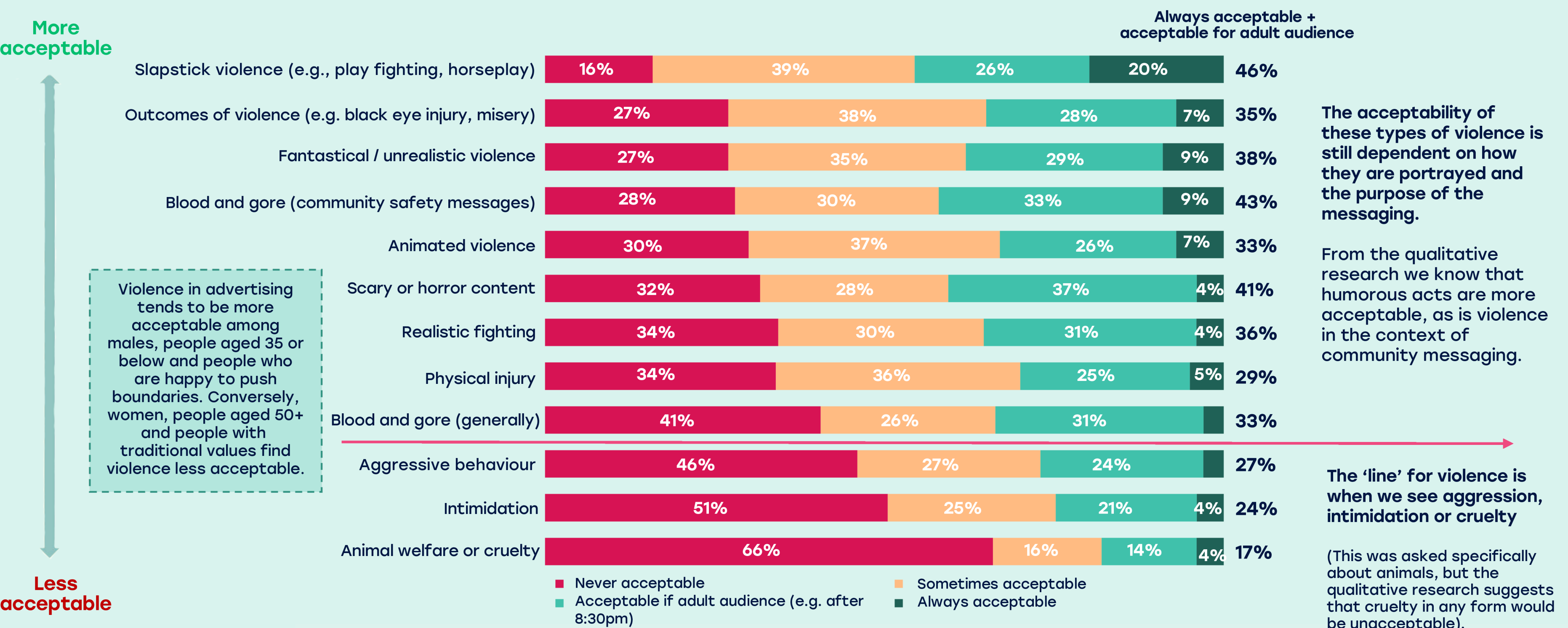
Violent or scary content is not viewed regularly by most people, although violent or scary movies had the highest element of engagement.

- Males were significantly more likely to engage with this content across all formats than females.
- People over the age of 50 were the least likely to engage with violent or scary content. Those aged 25-34 were more likely to engage.

While violent or scary content in films, shows, games and books does not necessarily reflect what we see in advertising, people's openness to this content may influence how strong they perceive the violence to be in advertising.

Exposure to violence   **Frequent + Very Frequent**

Watch violent or scary movies / shows
28% | 28% | 26% | 12% | 5%   **17%**

Browse / engage with violent or scary content online
45% | 24% | 18% | 10%   **13%**

Play violent or scary video games
59% | 17% | 12% | 8%   **12%**

Read violent or scary books / comics etc.
51% | 23% | 15% | 8%   **11%**

- Never
- Rarely (e.g., once a month or less)
- Occasionally (e.g., a few times a month)
- Frequently (e.g., a few times a week)
- Very frequently (e.g., daily)

When acts of 'violence' are considered in isolation, most are acceptable at least sometimes – but the line is drawn at aggression, intimidation and cruelty.

More acceptable

Always acceptable + acceptable for adult audience

Category	Never acceptable	Sometimes acceptable	Acceptable if adult audience	Always acceptable	Total
Slapstick violence (e.g., play fighting, horseplay)	16%	39%	26%	20%	46%
Outcomes of violence (e.g. black eye injury, misery)	27%	38%	28%	7%	35%
Fantastical / unrealistic violence	27%	35%	29%	9%	38%
Blood and gore (community safety messages)	28%	30%	33%	9%	43%
Animated violence	30%	37%	26%	7%	33%
Scary or horror content	32%	28%	37%	4%	41%
Realistic fighting	34%	30%	31%	4%	36%
Physical injury	34%	36%	25%	5%	29%
Blood and gore (generally)	41%	26%	31%		33%
Aggressive behaviour	46%	27%	24%		27%
Intimidation	51%	25%	21%	4%	24%
Animal welfare or cruelty	66%	16%	14%	4%	17%

Less acceptable

Violence in advertising tends to be more acceptable among males, people aged 35 or below and people who are happy to push boundaries. Conversely, women, people aged 50+ and people with traditional values find violence less acceptable.

The acceptability of these types of violence is still dependent on how they are portrayed and the purpose of the messaging.

From the qualitative research we know that humorous acts are more acceptable, as is violence in the context of community messaging.

The 'line' for violence is when we see aggression, intimidation or cruelty

(This was asked specifically about animals, but the qualitative research suggests that cruelty in any form would be unacceptable).

Legend:
- Never acceptable
- Sometimes acceptable
- Acceptable if adult audience (e.g. after 8:30pm)
- Always acceptable

Source: D11. How acceptable or unacceptable do you think the following depictions of violence are in advertising?
Base: Total sample, n= 2,037
Note: Labels less than 4% are removed for clarity.

What do people think about in deciding what is acceptable violence in advertising?

Could it desensitise audiences or be seen to normalise violence?

The concern is when the violence might influence children / young people to see the actions as normal. There is sensitivity to content that might condone antisocial behaviour or glorify violence including guns or weapons. Even mild violence is perceived by some to contribute to desensitising the community.

Is there a power imbalance?

There is greater concern with violence that is seen to demean or depict a power imbalance that is about intimidation or threat. For some, content that may be condoning of behaviours that are unacceptable in society is also unacceptable in advertising.

Is it intentional or unintentional?

Intentional acts of violence were more concerning than accidents or where violence is an unintended consequence. Violence is harder to find acceptable when the aggression is intended.

Is it gendered violence?

Even if violence is low level or suggestive only, it can feel inappropriate in the context of current events and societal values and attitudes.

Is the depiction of violence too graphic or intense? Could it be triggering?

Showing blood and gore are the benchmarks for an ad to be considered graphic. There is also some concern about overt depictions of violence being triggering. However, context is important and needs to be taken into account.

Is there an aggressor and / or victim?

For some, violence is seen as a product of human behaviour where there needs to be an aggressor, and usually a victim. When it difficult to identify either, then there were more questions about whether violence was evident.

What did we learn?

- Australians appreciate advertising when it's creative, memorable and humorous, but can distrust advertising and judge it harshly when it doesn't meet expected standards.

- There is concern about content that might be seen to normalise or condone behaviours or attitudes which are less socially acceptable.

- People are also alert to content that is insensitive in relation to current social issues – a clever ad is not an excuse to being tone-deaf to these issues.

- When it comes to language and violence, the 'line' is far more definitive for language, while violence is more subjective and requires a broader frame of reference for determining acceptability.

- There is strong support for advertising to reflect community standards. The ubiquity of advertising means that we cannot always know or control who will see or hear the content, so it is safer to be cautious than risk offence.