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It Depends on the Context: Community Views on the Use of Shock and Fear in Commercial and Social Marketing

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Abstract

Social marketing advertising has often utilised shock and fear based campaigns that contain frightening images, unsafe or illegal behaviour as well as violent and distressing images. To coincide with their use, there have also questions raised regarding the ethicality and acceptability of these types of appeals. Results from this pilot study support previous focus group findings, that members of the community have a teleological view of such issues in a social marketing context with a positive outcome justifying the means utilised to achieve it. All advertising whether it be commercial or social marketing, should maintain a level of ethical responsibility to ensure that campaigns are in line with evidence based community standards. This however can only occur when there is a relevant and well defined Code of Ethics to guide and uphold standards in relation to both commercial and social marketing advertising.

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It Depends on the Context: Community Views on the Use of Shock and Fear in Commercial and Social Marketing

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Abstract

Social marketing advertising has often utilised shock and fear based campaigns that contain frightening images, unsafe or illegal behaviour as well as violent and distressing images. To coincide with their use, there have also questions raised regarding the ethicality and acceptability of these types of appeals. Results from this pilot study support previous focus group findings, that members of the community have a teleological view of such issues in a social marketing context with a positive outcome justifying the means utilised to achieve it. All advertising whether it be commercial or social marketing, should maintain a level of ethical responsibility to ensure that campaigns are in line with evidence based community standards. This however can only occur when there is a relevant and well defined Code of Ethics to guide and uphold standards in relation to both commercial and social marketing advertising.

Introduction

All advertising in Australia, both commercial and social marketing advertising, is expected (but not legally required) to comply with the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics. Section Two of the Code is designed ensure that the general public are protected from unacceptable and offensive advertising and covers issues such as taste and decency (ASB, 2008). The Code has eight clauses, which are used by the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) to adjudicate advertising complaints against “prevailing community standards”. The eight clauses from the Code of Ethics relate to: discrimination/vilification; violence; sex, sexuality and nudity; advertising to children; language; health and safety; the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries Motor Vehicle Code; and the food and beverage advertising code (Advertising Standards Bureau, 2008).

Complaints made to the ASB are categorised under a product category (such as clothing, motor vehicles or alcohol); and complaints regarding social marketing advertising are categorised as ‘community awareness’. During 2005-2007, a total of 36 complaints against community awareness advertisements were made to the ASB (ASB various dates) with only one of these complaints upheld, in 2006. During this time, potential for causing alarm and distress to children (noted in 2.4: children’s code and the subclause of “Other”) was the most cited issue of complaint against community awareness advertising (n = 24). Despite this issue being most frequently raised by the community as problematic in relation to community awareness advertising, of the 36 complaints against community awareness advertising, none were upheld on this basis (with the only complaint upheld being due to the use of inappropriate language).

Fear appeals in social marketing advertisements

The use of fear appeals in social marketing advertising is commonplace, and debates around the ethicality of such appeals have been raised by many in the literature. For example, authors have questioned the appropriateness of using fear to change behaviour (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004), the absence of response efficacy due to not providing a solution to the problem which eliminates the threat (Arthur and Quester, 2003), and the difficulty in distinguishing between individual and social good (Brenkert, 2002). Another concern related to the use of fear in social marketing campaigns is the effects the appeals may have on unintended audiences. This is noted by Jones and Owen (2006) regarding the fear younger women have in relation to breast cancer compared to their risk of contracting the disease, and also by Hastings et al (2004, p 972) who described the effect fear-based social marketing messages have on unintended audiences as “collateral damage”. This notion of collateral damage is particularly pertinent when considering the distressing impact these campaigns may have on children (Hasting et al., 2004). The ethical concerns raised in regards to the use of fear appeals in social marketing advertising is noted in a study by Arthur and Quester (2003), with participants viewing a range of anti smoking campaigns raising concerns about the ethicality of such appeals despite their good intentions. All of these studies highlight the need for a closer and continual examination of the use of fear appeals in social marketing and the impact these advertisements may have beyond the intended market.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of the general public regarding the acceptability of the use of violence, illegal behaviour, frightening images, unsafe behaviour and shock tactics in advertising; and whether their perceptions differed between commercial and social marketing advertising.

Method

To achieve the aims of the study, a five page questionnaire was developed, asking participants their opinions on acceptability of the use of violence, distressing images and shock tactics in both commercial and social marketing advertising. The majority of survey questions were answered on a five point Likert scale (one being strongly disagree, three being neither agree nor disagree and five being strongly agree). Participants also had the opportunity to write open-ended responses for each issue and both types of advertising. In the questionnaire, social marketing was defined as “social education and health promotion advertising”. Examples of both commercial and “social education and health promotion advertising” were given (‘cars, food, alcohol or clothing’ and ‘anti-speeding, safe drinking, anti-smoking or healthy eating’ respectively). This was to ensure that participants had an understanding of the type of advertising the questionnaire was referring to.

The content of the questionnaire was informed by a series of focus groups previously conducted in conjunction with this research. The focus groups identified a range of issues that the general public believed to be problematic or unacceptable in the content of advertising. The questionnaire was administered as a pilot test to a convenient sample of 25 individuals. The quantitative results of the survey were entered into SPSS v 15.0 and frequency and percentage analysis was carried out. The qualitative responses were entered into an Excel file and manually coded to identify any common themes. This paper will report on the difference in attitudes towards the use of violence, illegal behaviour, frightening images and unsafe behaviour in commercial versus social marketing advertising. These issues were included, as they have been identified as the most relevant when exploring the acceptability of social marketing campaigns from the literature, the ASB complaint determinations, and the original focus group research.

Results

The quantitative results in Table 1 show that, as expected, these images had a higher level of acceptability among participants when used in social marketing advertising than when used in commercial advertising. In relation to the issue of violence or violent images, eight respondents agreed it was acceptable in social marketing advertising compared to only two for commercial advertising; and 12 felt that it was unacceptable in social marketing advertising compared to 23 for commercial advertising. It is interesting to note that respondents were more likely to have no definite opinion on the use of violence or violent images in social marketing advertising (n = 5) than for commercial advertising (n = 0).

Table 1: Participant responses regarding the acceptability of images in commercial and social marketing advertising

		Strongly Agree / Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Strongly Disagree / Disagree
Violence or Violent Images	Com. Ad.*	2	0	23
	Soc. Ed Ad.**	8	5	12
Unsafe Behaviour	Com. Ad.	1	6	18
	Soc. Ed Ad.	7	3	15
Distressing or Frightening Images	Com. Ad.	5	1	19
	Soc. Ed Ad.	12	4	9
Illegal behaviour	Com. Ad.	2	6	17
	Soc. Ed Ad.	10	7	8
Shock tactics	Soc. Ed Ad.	16	7	2

* Com. Ad. = Commercial Advertising

** Soc. Ed. Ad. = Social Education Advertising

In relation to the issue of unsafe behaviour, seven respondents agreed it was acceptable in social marketing advertising compared to only one for commercial advertising; and 15 felt that it was unacceptable in social marketing advertising compared to 18 for

commercial advertising. Three respondents had no definite opinion on the use of unsafe behaviour in social marketing advertising, compared to six respondents for commercial advertising.

When asked about the use of distressing or frightening images, 11 respondents agreed it was acceptable in social marketing advertising compared to only four for commercial advertising; and nine felt that it was unacceptable in social marketing advertising compared to 19 for commercial advertising. Four respondents had no definite opinion on the use of distressing or frightening images in social marketing advertising, compared to only one respondent for commercial advertising.

In relation to the portrayal of illegal behaviour, 10 respondents agreed it was acceptable in social marketing advertising compared to only two for commercial advertising; and eight felt that it was unacceptable in social marketing advertising compared to 17 for commercial advertising. Approximately equal numbers of respondents had no definite opinion on the use of distressing or frightening images in either type of advertising. When asked about the use of shock tactics, 16 respondents agreed that their use was acceptable in social marketing advertising, two disagreed, and seven had no definite opinion.

The qualitative results from this pilot study mirror the responses from previous focus group research, highlighting the general level of acceptance of these types of images and appeals in social marketing advertising. The one exception was 'violence'; with participants from both this study and the focus groups not discussing violence in the context of social marketing advertising.

"I guess the more graphic, the more the message may hit home." Female 55-64 years

"My rules for health promotion advertising are quite different. A certain amount of realism (shock and awe) is sometimes necessary for the campaign to have an impact." Male 35-44 years

"Regarding illegal behaviour and shock tactics, it is acceptable if it shows the consequences." Female 35-44 years

"Regarding health and safety, it depends on the context. If it is to show the consequence of the unsafe behaviour then it would be ok" Female 55-64 years

These results show that participants in this study expressed a greater acceptance of the portrayal of violence, illegal behaviour, frightening images, unsafe behaviour and shock tactics in advertising when it was used in the context of social marketing advertising compared to commercial advertising.

Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative results of the pilot test survey reflect the ideas and attitudes of participants from previous focus group research. These results support the view that people in the community view social marketing advertising through a pragmatic perspective, whereby the positive social value of the advertisement (for the whole community) outweighs the possible negative effects (on some members of the community) (van Putten and Jones, 2007).

The portrayal of violence, illegal behaviour, frightening images, and unsafe behaviour, and the use shock tactics in the context of social marketing advertising are seen as justified by the public due to the valued message these appeals contain. This idea is reflected in the decisions made by the ASB when adjudicating complaints against community awareness advertising. While it appears that the ASB are in touch with the community standards on this issue, there are two concerns that need to be raised in regard to the manner in which the ASB defines and subsequently adjudicates complaints against social marketing advertising under Section 2 of the Code. The first is that there is no clear definition of what 'alarm and distress' means to the ASB, even though it is the most cited reason for complaints against community awareness advertising (ASB, various dates). While the results of this study suggest that the five issues highlighted (and commonly used in road safety campaigns) are seen as more acceptable within that context, some members of the general public do not agree (as evidenced by the complaints received regarding these advertisements by the ASB). For the ASB to effectively adjudicate the appropriateness of such appeals in the context of community concerns about causing – 'alarm and distress' they need both a clear definition against which to assess appeals and an understanding of the public's latitude of acceptance in relation to social marketing advertising.

The second concern is how the ASB utilises Clause 2.2: Violence. As noted, the participants in this study and previous focus group research did not discuss violence in relation to social marketing advertising. The ASB, however, uses the term 'violence' to categorise and adjudicate on the use of graphic images, as well as suggested and implied violence (Advertising Standards Bureau, 2006), all of which are particularly common in road safety campaigns. The ASB's definition of violence, and classification of complaints under this clause, is not consistent with the way that the general public perceives and describes graphic images, suggesting that the existing clause perhaps needs to be amended to ensure a consistent understanding between potential complainants and the adjudicators of these complaints.

Conclusion

Despite the small sample size of this pilot study, the consistency of the findings with those from previous focus group research, demonstrate that the community is prepared to allow social marketing advertising considerable latitude in terms of the portrayal of violence, illegal behaviour, frightening images and unsafe behaviour, and the use of

shock tactics. However, community views change over time and advertising standards need to reflect these as closely as possible. To achieve this, the current AANA Code of Ethics should be revised to better incorporate the views of the general community, to ensure that advertising messages are consistent with the prevailing community standards.

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