Whose standards? An examination of community attitudes towards Australian advertising

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There is considerable ongoing debate in Australia, as in other countries, about the ethicality of current advertising practices. In recent years there has been an increase in the public focus on offensive or unacceptable advertising – such as overt sex appeals, racial vilification, and promotion of unsafe use of consumer products – arguing that many of these advertisements (ads) are contrary to community standards. The industry, on the other hand, argues that it produces ads that are designed to meet and appeal to community standards. There is no comprehensive data on the nature of community standards in relation to advertising, and the purpose of the current study was to assess community attitudes towards current standards of advertising.

Keywords
Whose, standards, examination, community, attitudes, towards, Australian, advertising

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There is considerable ongoing debate in Australia, as in other countries, about the ethically of current advertising practices. In recent years there has been an increase in the public focus on offensive or unacceptable advertising – such as overt sex appeals, racial vilification, and promotion of unsafe use of consumer products – arguing that many of these advertisements (ads) are contrary to community standards. The industry, on the other hand, argues that it produces ads that are designed to meet and appeal to community standards. There is no comprehensive data on the nature of community standards in relation to advertising, and the purpose of the current study was to assess community attitudes towards current standards of advertising.

Keywords: advertising, regulation, ethics, attitudes
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Introduction

A 2004 Morgan poll reported that only 13% of the Australian public rated the advertising industry as “high” or “very high” on ethics and honesty, with only three other professions (newspaper journalists, real estate agents and car salesman) receiving a lower ranking (Morgan Poll 2004). Brinkmann (2002, p. 160) expressed the view that “there is almost a suspicion that marketers’ references to values and ideals are a marketing trick, an oxymoron.”

Advertisers seek to develop advertisements that maximise the appeal of their product to the target market, and the likelihood of purchase (while not breaching any legal or regulatory requirements, or offending other members of the community). This can require a trade-off on the part of the advertiser (e.g., the likelihood of selling a product to single adult males may be increased if you can persuade them that it increases their chances of sexual success, but such a message would be in breach of advertising regulations and would likely alienate female viewers). The use of sexual appeals in advertising is an area which is constantly debated and is increasing over time (e.g., Soley and Kurzbard 1986; Reichert et al. 1999), and is consistently the most common issue attracting complaints to the Advertising Standards Board (Advertising Standards Board 2008a).

The Regulatory Context – Deciding on Regulatory Standards

All advertisers in Australia, as in the US and the UK, are bound by an industry-designed self-regulatory code of ethics that covers permissible advertising content. Following the demise of the Advertising Standards Council in 1996, the major industry body, the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), developed the Advertiser Code of Ethics (which applies to all forms of advertising), and established the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) and the Advertising Claims Board (ACB) to deal with complaints and breaches of this code. Under the new regulatory system, the ASB deals with complaints about taste and decency in advertising, and the ACB deals with rival advertiser complaints (Baker et al. 1998). The authority of the two boards rests on the willingness of advertisers to adhere voluntarily to ethical standards. Section 2 of the AANA Code (the section administered by the ASB) includes clauses about discrimination and vilification, violence, sexuality and nudity, alarm and distress to children, obscene language, and health and safety. Across 12 years of complaints to the now defunct Advertising Standards Council, which assessed complaints from both the public and rival advertisers, approximately 20% of complaints were upheld (Harker 2003). In comparison, of the total of 439 decisions on complaints reported by the ASB in 2007, only 44 decisions (i.e., 10.02%) were to uphold the complaint (Advertising Standards Board, 2008b). We also note that this is considerably higher than previous years, with only 28 (5.2%) of decisions upheld in 2006 (Advertising Standards Board 2007) and 19 (2.4%) in 2005 (Advertising Standards Board 2006).

The advertising industry, at least in Australia, is keen to take actions to demonstrate that it cares about reducing the potential for harms from advertising, although it has been argued that in many cases these actions are designed largely to pre-empt government regulation rather than to actually improve advertising standards (Jones 2007; Kleinman 2003). For example, when it was argued that portrayals of unsafe driving in car ads leads to unsafe driving among the general public, the industry proposed a voluntary code to regulate such portrayals (now AANA section 2.7); and
when it was argued that junk food advertising causes children to become obese, the industry
developed an ad campaign to encourage healthy eating and exercise (Jones 2007). However, the
industry appears reluctant to address issues around the ethical standards for advertising messages;
while the AANA Code specifically addresses perspectives of right and wrong in message content
(e.g., discrimination/vilification, violence, offensive language) the decisions of ASB suggest a
disjuncture between community perceptions and ASB applications of these principles.

The ASB is composed of a group of twenty people chosen to represent the community.
However, current membership primarily consists of university educated individuals, many of
whom rely on the media to earn a living – including actors, journalists and the former Managing
Director and CEO of the Seven Network Limited (Advertising Standards Board 2009). This
group appears to contradict the ASB’s stated position that the Board members are “individually
and collectively independent of the industry” (Advertising Standards Board 2009). Part of
the problem arises from the very nature of this Board; a group of broadminded individuals who are
repeatedly exposed to potentially offensive ads are likely to become jaded over time and to see
the ads from a different perspective to the “average” Australian. There is a need to create a more
reasonable yardstick for the measurement of prevailing community attitudes, to determine
whether particular ads are within or outside community standards in relation to portrayals of
sexuality, vilification, violence, and offensive language.

The aim of the current study was to develop an understanding of Australian adults’ perceptions of
the appropriateness of current advertising appeals; whether these perceptions vary across
different groups of the community; and whether consumers are willing, and able, to complain
about advertising they perceive to be inappropriate. That is, this study was designed not to
develop or test a pre-specified theoretical or ethical framework, but rather to understand what are
the issues that are salient – and problematic – in the minds of consumers.

Method

As this was an exploratory study to examine a previously under-research area, and not driven by
a pre-determined theoretical or ethical framework, all items included in the survey were based on
the findings of focus group research on community attitudes towards advertising conducted prior
to this study (van Putten and Jones, 2007) and the clauses of the current AANA Code. The
advertising attitudes survey was posted to 4,000 households in the Illawarra local government
area (LGA) in April 2008, with a reminder letter and a replacement survey sent to non-responders
after four weeks. A total of 872 completed surveys were returned (a response rate of 21.8%).
Respondents were asked a series of seven questions about advertising, with responses on a 5-
point scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The independent variables used
in the data analysis included gender, age, religion, education, being a parent, and previous
complaining behaviour. The relationship between the variables was analysed using independent t-
tests were run for independent variables containing two groups (gender, being a parent and
previous complaining behaviour) and Chi-Square tests of independence for independent variables
containing three or more groups (age, religion and education). Confidence intervals of 95% were
utilised, therefore any p value <0.05 was considered significant.
Results

Of the 872 returned surveys, 39.8% of respondents were male and 60.2% female. The age distribution was similar to that of the underlying population, with 19.8% aged under 35 years, 16.6% aged 35-44, 20.9% 45-54, 18.9% 55-64, and 22.3% aged 65 and over. Respondents self-identified a range of religious affiliation, which were categorised for analysis into ‘no religion’ (23.7%), ‘Catholic’ (23.4%), ‘Anglican’ (20.5%), ‘other Christian’ (21.5%), and ‘other’ (10.9%). The majority of respondents (43.6%) had some post-secondary education, and a further 29.8% reported completing a Higher School Certificate or equivalent (i.e., 12 years of schooling). The remaining 26.6% had completed some or no secondary education. Approximately 80% of the sample (77.6% of males and 81.6% of females) stated they had children.

Opinions about Current Australian Advertising

The majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Advertisements are sometimes misleading or deceptive about the product’ (94.3%); and that ‘there are sometimes advertisements in the media that people find offensive (93.9%). Responses to these items did not differ significantly by respondent gender, age, religious affiliation, or parental status; but agreement increased linearly with increasing educational attainment ($\chi^2 = 10.30, p = 0.04$).

The majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements’ (91.8%). Responses to this question did not differ significantly by respondent gender. However, older respondents were more likely to agree with this statement ($\chi^2 =35.55, p = 0.002$), with level of agreement increasing linearly by age group; parents were more likely than non-parents to agree (93.0% vs 83.6%, $\chi^2 =17.01, p <0.001$); those who identified as not having a religion were less likely than any of the identified religious groups to agree (83.3% vs more than 93% for each of the religious groups, $\chi^2 = 28.38, p < 0.001$); and those with a higher level of education were less likely to agree (86.5% of university educated vs 92.1% with other post-secondary and 97.4% of high school graduates, $\chi^2 = 29.03, p < 0.001$). A similar majority agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Advertisements sometimes encourage behaviours in children that are inappropriate for their age’ (90.9%). Responses to this question did not differ significantly by respondent gender, religious affiliation, education level, or parental status. However, older respondents were more likely to agree with this statement than younger respondents ($\chi^2 = 31.01, p = 0.006$).

Approximately 4 in 5 (82.3%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Some advertisers intentionally create advertisements that they know will cause offence.’ Responses to this question did not differ significantly by respondent gender, age, religious affiliation, or parental status. However, those with a high school education only were less likely to agree that ‘Some advertisers intentionally create advertisements that they know will cause offence’ (74.5% vs 85.5% of post-secondary and 83.0% of university educated, $\chi^2 = 20.29, p < 0.001$).

Only a small minority of respondents agreed that ‘People who are offended by advertisements are too sensitive’ (16.1%). Responses to this question did not differ significantly by respondent education. However, males were more likely to agree than females (21.0% vs 12.5%, $\chi^2 = 12.07$, $p = 0.001$).
p = 0.002), as were younger respondents ($\chi^2 = 64.48, p < 0.000$), and those without children ($\chi^2 = 34.70, p <0.001$). Similarly, only one-third (33.8%) agreed that ‘Advertisers are sometimes unaware that their advertisements may be offensive.’ Responses to this question did not differ significantly by respondent gender, age, religious affiliation, education, or parental status.

Table 1: Opinions about Current Advertising

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinions about Current Advertising</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Neither %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are sometimes advertisements in the media that people find offensive</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>93.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who are offended by advertisements are too sensitive</td>
<td>63.86</td>
<td>20.09</td>
<td>16.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisers are sometimes unaware that their advertisements may be offensive</td>
<td>53.65</td>
<td>12.51</td>
<td>33.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some advertisers intentionally create advertisements that they know will cause offence</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>82.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements are sometimes misleading or deceptive about the product</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>94.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements sometimes encourage behaviours in children that are inappropriate for their age</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>90.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>91.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Voicing their Dissatisfaction

The majority of respondents (89.9%) agreed that there are ‘rules about advertising in Australia’ with only 1.3% stating that there are no rules and 8.9% unsure. However, the majority were unable to correctly identify the appropriate body for a complaint about advertising. Only 49 (5.6%) of those who thought that rules existed identified the ‘Advertising Standards Board,’ with an additional 75 (8.5%) providing a response similar to this (such as “Advertising Standards Australia” or “Advertising Complaints Board”), suggesting they could potentially locate the correct organisation if they wished to do so. The perception that there are rules about advertising was not associated with gender ($\chi^2 =0.310, p=0.856$), religion ($\chi^2 =8.290, p=0.406$), or parental status ($\chi^2 =2.793, p=0.247$); but was lower amongst the older respondents ($\chi^2 =33.226, p=0.003$); and those with no post-secondary education ($\chi^2 =14.841, p=0.005$). Less than 10% of the respondents stated that they have ever made a complaint about advertising, with males slightly more likely to state that they had made a complaint than females (10.9% compared to 7.7%). However, of the 74 respondents who had made a complaint only eight reported complaining to the ASB. Interestingly, and contrary to perceptions that only certain demographic groups complain about advertising, there were no significant differences in reported complaining behaviour by gender ($\chi^2 =2.389, p=0.077$), age group ($\chi^2 =11.684, p=0.111$), religion ($\chi^2 =2.389, p=0.665$), education level ($\chi^2 =3.633, p=0.163$), or parental status ($\chi^2 =1.012, p=0. 0.231$).
Discussion

It appears from the results of this survey that Australian adults have some concerns about the standards of the advertising that they are currently exposed to. The majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘There are sometimes advertisements in the media that people find offensive;’ that ‘Some advertisers intentionally create advertisements that they know will cause offence;’ that ‘Advertisements are sometimes misleading or deceptive about the product;’ that ‘Advertisements sometimes encourage behaviours in children that are inappropriate for their age;’ and that ‘Moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements.’ Only one-third agreed that ‘Advertisers are sometimes unaware that their advertisements may be offensive;’ and less than one in six agreed that ‘People who are offended by advertisements are too sensitive.’

Religious affiliation was associated with differences on only one item (‘Moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements’); however less than half of those who identified as ‘no religion’ disagreed that moral standards should be considered in the development of advertising. Gender, similarly, was associated with differences on only one item (people who are offended by advertisements are too sensitive). Educational attainment, however, was associated with three items – those with a high school education only were less likely to agree that there are sometimes advertisements in the media that people find offensive, more likely to agree that moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements, and less likely to agree that advertisers sometimes intentionally create advertisements they know will cause offence, which suggests that educational differences are not associated with differences in ethical standards or expectations but rather with the ability to critically assess the intentions of advertisers. There were only three items which showed significant differences between age groups (Advertisements sometimes encourage behaviours in children that are inappropriate for their age, moral standards should be considered when creating advertisements, and people who are offended by advertisements are too sensitive). However, it is important to note that the lowest level of agreement for any age group was 82.5% for encouraging inappropriate behaviours in children (35-44 year olds) and 82.8% for moral standards needing to be considered (18-24 year olds); and the highest level of agreement that people who are offended are too sensitive was 25.7% (25-34 year olds).

It has been suggested that there are differences in perceived offensiveness of advertising as a result of gender, age, and religious affiliation, and we analysed responses separately by each of these demographic variables. To the extent that such differences exist, they suggest that there is a need for a broader inclusion of the community in both the development of advertising codes and the monitoring of the compliance of advertising with these codes. Given the stated central role of ‘community standards’ in the decisions made by the Advertising Standards Board it is surprising that broad consultation with the community – ideally on a regular basis, and inclusive of a range of demographic groups – is not a part of the self-regulatory system for advertising in Australia.

Importantly, despite some small demographic differences on some of these variables, we found a general level of consistency in opinions about advertising across the respondent sample. This suggests that there is, indeed, a general level of agreement among Australian consumers about the standards to which advertising should be held. Future research could usefully operationalise these
concepts by having representative samples of consumers examine current advertising messages and define the specific images, words and concepts that breach these standards.

This study did not set out to examine a pre-existing theoretical construct but rather to determine whether the Australian community has a common set of standards which could be used to guide the regulation of advertising, and the results suggest that this is indeed the case. There is a need to re-examine the current code of ethics for advertising in Australia – both its wording and its implementation – to ensure that advertising is consistent with the standards held by the Australian community.

References


Advertising Standards Board (2008b) Case Reports of the Advertising Standards Board, Sydney, Advertising Standards Board Ltd.


