



Australian Association of National Advertisers

Review of Code of Ethics

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Introduction

Women's Health West (WHW) is the regional women's health service for the western metropolitan region of Victoria. Our services include research, health promotion, community development, training and advocacy around women's health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1994, WHW has hosted the region's largest family violence crisis support and prevention program. These two main arms of the service place WHW in a unique position to incorporate women's experiences directly into our research, health promotion and project work, ensuring that we clarify the connections between structural oppression and individual experience. As a feminist organisation we focus on redressing the gender and structural inequalities that limit the lives of women. WHW's work is underpinned by a social model of health and, as such, we recognise the important influence of, and aim to improve, the social, economic and political factors that determine the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in the western region.

Informed by the vision of equity and justice for women in the west, WHW work is guided by the following five strategic goals:

- Delivering and advocating for accessible and culturally appropriate services and resources for women across the region
- Improving the conditions in which women live, work and play in the western region of Melbourne
- Putting women's health, safety and wellbeing on the political agenda to improve the status of women
- Recognising that good health, safety and wellbeing begins in our workplace
- Working with others to achieve our goals

Response to the discussion paper

WHW welcomes the opportunity provided by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) to review its *Code of Ethics* (the code). We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the AANA for initiating the *Code of Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children* and the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*. WHW believes that the introduction of these codes is a positive step toward encouraging the fashion, media and advertising industries to play an active role in bringing about long-term cultural change. These codes also better ensure that the interests and rights of consumers, particularly women and girls, are protected.

As one of the twelve women's health services across Victoria, WHW is well positioned to provide expertise and advice on the intersection between women's social experience and their health and wellbeing. This submission will therefore focus on discussion questions 3, 4, 6, 8 and 11 as these relate to improving women's health status.

Question 3

What circumstances relating to the portrayal of people should the *Code of Ethics* address?

Section 2.1 of the code states that advertising and marketing communication:

Shall not portray people or depict material in a way that discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability or political belief.¹

WHW supports the code stipulating that companies have an obligation not to produce commercial material that discriminates against or vilifies members of our community. However, we recommend that the code also stipulate that advertising and marketing communication:

Shall not portray people or depict material in a way that sexually objectifies a person or members of the community.

For the purpose of the code, sexual objectification can be defined as a process of viewing women (and in some instances men) not as active and self-determined individuals but rather as sexual objects that exist only in relation to men's desire.² The sexual objectification of women and girls in advertising and marketing communication dehumanises them as sexual objects and commodities. One way this is done is by identifying women solely with their bodies. For example, advertising material presents a woman's 'sexy body' as her key, if not only, source of identity. WHW believes the code must be amended to include a clause that prohibits the sexual objectification of people, particularly women. This is essential as:

1. Currently the code has no guidelines relating to this issue and as such has been ineffective in dealing with ongoing community complaints regarding the sexual objectification of women in advertising and marketing communication (as outlined in examples 1 and 2);
2. Incorporating sexual objectification as a separate factor for consideration will help improve the health status of women and girls in our community. As sexist and unhealthy representations of women are associated with violence supportive attitudes and a tolerance to physical and sexual violence.³

Recent examples of the code's inability to deal with advertising and marketing communications that sexually objectifies women and teenage girls.

Example 1: Brut deodorant ad (case number 0267/10)

At the beach a group of young men are in a car. One sees a young woman walking by in a bikini. In response to seeing this woman, one of the men starts singing a song about how when you see a good-looking girl you must tell other men or as he calls it 'spot and share, because, fellas, it's just what's right.'⁴ The men then indicate their approval by all leering at the woman, as the camera focuses on her breasts.

Complaints were made by members of the community who found the ad sexist and offensive on the basis that it could be considered soft pornography and appeared to encourage gang rape. Since the code does not specify that advertising or marketing communication has an obligation not to present women in sexually objectified ways or as commodities that can be 'shared around' by men, these complaints were dismissed. The Advertising Standards Board (ASB) dismissed the complaints as it considered the ad's theme 'light-hearted'.⁵ This ad was eventually banned under section 2.6 of the code, as it depicted material 'contrary to prevailing community standards on health and safety',⁶ as one of the men in the car was not wearing a seatbelt.

Example 2: Lynx deodorant ad (case number 89/10)

Digitally rendered girls appear from Lynx deodorant cans dancing. The voice over is as follows: 'Every specially coded Lynx Musicstar pack unlocks your own virtual groupie ... And right now buy 2 cans for your chance to win one of 5000 webcams!' A banner also appears that reads: 'Get the ultimate online experience – with every specially coded Lynx Musicstar pack – Get back what music stars have taken away from you.'

Complaints were made about this ad on the basis that it implies that the dancing girls could be won. The ASB dismissed these complaints as 'at no stage does the ad offer a woman as a prize'⁷ and that the 'girls shown dancing are virtual and not real.'⁸ This ad is also problematic and indeed harmful; as it perpetuates gendered stereotypes and negative social norms that position women as the property of men, while also implying that they are easily available for sex.

The social and health impacts of the sexual objectification of women in advertising and marketing communication

The pervasive sexualisation of women in contemporary media has detrimental implications for women's health, safety and wellbeing.

Violence against women is a social problem that is prevalent, serious and preventable.⁹ In Australia, approximately one in three women has experienced physical violence at some time in their life since the age of 15.¹⁰ While nearly one in five women has experienced sexual assault.¹¹ Sexual harassment is also a chronic problem in Australian workplaces with one in five women reporting experiences of workplace sexual harassment.¹²

Research has shown a clear association between exposure to imagery in film, advertising and the mass media that sexually objectifies women and girls, violence supportive attitudes and a tolerance for physical and sexual violence.¹³ Pornographic imaginary has been found to further exacerbate attitudes that support and condone violence against women.¹⁴

While there is no single cause of violence against women, the social construction of masculinity and traditional gender norms plays a major role in influencing the behaviour of men who perpetrate violence. Evidence shows that the risk of violence against women increases in communities that perpetuate gender stereotypes and that support attitudes and behaviours associated with male dominance and superiority.¹⁵ The Australian Government's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* identifies numerous social norms that increase the likelihood of violence against women. These include:

- 'Macho' construction of masculinity
- Traditional ideas that 'a woman's place is in the home'
- Notions that men should 'wear the pants' as heads of the household and wage-earners
- Practises that segregate male drinking and encourage excessive and binge drinking
- Behaviour that creates peer pressure to conform to these ideas of masculinity and male behaviour¹⁶

While advertising and marketing communication is clearly not the only source that promotes sexist attitudes in our community, these industries can play a key role in preventing violence against women. Their influence is evident by the identification of media, arts and popular culture as one of five key settings for the prevention of violence against women in the Victorian State Government's *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevention Violence against Women 2010-2020*.¹⁷ *A Right to Respect* maintains that the media, arts and popular culture can and do present narrow and distorted views of sex and show women in sexist and stereotyped ways, which reinforces attitudes and social norms that condone violence. By the same token, the media can challenge such representations by promoting women as active and equal participants in the private and public domain.¹⁸

WHW also supports the introduction of a *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Representations of Women and Teenage Girls* to provide national guidance on how women are depicted in advertising and marketing communication. The code would outline principles to guide and encourage industries in promoting positive representations of women.

Recommendation: The code should include guidelines regarding the sexual objectification of people.

Recommendation: The AANA introduce a *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Representations of Women and Teenage Girls*

Question 4

What issues, if any, relating to 'taste and decency' should be addressed in the Code of Ethics?

WHW believes that in order to ensure that advertising and marketing communication adheres to standards of 'taste and decency' it is necessary for the code to prohibit the sexual objectification of women for commercial interests (as outlined in question 3).

Question 6

What 'test' or 'tests' should the Code of Ethics include?

The difficulty associated with including tests in the code was highlighted in the report on the *Sexualisation of children in the contemporary media*. This document raised concerns about the 'prevailing community standards' test. The AANA defines 'prevailing community standards' as:

The community standards determined by the Advertising Standards Board as those prevailing at the relevant time, and based on research carried out on behalf of the Advertising Standards Board as it sees fit.

A research project carried out by the AANA on the question of community standards found that the ASB decisions were not in keeping with community attitudes as the:

Community ... were more conservative than the Board in their attitudes towards sex, sexuality and nudity.

Clearly further consultation and research is required in determining community opinions on a range of issues relevant to the Code.

Recommendation: Conduct further consultation and research to ensure that prevailing community standards are consistent with community opinions and public policy.

Question 8

What are the benefits, or otherwise, in addressing body image in the Code of Ethics?

WHW recommends that the code include principles outlined in the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*. This is of considerable importance given the impact body image has on women and girl's (and to a lesser extent men and boy's) health and wellbeing.

More than ever before, the community is inundated with images of women and girl's bodies, as we live in a society saturated by the mass media; be that television, film, magazines, music or the internet.¹⁹ Advertising and marketing communication plays a pivotal role in socially constructing what is considered the 'ideal' female body. Women and girls are bombarded by Anglo, extremely thin, young, air-brushed female bodies in media images; an ideal that is unattainable for all but a very small number of women. So pervasive is advertising and media communication that it is estimated that young women see more images of the 'ideal' woman in one day than their mothers saw in their entire adolescence.²⁰

The impact of the mass media on teenage girls' health and wellbeing is of particular concern, given that it plays a crucial role in how they view their bodies and construct their body image. Young women with a positive body image have increased confidence and self-esteem, which promotes good health and wellbeing. Negative body image, on the other hand, can have serious implications for women and girl's physical and psychological health status, as it is associated with the development of eating disorders, depression, self-harm and suicide.²¹ The considerable impact body image has on women and girls' health and wellbeing makes it an 'important target for public health action'.²²

WHW believes that the code has a responsibility to promote realistic and healthy goals relating to body image. This can be achieved by stipulating that advertising and marketing communication adhere to the principles outlined in the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*. These include:

- Positive content and messaging
- Diversity
- Healthy weight models
- Fashion retailers supporting positive body image
- Fair placement
- Appropriate modelling age
- Realistic and natural images of people

Recommendation: The code incorporates the principles outlined in the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*.

Question 11

Should online publishers play the same role as traditional publishers in helping to ensure that advertisements are in line with the AANA Code of Ethics and in ensuring that advertisements adjudged to be in breach of the code by the ASB cease to be broadcast?

WHW expects that online publishers be subject to the same application of the code as traditional publishers. Online marketing must be accountable to standards of ethical behaviour that are legal, decent, honest and truthful. This is important given the community's increasing reliance on information communication technology.

Recommendation: Online publishers must be subject to the same application of the code as traditional publishers.

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