

Inquiry into the Australian Film and Literature Classification Scheme



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Introduction

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide women's health promotion, information and advocacy service. We are a non government organisation with most of our funding coming from various parts of the Victorian Department of Health. We work with health professionals and policy makers to influence and inform health policy and service delivery for women.

Our work at Women's Health Victoria is underpinned by a social model of health. We are committed to reducing inequities in health which arise from the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. These determinants are experienced differently by women and men. By incorporating a gendered approach to health promotion work that focuses on women, interventions to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes will be more effective and equitable.

Women's Health Victoria's vision is for a society that takes a proactive approach to health and wellbeing, is empowering and respectful of women and girls and takes into account the diversity of their life circumstances.

Women's Health Victoria's ways of working are guided by four principles:

- We work from a feminist framework that incorporates a rights based approach.
- We acknowledge the critical importance of an understanding of all of the determinants of health and of illness to achieving better health outcomes.
- We understand that the complexities involved in achieving better health outcomes for women require well-considered, forward thinking, multi-faceted and sustainable solutions.
- We commit to 'doing our work well'; we understand that trust and credibility result from transparent and accountable behaviours.

SUBMISSION

(h) The possibility of including outdoor advertising, such as billboards, in the National Classification Scheme

The *Portrayal of Women Advisory Committee* identified a number of issues in relation to the images of women in outdoor advertising. These include:

- Failure to represent the diversity of women in terms of body size and shape, as well as race, sexuality, disability and religion¹.
- Use of women's bodies and body parts to sell products. For example, use of images which only show parts of women's bodies or depictions of women as inanimate objects for consumption².
- Association between women with sex. Women are represented as sexual objects and/or as sexually available³.

These issues apply in relation to advertising generally. However, outdoor advertising is unique in that it is consumed in public space and therefore imposed on the public, which is not offered a choice of whether or when to view⁴. The *Portrayal of Women Advisory Committee* found that outdoor advertising impacts on community perceptions of women, and:

... perpetuates and reinforces stereotypes, encourages negative views of women's status in society, and fosters attitudes about women and sex that are less than positive⁵.

This can manifest in negative self-esteem and body image among women and girls, and promotes acceptance of images that are either violent and/or sexually explicit⁶. To address these issues in a targeted manner, Women's Health Victoria believes that outdoor advertising, including billboards, should be subject to the *National Classification Scheme*.

Refer to our response to (k) for information regarding the issues of advertising self-regulation and the objectification of women.

Recommendation 1: Outdoor advertising, including billboards, should be subject to the *National Classification Scheme*.

(i) The application of the National Classification Scheme to music videos

The criteria used to classify music videos do not directly examine the objectification of women depicted visually or in the lyrics. For example, if a music video receives a restricted classification such as MA 15+, the content of the music video, including lyrics, is often modified so the classification can be lowered to G or PG. This means that the music video may then be broadcast during the general viewing timeslot such as weekend mornings.

The classification process is based on the consideration of the following elements⁷:

- Themes
- Violence
- Sex and nudity
- Language

- Drugs
- Suicide

'Themes' is the most ambiguous of the six elements. It refers to content depicting social issues such as crime, suicide, drug and alcohol dependency, death, serious illness, family breakdown and racism. Objectification of women is not explicitly considered as an issue.

As a result, music videos that objectify and demean women often remain unmodified and are shown during general viewing times. Women's Health Victoria believes that the National Classification Scheme should be applied to music videos, and that the current classification process should be expanded to include objectification of women, depicted either visually or lyrically.

Recommendation 2: The *National Classification Scheme* should be applied to music videos.

Recommendation 3: Current classification processes should be expanded to include objectification of women, depicted either visually or lyrically.

(k) The effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in preventing the sexualisation of children and the objectification of women in all media, including advertising

Women's Health Victoria does not believe that the *National Classification Scheme* has been successful in responding to the objectification of women, particularly in relation to advertising. The national voluntary system of advertising self-regulation is ineffective in preventing the objectification of women.

This is related to the fact that objectification is not identified as a separate factor in the *Australian Association of National Advertisers' Advertiser Code of Ethics* (the Code). As it currently stands, the Code does not differentiate between experiences of discrimination or vilification, and objectification. Discrimination and vilification are distinct from objectification, which is particularly relevant to women's experiences. Objectification is damaging and should be considered as a separate grounds for consideration under the Code.

Section 2.1 of the *Code of Ethics* states:

Advertising or Marketing Communications shall not portray people or depict material in a way which 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.⁸

The Advertising Standards Bureau's (ASB) own definitions of discrimination and vilification do not incorporate the concept of objectification. The ASB's *Research report on discrimination and vilification* defines 'discriminates' as:

Acts with inequity, bigotry or intolerance or gives unfair, unfavourable or less favourable treatment to one person or a group because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability and/or political belief.⁹

'Vilifies' is defined as:

Humiliates, intimidates, incites hatred towards, contempt for, or ridicule of one person or a group of people because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability and/or political belief.¹⁰

Objectification complements these ideas, but expands on them in a way that cannot be encompassed as either 'discrimination' or 'vilification'. Objectification can be defined as occurring when:

...a woman's sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. To be dealt with in this way is to have one's entire being identified with the body...¹¹

Objectification theory offers:

...an integrative framework for understanding how women's socialization and experiences of sexual objectification are translated into mental health problems: mainly eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction, each of which is more prevalent among women than among men.¹²

The Advertising Standards Bureau's own analysis of community perceptions of sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising, identifies that 'Reinforcement of women as sexualised 'objects' through portrayal in sexualised ads' is a factor which contributed to ads being seen as unacceptable. The results of this research show that:

Respondents were highly sensitive to ads which objectify women because in their view such ads reinforce and desensitise women as sexualised 'objects'. They believe that such ads portray women in this way to the broad community and are particularly concerned about the effect of such ads on developing and impressionable young women.

Again, ads which portray women as sexualised 'objects' were seen to put young females at risk of mimicking or aspiring to these unacceptable SSN [sex, sexuality and nudity] attitudes and behaviours (e.g. risky and premature sexual behaviour, self esteem and body image issues). Respondents also tied this issue back to their concerns about children's exposure.¹³

Recent cases such Pharmacare Laboratories Case # 0334/10 highlight that Section 2 of the Code is inadequate because objectification is not identified as a separate grounds for consideration. In this case, objectification was identified in the advertisement, but was not considered suitable grounds for discrimination or vilification in the original determination:

The [Advertising Standards] Board noted that there is no relationship between a woman in a bikini and the product being advertised. The [Advertising Standards] Board noted the focus in the advertisement on the woman's body and breasts and the depictions of the men staring at the woman because she is attractive. The [Advertising Standards] Board considered that the woman is objectified. However the Board considered that the overall theme of the advertisement is light hearted and is specifically directed to depicting men who appreciate the beauty of a woman. The [Advertising Standards] Board considered that the theme song which invites men to ensure that their friends also see the attractive woman is related to the woman as she has herself presented herself at the beach and there is no indication that the men do anything to the woman other than watch her. In addition the [Advertising Standards] Board noted that the woman appears confident and happy to receive the attention from the young men. The [Advertising Standards] Board considered that there is a proportion of the community who would find the objectification of the woman in this advertisement unacceptable. However in the [Advertising Standards] Board's view, although the advertisement objectifies the woman, it does not amount to discrimination against or vilification of women.

From this determination, Women's Health Victoria can surmise that the Advertising Standards Board views objectification as something that contributes to discrimination or vilification. This fails to reflect the substantial available evidence that objectification is in

itself offensive and does not meet the objective of decency promoted in the Code. As a result, advertisements that demean and perpetuate stereotypes of women are sanctioned because they fall outside the scope of the Code.

Given that it is the only forum for regulation of this sort, it is vital the system of self-regulation is replaced with a more rigorous and independent approach. This should incorporate objectification of women as a separate factor for consideration. This would recognise the difference between experiences of discrimination or vilification, and objectification, and would respond more effectively to the social and personal consequences of objectification. These include:

- *Impact on girls' health and wellbeing* including cognitive and physical functioning, body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety, mental and physical health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs¹⁴.
- *Impact on others* including boys, men, and adult women¹⁵.
- *Impact on society* including sexism, sex bias and sexist attitudes. 'Across several studies, women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media... were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths...sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships than were those in control conditions'. Exposure to sexualised content has also been shown to affect how women actually behave and how men treat and respond to real women in subsequent interactions. These studies have generally found that after men are exposed to sexualised content, their behavior toward women is more sexualized, and they treat women like sexual objects¹⁶.

New Zealand's *Advertising Codes of Practice* includes a clause which incorporates the concept of objectification in addressing how people are represented in advertising:

Advertisements should not employ sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading of any individual or group of people in society to promote the sale of products or services. In particular people should not be portrayed in a manner which uses sexual appeal simply to draw attention to an unrelated product. Children must not be portrayed in a manner which treats them as objects of sexual appeal¹⁷.

Although this clause mentions objectification of children (rather than women), it does demonstrate how broader principles of objectification could be incorporated into the Code.

Recommendation 4: Women's Health Victoria recommends that advertisers are subject to independent external regulation, which encompasses measures that specifically address objectification of women (as distinct from discrimination and vilification). The above clause from New Zealand's *Advertising Codes of Practice* could be used as a model clause or a foundation from which to develop more direct language regarding objectification.

(o) Any other matter, with the exception of the introduction of a R18+ classification for computer games which has been the subject of a current consultation by the Attorney-General's Department

Representation of women's genitalia in women's and M rated pornographic magazines

Medicare data shows that increasing numbers of women are undergoing cosmetic vaginal procedures such as vulvoplasty and labioplasty¹⁸. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists strongly discourage these procedures, which lack peer reviewed scientific evidence and are associated with serious risks such as scarring, disfigurement, infection, and altered sexual sensation¹⁹.

The growing demand for these procedures can be linked to a lack of awareness about the natural diversity of female genitalia. One reason for this is that representations of women's vulvas are digitally altered in magazines. Pornographic magazines rated M and women's magazines are subject to the *Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005* (the Guidelines), which state the following for unrestricted publications:

Realistic depictions of sexualised nudity should not be high in impact. Realistic depictions may contain discreet genital detail but there should be no genital emphasis. Prominent and/or frequent realistic depictions of sexualised nudity containing genitalia will not be permitted²⁰.

Mia Freedman, former Editor-In-Chief of Cosmopolitan, Cleo and Dolly magazines, described how this impacted magazines' ability to publish images of women's genitalia:

... the basic situation is that any magazine featuring a picture of a naked woman, had to digitally remove anything visible outside the 'single slit' of the vaginal lips. So any stray bits of labia or clitoris has to be airbrushed out²¹.

In effect, realistic genital images are altered in a process that lacks transparency. Correspondence between Kirsten Drysdale, a journalist for the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Hungry Beast* program, and the Classification Board highlights the confusion in application of the Guidelines. In response to a question regarding the meaning of 'discreet genital detail', a representative of the Classification Board responded:

Yeah well I guess genital detail's that, we can have discreet genital detail in Unrestricted and I guess that means genital, well, detail is pretty straightforward, so discreet means little or no or very little detail or not prominent, so it's sort of quite clear on what is not allowed, if that makes sense...²²

And:

Well, genital details. It's just the detail of the genitals. Like if it's not specific in our guidelines we use the Macquarie Dictionary meaning for those terms. And genital detail is details of the genitals. So, I guess in Unrestricted you can have discreet genital detail, and whatever that means, you combine that also with a pose, and with everything²³.

These responses demonstrate the lack of clarity surrounding application of the Guidelines, and suggest that they are used to censor realistic depictions of genitalia on an arbitrary basis and for no identifiable reason.

Altered images are highly accessible in women's magazines and mainstream pornography, and they inform both women and men's perceptions of their own genital (and others') genital appearance. Women's Health Victoria believes that the *Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005* should be amended to ensure that publications are able to publish real depictions of women's genitalia for unrestricted consumption. In the absence of this, images of genitalia that have been digitally altered should be labelled as such, consistent with the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image*²⁴. This would ensure that women and men are aware of the significant natural variation that exists in female genital appearance.

Recommendation 5: The *Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005* should be amended to ensure that publications are able to publish real depictions of women's genitalia for unrestricted consumption. In the absence of this, images of genitalia that have been digitally altered should be labelled as such.

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