

Inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising – Submission

Summary:

1. Moral and ethical
2. Adequacy of industry codes
3. Rate and nature of complaints
4. Suggested improvements

1. Moral and ethical concerns -

My concerns about billboard and other outdoor advertising, as a member of Shout _____ are the following:

- i) Advertisements of a sexually explicit nature, or those that imply sexual violence makes them inappropriate in public spaces where people do not have a choice to see them. They are inappropriate mostly because they depict **role models for young people** ie the more a female can be objectified as a sex object for male ‘pleasure’, the better. Conversely, the more often a male can snare a female for his sexual gratification, the better, even if violence is used and its in a group situation. It is a completely appalling that children and teenagers are so readily exposed to these images with their accompanying connotations. It has the effect of ‘sexualising’ children and young people – often exposing them to sexuality and/or sexual violence in a way that is inappropriate for their age and stage of mental and physical development. It doesn’t help adults either.

Examples of such advertising (dare I actually mention the brand names):

- a) Windsor Smith shoes have had billboards removed in the past – their advertisements specialised in sexual objectification of women, sexual violence against women and fetishism.
- b) More recently, Calvin Klein jeans have received many complaints about 2 billboards in particular. The one I complained about depicted a young female sitting, leaning back on a park bench in broad daylight. A young man was beside her with his hand on her upper thigh and other arm around her. Another young man appeared to be behind them. She was clearly depicting sexual arousal with her legs splayed apart (wearing her Calvin Klein jeans of course) and her shirt undone, exposing one breast completely. The other billboard showed several young men around a young woman lying prone. One of the young men appeared to be pulling her head back implying a consensual

pack-rape-type situation. Viewers are subliminally being fed the idea that by buying Calvin Klein jeans girls will be so sexually desirable that they will become objects of sexual violence – objectified for the gratification of young males – a fantastic message for young people. This is not the sort of behaviour I want role-modelled to my daughters and sons. It is horrifying.

- ii) Note only this, such advertising is **misleading and ethically corrupt (not to mention spiritually bankrupt)**, providing a hyper realised (or unrealistic) form of lifestyle. How often does the provision of a certain brand of condoms provide mind-shattering sex as is depicted on a billboard at Richmond? The level of dishonesty in depicting jeans as a potential source of extreme and violent sexual ‘desirability’ is just vile beyond description.

It is not the two-legged paedophiles we need to worry about so much as the insatiable appetite for sex and violence demonstrated by our media – the worst and most insidious paedophile of our age - who infiltrates young hearts and minds, robbing them of every virgin vestige of childhood and innocence.

- iii) Thirdly, such public advertising is **undemocratic** – there is no choice involved when a huge billboard is in the public arena where all are forced to see. Such distasteful, often virtually pornographic material on these billboards necessitates the individual right to choose whether one looks at it or not. Adults have that right, as do one of the most disenfranchised groups in our society – children. Why should a child have the need to ask his parents what the word ‘SEX’ means, way before it is necessary to know? Where is the right of a child to remain a child? A very large billboard in the middle of a shopping centre, or on a major freeway entering Melbourne, is seen by all and provides no avenue of choice whatsoever. When I have no right to choose what I see, I no longer live in a democracy.

2. Adequacy of Industry codes:

From the above it follows that industry codes are becoming dangerously inadequate. A quick perusal of the cases taken to Consumer Affairs last year tells us that few complaints are upheld despite hundreds of complaints, though some notably are – as were Windsor Smith shoes and Calvin Klein jeans. One could argue that viewpoints re billboards are ‘a matter of opinion’. I would argue that they are a matter of common decency and respect for fellow human beings. Guidelines need to be thought about and articulated as to what exactly ‘common decency and respect for fellow human beings’ actually are, and these should be the central premise from which decisions are made.

3. Rate and nature of complaints:

It is clear that many people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the direction in which some advertisers are going regarding billboards and outdoor advertising in the public arena. Such billboards and advertising should receive no time in the public arena as they undermine people for the short time they are up there. The fact that organisations such as 'Collective Shout', 'Kids Free 2B Kids' and 'Families Australia' are gaining wider coverage and have embraced by many, says that there are an ever-growing number of people out there who aren't happy with advertising and media trends. People are concerned with the 'sexploitation', objectification and denegration of young girls and women and the depiction of young males as being violent, sexually predatory and physically and psychologically domineering.

It should be considered that the vast majority of people do not get to the stage of making a complaint regarding outdoor advertising.

4. Suggested action/improvements:

- i) An articulated and documented set of 'limits' or 'criteria' (to couch it in positive terms) for acceptable content on public billboards and outdoor advertising. This should take into account 'mainstream sensibilities' of the general public.
- ii) That these 'limits' be taken from the 'common denominator' of views expressed by organisations such as 'Collective Shout', 'Kids Free 2B Kids' and individuals of similar expression, to ensure the sensibilities of the wider community are acknowledged.
- iii) Research to be undertaken to establish the moral/ethical viewpoints of the 'majority' of the Australian public.
- iv) Advertising standards need to be re-assessed and regulated to take into account all the above.

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(This is an individual submission – however I am also a member of 'Collective Shout'.)