

**Submission to the Senate Enquiry
into the Sexualisation of Children
in the Media.**

By

MEDIA STANDARDS AUSTRALIA



[Introduction and submission summary](#)

Media Standards Australia (MSA) is a community group that seeks to relay community concerns about standards in the Australian Media to relevant media organizations and regulators, educate the community about media issues, and support community members to express their concerns. We are Perth-based and have an Australia-wide supporter's network of over 4000.

In recent years, our organisation has seen increasing numbers of concerned parents relate to us instances of children being exposed to inappropriately sexualised media images of commercial products and services in the course of their everyday activities.

We have also been informed, in some instances, of the worrying effects parents and teachers have observed of, what appears to many parents to be, an all-out, no-holds-barred assault on the sexual innocence of their children, which they have no power to prevent or control.

This increasing "sexualisation" of the environment surrounding children has also been noted by numerous other commentators, researchers and organisations with a number of reports, studies and newspaper articles being published, expressing the concerns and worrying trends showing the harmful effects of this overtly sexualised media exposure.

In this submission we aim to inform the committee of;

1. some of the main sources of inappropriate sexualised portrayals to children our organisation is aware of (through community and MSA membership feedback) and the effects on children's behaviour;
2. who benefits from the sexualisation of children;
3. some critical comments on where the media regulators of Australia are failing the community when it comes to protecting children from inappropriate exposure and;
4. some key recommendations for changes aimed at creating a more "child friendly" and less "sexualised" environment for Australian children.

1. Sources of inappropriately sexualised images that children are exposed to and reported effects.

A number of sources of inappropriately sexualised media material in the environment of children are commonly noted by MSA members, and community members, who contact our organisation with their concerns. These include:

a. Intrusive, “in-your-face”, highly sexually suggestive advertisements published in print media or displayed on billboards.

A wide range of businesses promote highly sexually suggestive images and wording in newspaper, magazine and billboard adverts where they are readily visible to children. These are obviously intended to be “in your face” and “confronting” in many instances. The fact that children will inevitably be exposed to and impacted by these images due to their wide-ranging, public exposure does not seem to stop advertisers using images that are excessively and inappropriately sexualised. Some of these adverts are actually aimed at teenagers and younger children.

Parents frequently relate to community groups like MSA their feelings of embarrassment and annoyance that children do notice these inappropriate images and ask questions about the suggestive images and wording displayed. Some parents indicate concern about children picking up unhealthy messages about sexuality and women’s roles from these provocative advertising campaigns.

In recent years, many community groups and women’s groups in particular, have expressed deep concerns about the messages these adverts impose upon children and the community in general.

b. Radio advertising of “adult” products and services

A common complaint from parents concerns the prevalence of adverts for “adult” products and services - particularly impotence, premature ejaculation treatments and condoms, which are commonly played on the radio at times when children are likely to be in the car, going to and from school and after-school activities.

Many of these adverts feature sexually-suggestive comments and innuendo, and often feature “soft porn” sound effects such as orgasmic moaning and groaning in the background. One complaint to MSA from a mother described how;

“while driving the children home from school with a music radio station turned on in the car, an advert for a ribbed condom brand was played. This advert featured the sounds of a couple obviously having sex, and then commenting how good it felt using this particular brand of condom. This was a totally unsuitable time to air this ad in my opinion – particularly considering the porno sounds. I quickly switched off the radio but found it awkward to explain to the children why.”

Numerous parents complain of the embarrassment they feel at having this sexually inappropriate advertising intrude when they have children with them particularly while in the car.

As one annoyed parent explained to the Advertising Standards Board (in a complaint about a radio advert for an impotence treatment featuring a woman's voice inviting men to "put some sizzle in their sausage" over the sounds of a woman moaning "yes, yes!")

"How and what are we supposed to explain to young kids when they listen to this ad on radio?"

c. Music CDs and video clips on TV promoting sexually suggestive images, dance movements and lyrics

Many parents have noted with concern the increasing "soft porn" images in music videos played on Saturday mornings - a peak time for children's TV viewing. Many songs also feature highly suggestive lyrics.

These semi-pornographic music videos are also very often played in other public places – notably in music stores and electrical appliance stores, who frequently use music videos to demonstrate new TV sets working in store. The result is a lot of exposure of children to these images, both in public places and in the home.

A number of our members have noted directly the harmful effects on children's behaviour resulting from children's exposure to sexualised material. One of our members, a relief teacher noted

"A little boy of six was making sexual thrusting movements, for no particular reason, out on the verandah of the classroom. He stopped when he saw me. It was so bizarre, yet only to be expected these days."

Another mother noted that;

"One Saturday morning I came across my 6 year old daughter parading around with tissues stuffed into her T shirt to create prominent "breasts" which she was shaking around like the girls on the dance music videos playing on the TV."

It has become common to see children trying to imitate the sexualised movements and poses commonly seen on music video clips. This inappropriate sexualisation of children's behaviour could put them in danger by suggesting to some deviant adults that the child is less sexually naïve than they actually are, perhaps concluding that the child is inviting sexual contact.

Some products aimed at children such as kids "pole dancing" kits, sexy lingerie items for young girls, or clothing items like children's T shirts with sexually suggestive messages or images on them also encourage children to project an inappropriately sexualised image that some perverse adults may interpret as seductive.

d. Adult (R18+) rated DVDs and magazines displayed in shops where they are readily viewed by passing children.

Many parents have noted the increase in prominent display of adult magazines and DVDs for sale or hire in public places and shops where children are exposed to them.

One parent noted, in a complaint to the Classification Board, that:

“I have 4 children, the youngest being 9 years old. I frequently find myself having to shepherd my children away from areas of the video store where R18+ rated DVDs with display boxes showing women in sexually degrading positions and featuring crudely suggestive descriptions of the film enclosed are displayed at child’s level in areas in the middle of the video store. I frequently also see such DVDs displayed amongst other sections of the video store, such as the “dramas” section or adjacent to areas where there are many G rated DVDs of interest to children and families.”

Parents are expected to be responsible and protect their children from inappropriate sexual or violent/disturbing images - how can they do this when public places like video stores routinely place these images in our children's faces? “

e. Internet website adverts, “pop-up” adverts and “spam” emails showing pornographic images or suggestions.

A member of MSA was disgusted by “pop-up” adverts, with graphic pictures of men engaged in anal sex, for a gay porn website that appeared on a webpage she inadvertently opened whilst her 9 year old daughter was sat with her looking at the computer screen. Her attempts to shut down the page resulted in more pictures featuring graphic porn appearing on the screen. She reported that;

“It felt as though myself and my daughter had been sexually assaulted by these intrusive and unwanted images. What is the effect of this assault on my daughter? Once she has seen these grotesque images I cannot take them out of her mind. How will this possibly effect her later sexual development and her understanding of adult relationships?”

Distressing instances of family’s exposure to unwanted pornographic images on the internet are surprisingly common. The often deceptive nature of internet pornography is a considerable concern to many parents. Children looking for toy product websites, such as “Barbie Dolls” may inadvertently access a porn site by that name for instance. There have been reports of children seeking the NASA space project website for school projects inadvertently accessing a porn site with a web address very similar to the NASA site. This porn site (and many others with addresses similar to popular children’s sites) seem to have been set up with the deliberate intent of inducing children to view pornography.

[2. Beneficiaries of the sexualisation of children](#)

Advertisers for various products and services are the main beneficiaries of sexually suggestive and offensive advertising. Advertising in some form or another is increasingly saturating the media and the community and advertisers are therefore competing for the attention of buyers against many other businesses.

An easy way of getting potential buyers to look twice at your advert – or better still, talk about it to others so that they check it out - is to use sexually-suggestive or provocative images or wording in your advertising campaign. This will likely draw some complaint from concerned parents, which will possibly get your advertising campaign more attention – a bonus would be to have an advertising campaign so offensive (“cutting edge” or “pushing the envelope” in advertiser speak) that it, and the protests against it, get significant media attention (“free advertising” in advertiser speak).

As the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) is a body established and financed by the advertising industry and (seemingly) focused primarily on preserving advertisers “commercial freedoms”, it has proved largely ineffective in maintaining any real standards in advertising.

Advertisers generally have no incentive to moderate their advertising as there are few serious penalties for advertisers who break the Codes of Practice. In fact, there is every incentive for advertisers to deliberately design advertising campaigns to be highly sexually suggestive/offensive, as this is rewarded with more attention being directed at the advert, and no penalties or censoring, in the vast majority of cases.

As the impact of any image, no matter how confronting, will diminish with increased exposure, advertisers then have to devise progressively more confronting images to compete for attention. The result is the creeping increase in the offensiveness of advertising that Australia has seen over the last decade or so, with new advertising campaigns constantly trying to “out-offend” competitors. Perhaps this could be described as “advertiser shock wars” – a competitive push to make each new advertising campaign more confronting than those previously broadcast, in order to benefit from the attention this will draw to the advertising campaign.

[3. Some critical comments on where the media regulators of Australia are failing the community when it comes to protecting children from inappropriate exposure](#)

Many parents are concerned about this increasing sexualisation of our children’s environment and their seeming powerlessness to do anything about it.

Key regulators, who are expected, by members of the community, to uphold reasonable media standards, include the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) and the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC).

The experiences of both Media Standards Australia, and many parents who contact us, is that these media regulators fail in numerous ways to fulfil community expectations of them. Some examples include:

Re. Sexualised advertising displayed/aired in an unrestricted arena or during children’s viewing and listening times.

Inappropriately sexualised adverts (particularly billboards and TV programme adverts) are an increasing feature of advertising in the public arena where children are exposed to them, generating concern and indignation from many parents. However the ASB has been noticeably ineffective in responding to these concerns, often seeming to belittle those who complain about such advertising.

In the December 07 edition of the ASB’s on-line AdStandard News, Board member John Brown noted the increase in individual community complaints about “sexual innuendo” in advertising, but patronisingly suggested that perhaps those complainants were just “lacking in a sense of humour”.

Advertisers seem to be equally derogatory in their assessment of complainants. Case study 20/07 on the ASB website – a complaint dated February 07 about a billboard advert for a premature ejaculation product, prominently featuring the words “Want longer lasting sex?” - recorded the “Advertiser’s Response” - an arrogantly patronising and belittling diatribe against the complainant’s presumed lack of parenting skills and responsibility. The advertisers view was that:

Overall the greater good served by such a message [advertising sexual dysfunction treatments] should prevail over the discomfort felt by a very small minority who are uncomfortable discussing the subject of sex with their children. For those parents who feel that it is not appropriate to discuss this matter [adult sexual dysfunction??] with their child they as parents should be responsible for deflecting or answering their child in a way which they feel is suitable for this situation. There are many forms of advertising which include magazines, commercial and billboard which all focus on the subject of sex. If this billboard is seen to be offensive then all these other forms of advertising would also be offensive [that’s right, they are all offensive – but advertisers take no notice of the complaints!]. Each parent bears the responsibility of what they do and don’t tell their children [yes – parents, not commercial advertisers, have the responsibility and the right to determine what our children are told about sexual matters] - however it is not just cause for advertisers to remove all advertising relating to sex because certain parents don’t wish to answer questions raised by their young children [not in your biased opinion perhaps!]

(-emphasised comments added by MSA).

I doubt very much if this particular complainant felt inclined to appeal to this regulatory body again!

Also, anyone investigating the ASB site with a view to making a complaint about sexualised advertising would be extremely discouraged, from making a complaint, by this report.

Why should any parent who expresses concern about their children’s exposure to deliberately “in-your-face” public advertising for intimate adult products or services be subject to public insult this way?

Notably, the ASB seemed to be in agreement with the advertiser’s insulting view, dismissing this complaint without giving any recognition to a parent’s right to decide what sex education material their children are exposed, or not exposed, to.

This lack of respect for parents, and the needs of children, shown by the ASB is at the core of their poor performance in adequately maintaining appropriate standards in advertising and is a chief source of community dissatisfaction with their service. Until the ASB is prepared to recognise that parents have a right to expect a child-friendly community environment, and to support that right by enforcing compliance with updated and more adequate codes of practice concerning sexualising advertising material, it is unlikely to fulfil the community’s expectations.

Currently the ASB seems more concerned with protecting the commercial marketing interests of the advertising industry that finances it.

Re. Display of R rated DVDs and adult magazines in stores:

Regarding the display of R rated DVDs with sexually suggestive covers in video stores, one complainant noted (in a letter to the Classification Board) that;

“My local video store manager told me that he had been told by an inspecting compliance officer from the Classification Board that it was OK to display R rated DVDs in general areas of the store where they are readily accessible to children. When I pointed out to him that many of the imagery on the display boxes was pornographic or disturbing to children he agreed that this was not appropriate and did not make for a family friendly environment in the store. He also admitted he had had a number of other complaints from other parent.”

She commented on the inadequacy of the response received:

“Nobody seems to do anything about this. The Classification Board Community Liaison Officer I contacted suggested my only course of action was to contact my local police station and ask them to enforce the Classification Act regulations regarding display of R rated DVDs. However, he also stated that the interpretation of what constitutes an appropriately “designated area” for display of R rated material would have to be decided by the courts “on a case-by-case basis”. The intention of this comment was obviously to make it quite clear to me that I would be wasting my time expecting the legal system to uphold the law in regarding this issue. What concerned parent has the time and money to engage a lawyer to take their local video store manager to court every time they display R rated DVDs inappropriately?”

We understand that under the Censorship Act, R rated DVDs/videos are supposed to be displayed in a “conspicuously identified designated area” separate from other, lower-rated material.

However, recent investigations by MSA members have reported back to us that the vast majority of video rental stores visited did not have a have a separated off area for the display of R rated material, such that children could not inadvertently be exposed to it.

In addition, R rated DVDs were routinely displayed in other areas of the stores, such as amongst new releases or in other sections not clearly designated and separated off for “adult” material.

Of the 20 video hire stores we visited, only one had a properly separate and identified “adult” area for R rated DVDs and did not display R rated material elsewhere in the store. By contrast, many appeared to pay no attention at all to the Classification Act requirements to keep R rated material separate from lower rated material – putting all R rated material in a readily accessible “arthouse” section, for instance.

A particular concern of MSA’s regarding this casual disregard for the need to keep R rated material away from minors is that, in recent years a number of films that we strongly believe should have received an X rating or refused classification, have been rated “R” by the OFLC despite featuring graphic sexual violence and other highly questionable material.

Video stores not only place these controversial movies amongst other lower rating titles but have cards placed in them with cajoling words such as “the video they tried to ban” or “you make up your own mind”. This kind of suggestive advertising invites young people to take a closer look.

It seems the majority of video store managers either do not bother to adhere to the legal requirements regarding the display of R rated DVDs at all, or only do the minimum they are required (such as simply sticking an “adult” sign above the R rated DVDs shelf situated in an area readily accessible to children), making no attempt to fulfil the intentions of the regulations to keep this material out of children’s viewing.

They appear able to flout the law with impunity, as the OFLC is ineffective in conveying the importance of complying with the regulations, and does not support enforcement of them.

Many MSA members and commentators have noted a similar lack of concern and sympathetic response from OFLC regulators regarding the inappropriate display of adult magazines in supermarkets and other public areas where children are exposed to them.

[4. Recommendations to achieve a “child-friendly” environment for Australian children](#)

Core changes needed:

1. MSA believe that a primary consideration of all media regulatory bodies should be the protection of children from inappropriate media images in the public sphere and the protection of parents’ right to shield their children from exposure to inappropriate adult material in the media.
2. Media regulators should play a key role in routinely educating the media industry and businesses about the important duty they have to respect the needs of families and children, to be shielded from inappropriately sexualised imagery and should have the powers necessary to effectively enforce protective measures and legislative provisions.

The Australian community has been indicating clearly to the Government and media regulators for some time that it is NOT happy with some sections of the media and business community imposing inappropriately sexualised images and advertising material on children, and unwilling adults, as part of their marketing strategy.

It has also been expressing concern about the likelihood of harmful results on developing children, and the wider community, of the highly sexualised environment that has been created in our society over recent years through prominent, intrusive sexualised media images.

The community expects the regulators of standards in the media such as the ASB and the OFLC to respond to, and fulfil, the reasonable expectations that children should NOT be exposed to inappropriate adult media images in public places and that parents’ rights to adequately prevent such exposure is also supported.

Unfortunately, media regulators such as the ASB and the OFLC appear more concerned with protecting adults’ rights to see and hear whatever they please or to protect industry’s freedom to use intrusive and controversial sexualised material to promote their product or services.

This is perhaps to be expected from the ASB, which is a body supported and financed by the advertising industry, mainly to protect their own industry interests.

The OFLC seems to be hampered by notions that they are ideologically liberal and should not be overly censorial, big brother-ish or be viewed as “wowsers”.

The result is that children in Australian society are NOT being given the appropriate protection they deserve from rapacious and uncaring media and business interests determined to exploit sexual imagery to the maximum on the strength of the adage that “sex sells”.

We strongly suggest that a new examination of, and emphasis on, the underlying ethos of these bodies is needed to more effectively fulfil the community’s expectations that children and family life will be respected by business and media industry bodies, rather than be viewed as a “soft target” to be sexually abused and assaulted with impunity.

Further specific recommendations:

1. Replace the current industry controlled Advertising Standards Board with a community-based body, independent of the advertising industry. Any regulator of the advertising industry also needs;

- ❖ greater powers to enforce suitable standards (the current body has been described as a “toothless tiger” which the advertisers regard with disdain).
- ❖ To be able to vet advertising, intended to be given wide public display (such as billboards), BEFORE it is put out for view, to ensure that standards are adhered to. Currently, advertisers can infringe on the standards and cause offence to many in the public with impunity as, by the time the ASB considers the advert in question, the advertising campaign has, in most cases, been concluded anyway. Codes of practice need to be rewritten to give more emphasis to the protection of children and greater recognition of children’s developmental needs.

2. Radio advertising should be subject to the same time-slot restrictions as other broadcast media. Adverts and programme content of a nature more suited to adult hearing should be limited to a later time-slot. Currently, no listening time classifications exist for radio advertisements, allowing radio advertisements for adult, and sexual products and services, to be aired at any time of day. In considering the time classification for these adverts, the broadcaster should consider the overall impact of the advert – including soft porn background sound and highly-suggestive innuendo. Currently, the Advertising Standards Board seems only to consider that there is no direct use of obscene language in the advert sufficient to warrant taking it off the air. Again, no consideration is given to the impact on families with children who are likely to be exposed to these adverts.

3. The time-slot allowed for music videos should be reconsidered if those video clips feature highly provocative images. Currently, classifiers do not seem to consider the overall impact of the scantily clad women dancing in a provocative manner to highly suggestive lyrics on child viewers. They insist that because the persons portrayed are not nude, or using language judged to be obscene, that these videos only warrant G or PG level ratings.

4. Business managers, such as video store and newsagents, who display R rated DVDs and magazines for sale or hire need to be better educated about ensuring the public spaces

in their establishments are “child-friendly” and do not display inappropriate adult materials, where parents cannot prevent their children being exposed to them. The Classification Board needs to be more pro-active in promoting the responsibility to provide a child-friendly environment in public spaces. Perhaps the OFLC should promote a regular “child-friendly community” campaign to raise awareness of the need to prevent children’s exposure to sexualised media?

5. Mandatory ISP filtering of pornography would greatly reduce the instance of children inadvertently being exposed to pornography on the internet. This is a move that has been suggested for some years now by numerous community groups and commentators, in the face of increasing evidence of harmful exposure of children to pornography through the internet.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this enquiry.

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