

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO GENDER PORTRAYALS IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract

This study explores Victorian community responses to gender portrayals in advertising, in order to identify potential pathways forward to promote gender equality in the advertising setting. Based on data from ten focus groups held in Victorian metropolitan and regional centres, the study suggests that community members perceive that stereotyped gender portrayals and sexualised images of women are common in advertising.

Community members are concerned that these portrayals pressure women and men to conform to limiting stereotypes, have negative impacts on health and wellbeing, and may support attitudes that cause violence against women. However, the prevalence of these portrayals may have a desensitising effect, making community members unlikely to react to or complain about them.

Community members expect industry to take responsibility for improving portrayals, and believe government should play a more prominent role in mitigating harmful impacts and enforcing regulation. They identify a need for increased industry and community awareness about the negative impacts of stereotyped and sexualised gender portrayals, along with increased consumer awareness of regulatory and complaints systems.

ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH VICTORIA

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is a statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service. We work collaboratively with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence systems, policies and services to be more gender equitable to support better outcomes for women.

As a statewide body, WHV works with the nine regional and two statewide services that make up the Victorian Women's Health Program. WHV is also a member of Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women's health and the prevention of violence against women.

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Executive summary

BACKGROUND

Advertising has a powerful influence on our attitudes and expectations in relation to gender. There is growing evidence that the use of gender stereotypes and increasing reliance on sexually objectifying images of women in advertisements undermines efforts to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women in Australia.

In 2018, Women's Health Victoria (WHV) was funded by the Victorian Government to deliver a project to address sexism in advertising. This research into community responses to gender inequalities in advertising – produced collaboratively by RMIT University and WHV – was funded as part of this project. The aim of the study was to explore Victorian community responses to gender portrayals in advertising, in order to identify potential pathways forward to promote gender equality in the advertising setting.

I think one ad itself cannot be harmful, but when you see thousands of these ads, especially for ... young girls - and boys ... they see ... what the standards are for when they grow up...I think it will become harmful.
[female participant]

The impacts of advertising on gender inequality

Stereotyped portrayals of men and women remain prevalent in advertising around the world, and women and girls are increasingly portrayed in sexualised and objectifying ways. Research shows that these portrayals have harmful impacts, including:

- limiting the role, aspirations and interests of men and women
- damaging girls' and women's physical and mental health
- reinforcing the beliefs and attitudes that cause violence against women.

METHODOLOGY

To obtain detailed qualitative data on responses to gender portrayals in advertising, ten focus groups were held with 74 Victorian community members (46 women, 28 men) in metropolitan and regional centres. Data was collected on perceptions of gender portrayals in advertising and the impacts of these portrayals, understandings and perceptions of the regulation of advertising in Australia, and how gender portrayals in advertising could be improved.

KEY FINDINGS

Portrayals of gender

Participants felt that advertising portrayals of women and men were stereotyped, with women shown as homemakers, mothers or sex objects, and men portrayed in more action-oriented roles and associated with leadership and power. These portrayals were seen to be out of step with contemporary society.

It might have an impact on violence towards women ... women are being advertised, targeted towards their appearance, and ... the advertisements that are targeted towards men are about how assertive and powerful they are ... this might lead to that power dynamic in which men might take it upon themselves to then act upon that power.
[male participant]

I'm used to that theme ... I've become conditioned not to be offended... I've absorbed way more than one should"
[female participant]

[we need] to be making changes to make advertising more reflective of where we need to get to, and where we need to get to is in the direction of greater equality between the genders. And ...we need to ... take seriously the sorts of problems which are reinforced by advertising.
[male participant]

Impacts

- Participants raised concerns that such portrayals place pressure on individuals to conform to limiting gender stereotypes. They regarded children as a particularly vulnerable population group who internalise expectations about gender from advertising.
- Participants felt that the impacts of these portrayals were particularly disempowering for women and contributed to the devaluing of women in society. Many suggested that advertisements that sexualise women or focus on women's appearance had a negative impact on intimate relationships, body image, self-esteem and mental health. Several expressed concern that these portrayals could contribute to violence against women.
- Women participants tended to express concerns about gender portrayals more readily than men, particularly in relation to idealised and sexualised images of women. They observed that these portrayals were sometimes presented as empowering, but were concerned that they could set unrealistic standards for women.
- Participants felt that these portrayals were problematic, but were so common that they had become normalised. This was perceived to have a desensitising effect. As a result, participants said they often did not consciously react to problematic gender portrayals, even though they were affected by them.

Regulating and improving gender portrayals

- Participants lacked knowledge of how advertising was regulated in Australia.
- They perceived that the advertising industry, government and consumers all had a role in improving gender portrayals in advertising. However, they felt industry had the primary responsibility for improving portrayals, and that government intervention was needed in order to address possible social harms and to ensure regulation was enforced.
- Participants also identified a need for improved processes for consumer feedback and complaints, increased diversity in the advertising industry and in regulatory bodies, and media literacy education in schools. They also suggested guidelines for advertisers regarding gender portrayals, while noting that these should allow scope for creativity.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for advertising industry practice and regulation in Australia. They suggest that community members frequently perceive that gender portrayals in advertising are stereotypical and that women are sexually objectified, and many are concerned about the harmful impacts of these portrayals. However, the findings also highlight that individuals are often desensitised to these portrayals. As a result, community members may be unlikely to react to or complain about gender portrayals in advertising, even though they find them problematic. This is significant in the context of Australia's self-regulatory system for advertising, which relies on consumers recognising problematic advertising and being motivated to make complaints.

These findings highlight that addressing gender inequalities in advertising will require a collaborative effort that involves industry, government and the community. Community members see industry as having the primary responsibility for improving portrayals, with government playing a more prominent role in mitigating harmful impacts and enforcing regulation. The findings also point to a need for increased education and awareness-raising about gender portrayals for both advertisers and the community, together with increased consumer awareness of regulatory and complaints systems.

Introduction

Advertising increasingly saturates public, private and online spaces, and is highly influential in shaping beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours (Lavine, Sweeney, Wagner 1999). It filters into private settings through television, radio, print media, the internet and social media. It is also ubiquitous in public spaces, including in shops, public transport, entertainment and sporting venues. Its pervasiveness means that it has impacts across the entire community.

Along with other forms of everyday media, advertising plays a profound role in shaping attitudes and expectations in relation to gender (McKenzie, Bugden, Webster & Barr 2018). Stereotyped portrayals of men and women remain prevalent in advertising around the world (Grau & Zotos 2016; Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016). Research also identifies that women and girls are increasingly portrayed in sexualised and objectifying ways (Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Zotos & Tschla, 2014).

These portrayals have significant individual and social impacts and undermine broader efforts to promote gender equality in Australia. From an early age, children's aspirations and interests are shaped by characterisations of gender that are limiting and stereotyped (Bond, 2016; Ward & Aubrey, 2017). The influence of these representations continues into adulthood (Giaccardi, Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Lippman, 2016; Seabrook et al., 2016). The prevalence of portrayals that sexualise women or present unrealistic images of women's bodies can have a harmful impact on girl's and women's physical and mental health (Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2010; Tiggemann & Brown, 2018; Ward, 2016). Further, exposure to

sexualised and objectifying images is associated with beliefs and attitudes that cause violence against women (Capella, Hill, Rapp, & Kees, 2014; Lanis & Covell, 1995; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Romero-Sánchez, Toro-García, Horvath, & Megías, 2015).

Until recently, government initiatives to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality in Australia have paid limited attention to the critical role of advertising. Today, Australia's national framework for preventing violence against women, *Change the Story*, and also the Victorian Government's strategies *Free from Violence* and *Safe and Strong* have recognised that advertising and everyday media is a priority setting for preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality.

In 2018, Women's Health Victoria (WHV) was funded by the Victorian Government to deliver a project to address sexism in advertising, working together with six project partners. The project aims to engage industry, businesses, regulators, academics, activists and community members to mobilise support for action to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality through advertising. The project is the first coordinated effort in Australia to promote gender equality and address the drivers of violence against women in the advertising setting. This research – produced collaboratively by RMIT University and WHV – has been funded as part of the project.

The aim of the study was to explore Victorian community responses to gender portrayals in advertising, in order to identify potential pathways forward to promote gender equality

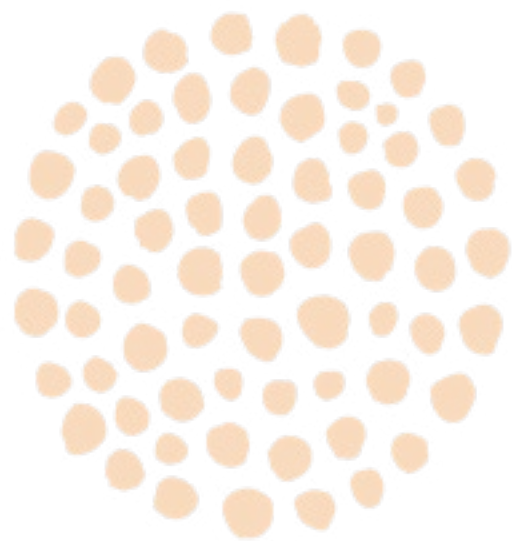
in the advertising setting. The research was undertaken through a series of focus groups held with Victorian community members. Focus groups explored:

- perceptions of how women and men are portrayed in advertising
- perceptions of the societal impacts of advertising portrayals of gender
- understandings and perceptions of the regulation of advertising in Australia
- how gender portrayals in advertising could be improved.

The study helps to address a lack of Australian research on community perceptions of gender portrayals in advertising. While research on community perceptions of gender portrayals has recently been undertaken in other countries (for example, a study undertaken in the UK - see Crush & Hollings 2017), recent Australian data is limited.¹ The Australian Advertising Standards Bureau (now Ad Standards)² regularly commissions studies on Australian community perceptions of advertising, however these provide limited information on community perceptions of gender portrayals and focus predominantly on the extent to which the decisions made by Ad Standards are aligned with community views in relation to a range of issues.³

The current study provides important qualitative data on how Victorian community members perceive gender portrayals, aspects that prompt concern, and their understandings and perceptions about advertising regulation and the complaints system and how gender

portrayals in advertising might be improved. This data is critical in the context of a regulatory system for advertising in Australia that is largely based on codes of ethics and practice developed by industry, which are intended to align with prevailing community standards (Gurrieri & Hoffman 2019). In this system, complaints made by community members play an important role in influencing advertising practice and the subsequent media landscape. However, this relies on community members recognising problematic portrayals, understanding the regulatory process and having the skills, capacity and motivation to make a complaint. The current study sheds light on these issues by providing rich qualitative data on community members' views, as outlined in the next section.



1 Some earlier Australian data is available from a survey of attitudes towards gender portrayals in advertising undertaken in 2005 (Harker, Harker & Svensen 2005)

2 Ad Standards is an advertising industry body that reviews complaints through a community panel. The panel decides whether the advertisement is consistent with 'prevailing community standards'.

3 These reports include research on community perceptions of advertising (2006, 2008, 2012, 2017), as well as research on specific areas of the code of ethics: discrimination and vilification (2009), violence (2009), sex sexuality and nudity (2010); exploitative and degrading advertising (2013), and perceptions of advertising directed primarily to children (2015). The studies are based on survey data from adult men and women across Australia, as well as qualitative data from focus group. "See <https://adstandards.com.au/news/reports>"

Methodology

Qualitative research was undertaken to explore community responses to gender inequalities in advertising and pathways forward to promote gender equality in the advertising setting. Data collection consisted of 10 focus groups, each of 90 minutes' duration, that took place during April, May and June 2019 in both morning, afternoon and evening sessions. The focus groups were moderated by Dr Gurrieri from RMIT University and observed by a WHV researcher. The research received human research ethics approval from the Business College Human Ethics Advisory Network at RMIT University as a low risk project. The sample comprised a total of 74 participants from a broad range of backgrounds, as detailed below. The research was conducted in Victoria, Australia in both metropolitan and regional centres.

Design of the focus groups

The focus groups were guided by researcher questions in a semi-structured format (see appendix 1). The design of the questions was informed by relevant research (Crush & Hollings 2017; McKenzie et al. 2018; Gurrieri & Hoffman 2019).

At the beginning of the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss the portrayals of women and men in advertising today. The second part of the focus groups utilised stimulus material to explore perceptions of gender inequality, offensiveness and harm in advertising.

Participants discussed two of four possible advertising examples (see appendix 2), depicting women, men and children. Advertisements were selected because they:

- demonstrated use of gender stereotypes; or
- demonstrated sexual objectification and/or gender inequality; or
- had received large numbers of complaints against them; or
- had prompted vigorous conversations in the media (see appendix 2).

Lastly, the focus groups explored community understanding of advertising regulation in Australia, stakeholder responsibilities for advertising in relation to gender equality, and the role of guidelines for the portrayal of women, men and children in advertisements. The focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Participant recruitment

Advertisements for participant recruitment were placed throughout classifieds pages (such as Gumtree), community noticeboards of public libraries, social media channels of RMIT University and Women's Health Victoria, University careers pages and the communications channels of project partners (City of Melbourne, Our Watch, Collective Shout, Venus Comms). A recruitment house was employed to recruit for the regional groups.

Individuals interested in participating contacted the research assistant for the project who explained the research study and provided a screener survey for participants to complete in order to qualify for the study (see appendix 3). Survey responses were entered into Qualtrics software and analysed by two researchers to screen for a valid and balanced sample of

participants. The qualified participants were then sent an invitation to attend a focus group along with a participant information sheet and consent form. At the end of each focus group, the participants were given a gift voucher for their participation and time.

Sample demographics

The research participants were drawn from a variety of demographic backgrounds, including socio-economic, cultural, sex, age and household composition, to create a diverse sample.

The sex distribution of participants was 62% female participation and 38% male participation. The process of screening yielded a much larger possible recruitment sample of women. Men did not seek to participate in the study to the same extent.

The highest number of participants were aged between 25-34 years, comprising 41% of the sample. Age cohorts 18-24 years (24%) and 35-44 years (16%) were also well represented in the sample. There was more limited participation by those aged 45-54 years (8%) and above 55 years (11%).

The sample had higher participation from Metropolitan Melbourne (76%) in comparison to regional Victoria (24%).

53% of participants were born in Australia. Other countries of origin included: Argentina, China, Guatemala, India, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, UK, Vietnam and Zambia.

The distribution of the participants across household composition criteria was balanced. 27% of participants were from a group household and 23% of participants were living alone. 19% of participants were living with children in the household and 22% of participants were living as a couple. The remaining sample identified their household composition as 'other'.

The sample skewed towards a lower household income, with 50% of participants having a household income below \$50,000. This was mostly correlated with ages between 18 and 34 years. 31% of participants had a comparatively

higher household income between \$50,000 and \$100,000. 16% of participants had a household income between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Only 4% of participants had a household income over \$200,000.

The majority of participants in the study (46%) had attained a Bachelors degree. Nearly a quarter of the sample (23%) had attained a higher degree qualification (Masters or PhD). 22% of the sample had attained a vocational qualification and 8% of the sample had attained a secondary school level qualification.

56% of the sample was employed on either a full-time or part-time basis. 35% of the sample were studying and 4% were retired. 3% of the sample undertook home duties with the remainder of the sample (2%) unable to work.

In terms of exposure to advertising, 88% of participants were often exposed to advertising, 11% were exposed from time to time, with the remainder rarely exposed (see appendix 3).

Attitudes towards gender equality

A series of questions were asked to screen participants' attitudes towards gender equality. These questions were based on questions asked in other national surveys.¹

The majority of participants included in the study held the attitude that gender inequality was still a problem in Australia today. However, the other attitudinal questions revealed greater diversity in relation to attitudes towards gender stereotypes, women's roles and gender equality (See table 1 opposite).

¹ These surveys were the *National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women (NCAS) Survey* conducted by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) (2018); *Bystander Research Snapshot Report* by Our Watch (2017); and *From girls to men: Social attitudes to gender equality in Australia by 50/50 by 2030* Foundation (2018).

QUESTION	Strongly agree or agree %		
	All participants (N= 74)	Women (N= 46)	Men (N=28)
Inequality between men and women is still a problem in Australia today	92%	96%	88%
Women are better care givers than men	68%	70%	64%
Men have more sexual needs than women	31%	28%	36%
Women's request for gender equality are exaggerated	19%	17%	21%
Women are becoming too outspoken these days	20%	17%	25%
Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household	12%	4%	25%
Sexist jokes are harmless fun	16%	7%	32%

Table 1. Summary of participant attitudes towards gender inequality, as generated through the screener questionnaire

Participants' attitudes were similar to those recorded in other Australian research:

- 92% of participants in our screening survey agreed at least to some extent that gender inequality is a problem; this figure is similar to that reported in a national survey of Australian attitudes to gender equality (88%) by the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation (Evans et al 2018).
- 12% in our screening survey agreed that men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household; by comparison the National Community Attitudes Survey towards Violence Against Women in 2017 found that 16% of adults agreed with this statement (Webster et al 2018).

Research findings

In the focus groups, men and women living in Victoria discussed gender inequalities in advertising. There was general consensus that the portrayal of women remains associated with traditionally feminine roles – such as that of the home maker and mother. Participants noted that women's appearance and sexual appeal also remained central to advertising portrayals of women. Portrayals of men were considered equally stereotypical, with men portrayed in more action-oriented roles and associated with leadership and power. Participants expressed concern about the potential for such portrayals to negatively impact on children and broader social norms.

Throughout the focus groups, women tended to engage more readily in discussions and to have stronger views about gender portrayals in advertising than men, particularly advertising that promoted specific body ideals or that sexually objectified women. Male participants were initially more likely to justify gender-stereotyped representations in advertisements. However, group discussion often resulted in participant perspectives shifting throughout the session, especially for male participants. Often female participants prompted male participants to more fully consider how women were represented and the potential for this to impact on social norms.

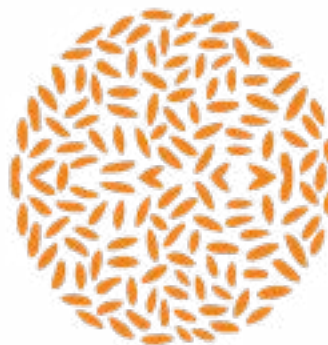
The following details the research participants' perceptions of how gender is represented in advertising, the impact of such portrayals, and the ways in which gender portrayals in advertising can be improved.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN ADVERTISING

In describing the representation of men and women, participants frequently perceived that they were constructed as opposites. Men were perceived to be depicted as assertive, action oriented, and shown in positions of power. By contrast, women were regarded as submissive, lacking in power and valued only for their appearance.

“Female: [it] is subtly presented ... like, men are protective and dependable. [In] sports ads, you can see men being in that dominant, like, main position and women accessorising ... But the main focus, who is the dominant character? The men are.

“Female: Women are shopping or fixing their hair, on the beach or out with friends and the man's always working or on a farm or painting a house or, you know, doing job things.



Portrayals of men

Participants perceived that portrayals of men demonstrated characteristics of dominance, leadership and capability.

“Male: The language used is quite assertive... it's like, “you've got to act fast, or you've got to take on this opportunity quickly”, with dominance, that kind of leads into that stereotypical view of what men should sort of be, as strong, assertive and straight to the point and suave.

Some observed that men in advertisements were portrayed as career focused and as having higher social value than women:

“Male: Professional. Like ... a man in a suit or a man in a particular profession, like, being a tradie – there's quite a big focus on the man's job where I don't think you get that as much with women.

“Male: For example, if the ad involves like a work focus then men tend to be portrayed strongly. But then if there is more of a community focus in the ad, women come to be more portrayed in the ad.

“Female: Well, I think they are always treated best, and valued more than women... and I think that's often reflected in the ads. You know, they're always the doers, the executive.

Men were often described as being portrayed in action-oriented roles and demonstrating physical prowess:

“Female: I think [advertisements often show] men coming in and fix things. Like there is a local ad here ... and they are like, plumbers or something, and the jingle is “Calling the [company name] boys – job done!”, and then it's a big picture of like 30 blokes. This is like “women don't work here, but call us”. ... I am sure they are not opposed to actually hiring females, but it's just the way it sort of comes across ... “call a bloke, and a bloke will fix it”.

In discussions of men's roles in the home or in relation to caring duties, two themes emerged. Firstly, men were often shown outdoors and were depicted as capable and responsible for physical home maintenance:

“Female: When it comes to even like family ads ... You might see the dad outside kicking the football, and mum's you know, doing the dishes, or mopping the floor [or] he is outside fixing the roof tiling or something typically ... manly. Or what we would perceive as “oh that's the guy's job”. Whereas the woman isn't usually the one that is outside. She will be inside doing something else.

Secondly, men were portrayed as being unable to conduct regular household or parenting tasks, denoted through comedic representations. For example, one participant explained that men are shown as:

“Female: Inept ... to do with anything in the home... they're useless, or they make mistakes, or they do silly things to look after the children, and in social media, they do silly things to keep babies quiet, and so on. However, if it's to do with a car, they're the ones that know all about mechanics and technology.

Another participant said:

“Female: Quite often in the ones where they are reflecting household duties, or men doing the traditional women's chores, it's taken light heartedly, or a joke is made out of it. The one that comes to mind is where the husband is at home, and he is looking after the kid and he has to go and get a wipe to wipe the kid's face, and comes back but the dog has licked it all up, and cleaned it ... It's like men can't handle those sorts of jobs.

Although there tended to be a greater discussion of the homogeneity of women's physical appearance in advertising, men in advertising were frequently described as muscular and rugged:

“Female: I think for men, it's seen as being buff. It's seen as having a six pack. It's seen as being—having definition. It's seen as being blonde or lighter hair. It's seen as being quite tough in the face.

Overall, participants' descriptions suggest that they perceive that advertising portrayals of men reflect traditional masculine roles and depict men in positions of power. Discussion focused on the roles and activities of men, rather than on their physical appearance in advertising portrayals.

Portrayals of women

In general, participants identified that women inhabit three primary roles within advertising portrayals: that of the attractive accessory, the homemaker, and/or the mother. Women were quick to provide detailed descriptions of the ways in which they felt they were confined to the private sphere, lacking in authority and positioned as secondary to men in advertisements. :

“Female: Well, with the female, the homemaker, the domestic roles within the kitchen and the household, the gardening.

“Female: Kind of as decoration or secondary, like, second of plot, secondary to the decision-making, or an ornamental figure.

“Female: [men] tend to have more of a presence ... be more of a leader within the ad. The female being the supporting role.

“Female: Even like baby products ... very rarely would you have a whole advert where it's the dad looking after the baby or it's the dad changing ...that parent side of things is very much geared to the women not the men.

In describing advertising portrayals of women, participants frequently emphasised the significance of idealised physical characteristics:

“Female: It's always like a perfect image ... What society sees as perfect, like you don't see the pulled up hair, no makeup, baby in the arms, whatever, it's always the high heels on, that perfection at all times.

“Female: I watched the tennis, and I saw some appalling television ads, portraying women as sex objects, and the helpless damsel in distress, needing a man to save them, always young, fit, able-bodied, slender, attractive.

Participants identified that portrayals of women in advertising often perpetuated the notion that women are capable of seamlessly performing multiple traditional roles, whilst always maintaining a perfect outward appearance:

“Female: I think they are generally tall, thin, and attractive ... even if it's stressful they've kind of got things under control. They are able to play a number of roles ... a domestic goddess, a professional. They are very rarely shown as an authority figure in the way as “trust me I'm a dentist” or whatever ... But still like they're probably seen to be ... contributing financially to the family as well. They have houses that are huge and beautiful, they have social lives and then they're also meant to be desirable. I think women are meant to want to be them and I think want men to want to be with them. This image of perfection that's very difficult to live up to.

Some observed that women are shown as either as nurturers or as sexual objects::

“Female: ... women are expected to be sexy but nurturing. ... even in perfume ads for males ...women have extreme body type, and they are looking really alluring, and really seductive. But at the same time, they want to use women as nurturing ... taking care of the family. You know, the woman is packing a lot of food, and going to a picnic, and the car is driving away to somewhere awesome. So I think, we always stick by two ends, either we are inside the family, or we are there tempting somebody else.

“Female: You have sort of that kind of house housewife kind of model, but then also the ultra-sexy women. I feel like most of the time it's kind of one of those two.

The significance of sexually objectified portrayals of women emerged strongly in participant discussion and was raised in all focus group sessions:

“Female: Yeh, most of the ads that like you see, they're most of time objectifying the women ... it's usually showing the female as being seductive, and following the shadow of the men.

“Female: ... [women are shown] as objects. So, if you're trying to sell like a shower or something like that ... you cannot even notice the shower is in it, there would be a woman behind it or something like that. Really playing on ideas of sexuality or mystery or those kind of ideas.

Younger women were identified as the main targets of sexualised portrayals:

“Female: I think we should look at different age groups of women portrayed in advertising, cause there doesn't seem to be a lot of older women. It's a lot of those motherly types, or career women, younger women are more like sex objects really. I guess older women if they appear are usually seen to be quite vulnerable. So there seems to be a stereotype for each age category of women.

In response to viewing an advertisement for jeans (shown here and appendix 2) which depicted men and women, participants identified that the women were shown wearing less clothing than the men. This was perceived as common in advertising, and as problematic and disempowering for women:

“Female: The women have ... got bras on or you know, hand across the breast. But the other men are well clothed. Why? Why the double standard? Why haven't they all got t-shirts and shirts on ... Why?

“Female: It just seems that the women aren't good enough on their own, like, they need to show some sexualisation in order to reserve their spot, whereas men can just chuck on a t-shirt and that's enough so that's going back to worth and, like, deriving worth from women being sexual objects.

Notably, female participants repeatedly expressed discontent with stereotyped and sexualised portrayals:

“Female: We can't be equal if we're window dressing.

“Female: We're represented as caregivers, wives, mothers, and consumerists, and it's very one dimensional. We're not all of those things, and we're so much more than that.

“Female: And the girls, they've got to look sexy ... I always just think why do the girls have to be half naked?

Overall, participant discussion revealed a perception that women in advertising are presented in a stereotyped and sexually objectified manner, with an emphasis on appearance and sexual appeal, and lacking the authority and agency embodied by their male counterparts. Female participants frequently expressed unhappiness with these portrayals of women.



Portrayals of girls and boys

In response to a toy advertisement (shown here and appendix 2), participants reflected on the representation of children in advertising. Consistent with portrayals of women in advertisements, more women than men provided quick and detailed descriptions of the roles children were being portrayed in and the harms associated with these stereotypical portrayals.

The depiction of roles associated with boys and girls was largely reflective of the traditional gender roles associated with adult men and women. In particular, participants noted the representation of girls in roles associated with the home and boys in more action-oriented roles:

“Female: This clearly shows that it starts from childhood. So the values, the way it is being portrayed ... that mindset is being constantly being just built up over the years. He has been shown [as interested in] construction ... engineering, and mechanical stuff. And the girl is shown with a kitchen set, or a Barbie doll. So from day one we are setting that divide, that “you would like a kitchen set more than those toys”. And also the colour, like he is wearing a blue, and she is wearing a multicoloured. So, that’s where “girls love pink and boys love blue” comes from.

“Female: I just feel like they just set a ... box for the girl, that’s the thing you have to do, and you can’t do the same as the boy.

The clothes worn by children in advertisements were discussed as restricting girls’ capacity to engage in certain types of play:

“Female: Even just looking at what the two children are wearing and how just their clothes would affect play. So the girl is wearing leggings which is one thing that is better than just a dress but for any of us that went to primary schools in Victoria, like, it’s only recently changed that girls have been allowed to wear shorts, you know, and actually playing on the monkey bars with dresses constricts natural play. And he’s got his comfy runners on.

The colours associated with children’s advertisements were further discussed as reproducing traditional associations of pink with girls and blue with boys. On occasion, the ‘stronger’ colours used for boys’ advertisements were considered to garner more attention than the ‘softer’ colour palette used for girls’ advertisements. Overall, the discussion revealed that portrayals of children in advertisements reflect similar stereotypical roles and depictions associated with the representation of adult men and women in advertising.



Changes in portrayals of gender

Largely, participants considered that there had been little change in gendered advertising representations over recent decades. Gender portrayals in advertisements were seen to be out of step with contemporary society

“Female: A little prehistorically or archaically, we haven’t evolved since the ‘50s really ... Seriously, women are still portrayed as the same.

“Female: ... I’ve also observed that in some SUV advertisements ... they have men in the advertisements but then I feel in reality, women use a lot of SUVs.

Some participants expressed concern that men and women are increasingly objectified. For example, one said:

“Female: I think it’s sad that they’ve also started objectifying men in advertising. It used to be a problem with women and rather than stopping that they started doing it for men as well so I think everybody now is portrayed as an object.

However, participants also noted that while the sexual objectification of men had increased, the nature of these portrayals is different from portrayals of women.

“Male: I feel like when men are portrayed as sex objects, when it does happen, generally it’s not by stripping their clothes off. Generally, if a man is portrayed as a sex object, he’ll still be wearing clothes. It’s not so much about the body as it is about the other factors that might make a man attractive.

Participants also identified some positive changes with respect to gender portrayals and increased representation of diversity within advertisements.

“Female: There are starting to be ads now where there are same sex couples, particularly like on TV, and internet, and I think that strips

away the gender stereotypes a bit too. Cause it confuses some people who don’t get it and go: “That’s two women—where is the bloke? There needs to be a bloke in this situation”, or “it’s two blokes, how can they do dishes ‘cause there is no woman?”. You know, it really challenges people’s thinking, which is really great.

“Female: They must have listened to the issues, because they have even designed Barbie dolls now to be a little bit more realistic, weight wise. They must have listened to feedback. I don’t think they have listened enough yet.

Participants noted that increasingly advertisers tried to portray women as independent. Whilst some participants regarded these portrayals as constructive, others considered them tokenistic and inauthentic:

“Male: They’re using it to sell. So it’s a series of stereotypes, but always to sell. ... You’ve got sometimes often apparent liberation, or whatever, but always the liberation is through the purchase of a phone, a this, and a that.

“Female: I think everyone is moving towards gender equality as much as they can, regardless of whether these big companies necessarily believe it or agree with it ... Everything at the end of the day is to please consumers, and to make money ... So I feel like, especially with how pressing it is at the moment, like, moving towards feminism. It’s like ... stronger women [are portrayed]. Rather than like; “Oh I can’t reach that up there”, they’ll get rid of the man that comes to save it, and they’ll just focus on the woman. But much more recently though.

Participants also observed that idealised or sexualised portrayals of women’s appearance were sometimes presented as empowering. However, there were mixed views about the benefits of these portrayals, with many participants questioning the motivations for these advertisements or arguing that these portrayals could be counterproductive and may undermine women’s equality:

“Female: They’re just sowing some line. They’re using this idea for empowerment, this feminist empowerment, something like your choices and all that, it’s nothing. They’re just trying to sell us a line. It’s consumerism. It’s not empowering at all. It’s undermining women.

“Female: I am thinking of ... some of the perfume ads that the stars are in, like Cate Blanchett ... They kind of look fierce, and strong, and beautiful, and that’s kind of quite a big benchmark for say a teenage girl to measure up to. To be that, you know, with men dripping off them.

According to participants, commercial motives were the key factor influencing gender portrayals in advertising. Companies were seen to be willing to use harmful or problematic portrayals of men and women in advertising in order to gain attention. In the instances where companies attempted to portray gender roles in more diverse ways, this too was characterised as superficial and pursued for commercially driven motives.

“Female: Think of the [brand name] ad that has come out a few months ago and, like, I don’t know, my skeptical self was, like, oh that’s well and great, but [that brand] is owned by a company that continued to peddle through the advertisements of a whole lot of products targeted towards women’s physical insecurity. So it was kind of like, yes, this is really good and it was talking about toxic masculinity But also looking at the larger picture ... was it just a bit of opportunism? Because it’s not as if they’re doing that across the board for all their other products.

“Male: Everything is a business, everything is about money, and I guess that ... the purpose of this is to capture the attention. And they’re saying that the cheapest way is to use, for example, a nude woman and not to pay creative people, or not wanting people thinking outside the box.

In some instances, participants observed that the competitive nature of the industry meant that, despite having some awareness of the impact of portrayals on women’s inequality, advertisers would take any measures necessary to ensure their commercial success:

“Female: I think there’s a gap of awareness and acknowledgement in the advertising companies. Like they are aware of what gender equality is or what women are suffering but they don’t want to acknowledge that because of the competitive race they face.

However, advertisements sponsored by government emerged as a notable exception in participant discussion. Some identified examples of government advertisements which were seen as positive, and these were not treated with the same scepticism as those perceived to be driven by corporate motives:

“Female: Well I think the government has started to take a role in terms of some of the ads that they are funding ... they are not advertising products ... they’re using the media in ways that actually addresses the inequality between men and women. And they’re good ads. So they’re using the media to actually promote equality, so they already know the power of the media and you know. I suppose it is a little bit like a stick or a carrot approach.

“Female: I think it’s changing like, I think men are being portrayed as more sensitive than they used to be. You know that Respect Women ad, and he’s, like: “Call out when your mate is become disrespectful.” I guess it is both sides of the coin, cause they’re showing different types of men, so they can all exist.

Overall, participants perceived that advertising portrayals have changed to some extent, however these changes were not always perceived to be positive or motivated by a genuine desire to promote gender equality.

IMPACT OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN ADVERTISING

When participants considered the harm posed by advertisements, they tended to identify the potential for negative effects on a broad, societal level, particularly in relation to the reinforcement of problematic social norms. The norms promoted in advertisements were perceived to contribute to social harms, including violence against women and a reduced potential for both men and women to pursue a range of goals, roles and occupations.

The power of advertising in shaping gender norms

The power of advertising to shape and/or reinforce ideas around social norms was a prominent discussion throughout focus groups and most commonly raised by women:

“Female: I don't think we can ever underestimate the power of advertising no matter what form it actually comes in ... And I think for a long time we were really quite naive about its capacity to influence and to shape people's view of the world. So I think we have begun to go some way down the track, but it's slow work, really slow work. And it's really critical that advertising is put under ... a lot more scrutiny than it actually has been in the past. So it's time really to actually say what are we doing? Cause it does shape what happens in society.

“Female: I think it normalises, profiles what's the status quo. I think in a few ways. There's obviously so much advertising that we see all the time that we don't always have time to realise the influence it has, and so it's a norm. I think the other thing is the types of products that are marketed to men and women tend to be different ... But even for example ... sports gambling in particular seems to be very targeted at men, and would probably cause men to feel that that is a common or an accepted social activity for them to do. So, they'll be potentially less likely to feel guilt around doing it or might be more likely to

suggest to their friends that they do that as an activity. In the same way a lot of domestic products tend to be advertised or show women using them. And so in that sense, you know, the way that we value domestic labour is also affected by how we see it portrayed in advertising.

“Male: It does reinforce those stereotypes. That's a bad thing. I think I was a kid who grew up with ... that sort of stuff, so I'm certainly on that side of the fence, but I don't think you need to reinforce that in advertising. There are boys who like dressing up and who like doing stuff in the kitchen, and that should be encouraged, I think, rather than sending a message that this is unmasculine.

Several identified that advertising plays a significant role in perpetuating social norms because of its pervasiveness:

“Female: I think one ad itself cannot be harmful, but when you see thousands of these ads, especially for ... young girls – and boys, I have to add. They see what the standards are for when they grow up. I think it will become harmful.

“Female: the cumulative thing again, these things are so subtle, and maybe not of itself, but there's so much of it out there that it's ... pervasive ... that's where I think people get overwhelmed by it.

“Male: I was going to say that sometimes it happens the other way around, so I've noticed the way women are treated in society then affects how they're represented in advertising.

Impacts on children's development and gender roles

In discussing the potential harm posed by advertising portrayals, a significant portion of participant discussion focused on the potential impact on children. Advertising was constructed as a key site through which children learn about gendered social expectations:

“Female: Unfortunately children spend a lot of time in front of TVs watching adverts. ... that's where they're learning from. They're learning from the things around them. I think you do pick up like: “Oh daddy why weren't you at work?” or like, “Mummy you need that” ... Then the product, or the advert that they're showing, that's what the child is going to associate it with ... like, the cleaning product should be for their mum.

“Female: I think kids in particular don't know that something is wrong until somebody tells them, and whether they are being told through advertising, or through their parents, or through other role models, I think it can be harmful – because it then will lead onto social expectations. And then going into a school environment and telling other kids that they are wrong for playing with something, or “it's for girls” or... Just has a flow-on effect. Children aren't born to know what they are supposed to do in their gender roles, so something like that could be part of the influence in telling them. So that is where I see it being harmful.

“Male: I just think it's important to think about the effects of advertising especially like, with self-esteem, self-image and mental health and everything like that and the effect that it can have on younger people in particular

Children were regarded as a vulnerable group who were particularly susceptible to ideas communicated via advertisements. This was because they were perceived to have limited capacity to control their exposure to advertisements and to lack the ability to critically engage with the messages presented.

“Female: What goes on at home is really important, and if a child is raised in an environment where they have unlimited access to TV or internet... And then any advertising that comes in and there is no filter on what they're exposed to, then the damage is already done before they go to a school environment. Education may give them the flip side of that, but they're already being quite immersed in all that subtle stereotyping, and damage is done even before they go to school. Even before kindergarten.

“Male: ... when it comes to the younger age group, then we have no control over what they're watching and these days, I have a little cousin who is about six years old who has access to an ipad or a phone. And he's probably just watching cartoons on the phone or the ipad on Youtube or Netflix, but then he has no control on what advertisement he's going to be watching next. So, I feel the age group matters a lot and younger kids are more prone to get influenced

Advertisements were also perceived to undermine broader efforts to educate young people about gender equality:

“Female: The objectification of women in an ad ... translates to how we feel within the society. [it affects] the youth that are coming out of their teens and the way they see women portrayed. And at home, we're giving them the message that you need to respect women, and you need to have positive attitudes towards them, but then they see a totally different attitude in the media.

Impacts on adult gender roles

Participants considered that advertisements placed pressure on adult men and women to conform to stereotypes.

“Female: Say if you're a girl for example, you think: “Oh I should be like that girl on the ad”, and you might not want to broaden your horizon because you think “oh that might be more of a man's position”.

“Female: Even if I think about gifting something to someone, maybe I want to gift a mechanics kit to my girl cousin or someone, I would just feel that, no maybe I'm not supposed to. So, that's kind of like altering my personal thoughts. So, yeah. I do find it offensive.

While stereotypes were perceived as limiting the potential of both men and women, participants identified that the impacts were particularly disempowering for women and contributed to the devaluing of women in society.

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“Female: ... It puts pressure on a male for example, to be kind of like, “Yep this is your responsibility, as the bread winner,” or whatever, to resolve those issues. But then also to the woman it has side effects of being so disempowering, the sense of like “Oh I wouldn't be able to do that, I need to rely on someone else who has those resources or skills”.

“Female: Food brands, in the way they advertise it ... subconsciously it's giving an image that the mother has the responsibility to cook. So if some man likes to take that responsibility, they suddenly become like “Oh wow he is such a good man, he knows how to cook”. No it's very normal, like my mum knows how to cook and so should my dad. And this is something I realise even in my own household, like my father likes to cook. But then the day he cooks it becomes a “wow” thing, but when my mum cooks, we forget to even thank her. Because we assume that she is doing what she is supposed to do. Because in the ads, the mother is pouring the milk. She is the one feeding the kids.

Impacts on intimate relationships

Participants identified that sexualised advertising could affect expectations in intimate relationships and placed pressure on women to please men.

Participants made the following comments after viewing an advertisement which depicted two women in lingerie surrounded by clothed men (shown here and appendix 2):

“Female: ... the underwear is very sort of based on pornography... It's again... the expectations that girls have to please boys – because boys are into watching a lot of pornography these days. And you know, that influences that ... doing things to please, because you think that's what you should, so you wear all this sexy underwear.



“Female: ... if girls are thinking that they need to be like this to get attention, then ... I think they are going to have sort of a difficult time of it, you know, sustaining attention, and relationships. ... It's not healthy. ... It's really harmful ... putting into the public saying: "Oh look if you want to be the 'It' girl, behave like this." It's not even just about the clothing, it's more an attitude about the women. And how they gain power is being this sexual object.

“Female: I buy lingerie, so ... I think I'm meant to be part of the target market for this [ad for lingerie] ... They're actually ... objectified as sexy women together for the male viewer ... if the female is the one who it's being marketed to, is this what you should think of? You should buy this because you could wear this, you could look this good, and men will lust after you in this way. It just, I just really don't like it.

Participants linked the portrayals of women in this advertisement to the broader social issue of violence against women.

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Impacts on body image and mental health

Participants discussed advertising as setting unrealistic standards around gender roles, but particularly with respect to female aesthetics. Such norms were considered to negatively impact on body image, self-esteem and mental health. Participants also noted that advertising could ostracise those who may diverge from established norms:

“Female: I think particularly with how aesthetic norms of female beauty have changed over the last few decades ... in terms of what products are being pushed and what new market it's being created for ... Like, I don't think anyone had a problem with cellulite before but now we're told: "Holy moly, there's little dimples on our skin; we need to get rid of them." I think it adds to that trope of women getting worth from their beauty. We're not seeing cellulite ads for men. Maybe it will happen and it's not the right direction to be going down when we're just causing more anxiety for men just because women have had it.

“Male: The stereotype of a woman's body. If you don't fit in that, it's like you are rejected from normal standards of being attractive to men. I think that is most harmful thing.

“Female: That kind of makes you feel inadequate as a woman. Because you go: "Oh I don't have that beautiful hair, I don't have those beautiful lips", like, "I couldn't look like that".

“Male: It's important to think about the effects of advertising especially like, with self-esteem, self-image and mental health and everything like that and the effect that it can have on younger people in particular.

Impact on attitudes towards women and violence against women

Some participants considered that portrayals of gender roles in advertising contributes directly to violence against women.

“Female: And it certainly impacts upon females socially, like it gives license to ... not value her role as much. And I think it has a greater impact in regards to violence against women ... It gives him more control.

“Male: Those adverts might have an impact on violence towards women ... Women are being advertised, targeted towards their appearance, and men – the advertisements that are targeted towards men are about how assertive and powerful they are. [That] might lead to that power dynamic in which men might take it upon themselves to then act upon that power and twist that to their own needs.

Other participants spontaneously raised concerns about violence against women when they viewed the sample advertisement for lingerie (see appendix 2).

“Male: The guys look powerful and the women look ... like, they don't feel in charge of the situation. It feels like they're not in charge. Even the fact that they're not fully clothed and stuff; it feels like their power has been taken away from them or their agency in the advertisement ... It just feels off. It just feels like they're overly vulnerable in this situation where the men are still given their own agency.

“Female: I see this as very harmful because of the context of the current rates of violence against women. So if the current context were different and we didn't have this kind of ridiculous crisis, then I think we could be, like, “Look, it's not ideal, but it doesn't mean much”. But the reality ... is that ... a lot of women feel threatened on a daily basis. A lot of women will have a high chance of sexual harassment or abuse in their life, and men do as well, but that

threat is from other men. So I think it's just reinforcing that power dynamic and the fact that the women are naked and physically as well as potentially psychologically exposed.

To a lesser extent, participants discussed the potential for individuals to experience bullying or devaluing as a result of deviation from the gendered standards established in advertising portrayals.

“Male: If other people think men are supposed to be tough and strong and they're not, they might want to bully that male. Or if they've been persuaded by society that that image of a man is ... not supposed to be sensitive and stuff like that, people [might] be like “oh you're not a man” ... and then they can put them down.

“Male: That's the impact on that individual, but then my girlfriend, she's pretty and all that, but not as attractive as those girls first. She's marked down because she doesn't look like some crazy image.

Desensitisation and normalisation

Participants noted that stereotyped advertising portrayals were so pervasive, they often did not react to problematic ideas or depictions, even though they were affected by them:

“Female: I just feel there is so much desensitisation taking place. Every new reality TV is one step worse, and it slowly brainwashes you. You're shocked in the first episode, and then it becomes normalised, and then the next reality TV show comes on, and it's one step more morally deprecated. I don't know what else to say. It's the same happening in advertising as well. There's a shock factor, and then you think, okay, I've seen it. Show me something new.

“Female: I think because of how I’m used to that theme that I’ve become conditioned not to be offended. Because I’m 53 and I’ve absorbed way more than one should, growing up with television when it was invented. ... I’ve become desensitised.

Participants described being so accustomed to seeing stereotypical advertising portrayals of gender that they did not consciously reflect on them. These comments were often made by participants after being asked to reflect on the gender portrayals in a variety of sample advertisements:

“Male: It’s not something that if I were going to glance by in the street, since we see so many typical adverts. ... And now I can kind of look at that and see that ... maybe there’s a power dynamic going on there and it’s now bothering me.

“Female: Thinking about the adverts that we looked at and saying how we felt about them, obviously they’ve been taken out of context, and we are kind of staring at them for a very long time. But if we were walking down the street after this, and it’s a huge window display right there, we might flick an eye at it, but we wouldn’t even discuss it, like we wouldn’t even pick up on it, it’s just there.

Such discussion suggests that individuals may be concerned about or influenced by gender portrayals in advertising, but they may be unlikely to consciously recognise or reflect on their perceptions of advertising portrayals unless they are specifically prompted to.

Ability to avoid advertising

Some participants identified that they were able to avoid advertising content that they did not like, and this may reduce its influence. The internet was identified as allowing for greater control over advertising content; this was contrasted with commercial TV stations:

“Female: ... we live in a time where we’re able to skip ads. ... people have shifted from watching TVs to Netflix, where you can just skip ads. So, it all also depends on how much you’re exposed to them that you let that affect your daily living.

“Female: I think the channels can dictate who we see a lot, ... I watch a lot of ABC and SBS, don’t watch any commercial television ... I spend a lot more time on social media, where you opt in to what you see.

Others said that having family and peer support assisted them to reduce the personal impacts of advertising:

“Female: I think in my world and my – people I surround myself with – that those advertisements don’t play a factor in how my group of friends, both female and male, are treated. I find that even in terms of family that they don’t look at an ad of a skinny person and say, “Oh, you know, that’s what you should look like.” Like I haven’t had that experience.



Improving gender portrayals in advertising

Research participants discussed a range of ways that gender portrayals in advertising could be improved. They considered the responsibilities of various stakeholders, the system of advertising regulation, guidelines for advertising practitioners, diversity and representation in advertising agencies, consumer activism and advertising/media literacy.

STAKEHOLDER RESPONSIBILITIES

Participants perceived that industry, government and consumers all have responsibilities in relation to gender portrayals in advertising.

“Female: We are all players in the game though. You know, the corporation is, the consumer is, the government is.

However, most considered that advertisers have the primary responsibility for the messages and representations portrayed in their advertisements and the harms these may cause:

“Female: I think it is on everyone. But I think the company has a big onus of responsibility. Because they need to consider that when you are publicising something, you need to take that into account, you need to look at whether you're stereotyping people.

“Male: I think ... they have a moral responsibility surely.

“Female: They should watch it themselves and then ... analyse it. Think about the people they're targeting, or the potential people who could be harmed by their ad.

Participants also discussed the role of consumers in regulating advertising. Problematic advertising messages were sometimes cast as indicative of the views already held or supported by the community. Some argued that consumers as a stakeholder group were responsible for enabling companies to produce the messages propagated within advertisements. However, other participants questioned the potential for consumers to have an impact on the kinds of advertisements produced.

“Female: We cannot blame anyone but ... ourselves.

“Female: I think we just need to change the way that we're doing this because I feel like everyone's responsible. As the consumers, we're responsible, we're saying “hey we want more, we want more” so that's where they need to change that cycle.

“Female: I think it gets harder for the public and individuals to take on that kind of responsibility ... I think it's something that someone else has to take on ... for the government. Facilitator: So you think government has a role? Female: Yeah.

As can be seen from the above extracts, participants considered that a variety of actors shared responsibility for advertising portrayals.

ADVERTISING REGULATION AND OTHER STRATEGIES

The majority of participants expressed little or no knowledge about current regulatory practices:

“Female: I assumed there were guidelines.

“Male: ... honestly I have no idea how it's regulated. I'm a bit curious.

Some participants expressed the assumption that government was currently regulating advertising:

“Male: There is a body of the government, I think, that regulates whatever is put out on any media.

“Male: I just assumed it was like a government agency.

After being provided with a summary of the current self-regulatory system in Australia, many saw self-regulation as problematic because industry is primarily driven by financial interests and lacked external accountability:

“Female: You can't leave it up to self-regulation. They will use whatever sells, and if this is selling right now in this time, then that's what they'll use. Consumers have to change, but in the meantime, I think government needs to intervene.

“Female: Self-regulation is only as good as they want to be self-regulated, you know. I don't like self-regulation. Sometimes you need an outside authority that's not in any way connected financially or otherwise – but it's usually financially – to enforce. Be the enforcer.

“Male: There are organisations which are declared groups to whom complaints are made, and they assess whether or not people pass the test, and if they don't, ads might have to be pulled. Unfortunately, those are systems

which are not plugged in to the legal system, I think, and so you can get some reasonably bizarre decisions out of those organisations, which can't be challenged anywhere.

As a result of these concerns, many participants identified government bodies as having ultimate responsibility for regulating the advertising content produced:

“Female: I don't think that companies can regulate themselves in a way that maintains kind of community wellbeing ... because that's not their mandate. Like, companies' mandates are for profit ... So, I think it's not necessarily their fault because it's just not their mandate but I think it's irresponsible in a way to leave that to those companies who also, from history, haven't lived up to those expectations that people may have held to, like, self-regulate. So I think it [regulation] needs to sit with government.

“Male: they're just trying to sell whatever they can. It's their job – if I was in that position, I wouldn't want to lose my job. Like I would have a sense of social belonging and also responsibility towards my society but also keeping in mind that people are going to be selfish when it comes to their job and keeping it or doing a good job and then getting promoted. So they would probably do anything and everything to sell the product. So there should be a body that keeps a check.

Participants argued that government intervention was needed in order to ensure that the social harms that may result from advertising portrayals were effectively addressed. Government could also ensure regulation was enforced.

“Male: I think it's probably easier for the government to have a say in regulating the companies, cause they would be able to use their power ... to potentially fine, or use some sort of authority in order to keep them within those established rules, whatever they might be.

“Female: It needs to be held accountable ... perhaps the government could influence those criteria more often or revise them routinely. So that when there are more suicides in male teens or whatever because of what's portrayed ... that might relate directly to advertising, perhaps the senate could debate on that and then make a ruling.

“Facilitator: So you think there is a role for government in the regulation of advertising?
Female: I think so. Yeah. Who else could you look up to really to speak on your behalf?

Complaints processes

Some participants pointed to the advertising complaints process as a means for individuals to influence gender portrayals. However, this was regarded as having several limitations as a primary mechanism to regulate advertising. For example, some said that they were unlikely to make the effort to complain and felt it would have little impact:

“Female: ... I don't know where I could go to complain about an advert. So no matter how offensive or not it is, if I'm a bit like: “Oh I don't really like that”, I'd just brush it off and move on. I won't report ... because I don't know what my one little opinion is going to do.

Others had similar views, and perceived that the complaints process is slow, and by the time complaints are addressed the harm may have already been done.

“Female: It's such a convoluted process to complain about it and then to have your complaint taken seriously. And then even if your complaint is upheld, for the brand to actually act on the finding ... by the time it's all gone through the process the campaign's moved on, they're doing something else ... the self-regulation of advertising is a joke in my opinion.

“Female: It's already out there when people have to complain though.

“Male: The harm is done.

“Female: It's already there – and then it goes viral, it's everywhere ... It's a problem – because people have already had to experience it, to have to complain.

As a result of these concerns, participants discussed the potential for a more immediate and active process for consumers to respond to advertisements:

“Female: But for there to be like, not even a system, but just a platform where people can say: “Yeah I don't really like that” ... just to have an opinion ... at least to start introducing the fact that “if you're not ok with stuff that we're showing to you, then this is how you can let us know ... and we might act on it, might not – but at least we've got an opinion”. So just gathering more opinions, rather than ‘Like’ or ‘Don't like’. On social media, you can ‘Like it’ like it, and you can do your ‘Don't likes’, but it doesn't reach every demographic ... not everybody is on social media.

Sanctions

Participants perceived that an effective system required the use of sanctions to enforce regulation:

“Female: It really should have some kind of punish system. Because ... the advertiser, they will get awareness of like what kind of things we can make, and what kind of things we have to avoid.

“Female: I think there should be some penalties. If there's penalties involved knowing if they go too far, the penalties would be imposed and things like that.

Guidelines for gender portrayals

Several participants outlined the potential for guidelines to be developed for advertising practitioners to positively influence gender portrayals.

“Male: Probably gender equality should be considered in framing the guidelines ... So you showed us the example of the boy with the mechanics and all the construction tools there and the girl with the kitchen ... so why can't both genders be a part of both the advertisements? Probably both the kids playing with the set would be more – much cooler to portray.

“Female: ... things like targeting not for the idealistic body, or something like that, but more realistic. And also ... making very gender neutral advertisements for the children especially.

However, in discussing the potential for guidelines, participants were concerned with the potential for companies to find loopholes and ways to subvert the ethos underpinning them.

“Female: I think even if we have guidelines, the advertisers can still work around those guidelines, and still make things that are inappropriate, or offensive to people, so it again comes to that same point. So no matter how many guidelines you keep on making or amending, but if somebody wants to portray something, they'll try to put it like in a different way.

Participants also considered that there may be limited capacity for guidelines to regulate international advertising content available online and via social media.

“Female: I think the trickiness would come from international guidelines in comparison to Australian guidelines. How do they then police that? Because obviously we're going to get things from the internet, advertising material for particular products, that will come through from an international provider. So whilst in

Australia we are quite able to create guidelines, it's a matter of internationally how that then impacts.

Another concern was the potential for guidelines to stymie creative advertising content. There were varying levels of debate about this concern, with some contending that guidelines and other forms of regulation should be avoided in order to allow for full creative processes, and others arguing that guidelines will encourage greater creativity.

“Female: I think in relation to what is the purpose of the advertisement there can definitely be a guideline, and I think creativity - the word is there for a reason. You can be creative with [a] lack of resources, you can still be creative. So I think having an excuse that “oh ... I think everything would be destroyed because we would not have that liberty to be creative enough, I think that is not a strong enough argument for me. I think people can be creative and really, really like circumstances where the resources are very limited. So I think we can do that with the guidelines and all.

“Male: ... I guess there shouldn't be guidelines for every minute detail that goes in an advertisement. But there should be some broad guidelines, which can be used by a government, or organisations to break the stereotypes.

“Female: I disagree with the idea that having a regulatory body is a good thing. I think that by having a regulatory body, it narrows creativity. I think that it's ... I mean, at the end of the day, the advertising industry and agencies in particular thrive on creativity whether that's good or bad, ethically or unethically – you know ... and I think that, you know, as the famous saying goes, there's never such a thing as bad publicity.

Other considerations in the implementation of guidelines included a need for rules around the timing and placement of advertisements. This was perceived as important as a way of limiting children's exposure to harmful messages:

“Male: I also feel they should have guidelines which pertain to which form of media, which media platform that the organisations are going to use to publicise their work. So ... we can't put every ad on the billboard. So, probably, they should have guidelines as to what sort of advertisements are okay to be put on billboards and what can be advertised post 9 pm on TV channels.

“Female: Maybe they can make the ads appear at like, certain times [or on] certain channels ... Maybe they can limit the way they put the ads to, like, certain places, timings.

Diverse representation in advertising agencies and regulators

Some participants considered that greater diversity within advertising agencies was likely to positively impact the advertising output:

“Male: My perspective [is] that there are more men who are decision makers for a firm ... and I think more inclusion of women would help in making them strengthen the moral compass.

In addition, participants considered there to be a need for a diverse range of people to be involved in advertising regulation and the assessment of complaints:

“Female: I think it also comes down to the diversity of that regulation body. You know different people of different backgrounds have different experiences in their life. That can have a deciding effect on whether or not ... this ad is too offensive.

“Female: I think that the body or group [that] is making those decisions on complaints, that needs to be very very diverse. So, say, if it kind of consisted of what in Australia is the current hierarchy of identities – which is, like, white male - then those judgments can be very different. It is so important to have people whose lives have been affected in the judgment on the review group ... Like, very representative in terms of age, gender, nationality, sexual ... gender identities.

Consumer activism

Participants perceived that consumers could play an influential role in how gender is portrayed in advertising by making complaints or by not buying products. However, participants debated the efficacy of consumer action:

“Male: You don't like it, you don't buy it. They won't market it that way if you don't buy it ... all the advertising is selling something, whether it's legal experience, knowledge, doctors ... they're trying to sell a service to get money. So the consumer has the ultimate power.

“Female: I don't think it's just about the consumer ... cause you can be empowered or disempowered. So just to ... say that it's the consumer's responsibility, I don't think is very fair.

Advertising and media literacy

While most participants argued that advertising should be regulated, this was characterised as an imperfect solution. Advertising literacy programs were identified by some participants as important to improve the capacity of individuals to respond to advertising messages.

“Female: ... as a parent it's important to have those conversations with the kids when they're consuming advertising, so that they see how they're being played and manipulated ... It's always a promise that never ... you'll never be satisfied, you're never going to get the things ... Media literacy is really important and that just critical thinking to be able to see ... and being aware of the climate.

“Female: Perhaps the responsibility lies with government health and government education ... you could have programs in schools. And of course, because it's causing mental health issues and suicide and so on, it's also a health problem.

“Male: The only way I can see of trying to improve the situation as time goes by is ... the kids' education ... and improve our situation as we go.

Some participants highlighted that education is critical, and that citizens need to be more active in recognising the potential harms and in ensuring advertising portrayals support gender equality:

“Male: I think that point about education is very important. We live in rapidly changing times ... Where people advertise today is very different from what it was even 10 years ago and spaces like the social media are becoming increasingly important, many more television stations and great decline in some media, like newspapers. So we live in changing times. Advertising, I think, is both a reflection of our society and community and its attitudes, but it's not a perfect reflection by any means. It's a distorting one because ... it's directed to getting people to part with their money, so there is an objective there which is not consistent with society's objectives. We need to ... make advertising more reflective of where we need to get to, and where we need to get to is in the direction of greater equality between the genders. And we need to take seriously the sorts of problems which are reinforced by advertising – such as, body image problems, which are very significant problems in our society, and what they lead on to – depression and suicide. So these things are important.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are offered in relation to the findings of this research:

Gender portrayals in advertising

This research suggests that community members perceive that advertising portrayals of boys and girls, and women and men are closely aligned with traditional gender stereotypes. Participants in this study suggested that men were shown as assertive, capable, action-oriented, career-focused and in positions of power. Participants also perceived that men were frequently depicted as inept in relation to routine household chores or parenting tasks. By contrast, advertising was perceived to depict women as lacking in authority and valued primarily for their appearance. Participants felt that women in advertisements were shown in one of three primary roles: the attractive accessory, the homemaker, and/or the mother. A theme that consistently emerged in discussions of portrayals of women was the prevalence of sexually objectifying images.

The observations of participants in this study are consistent with the findings of research on advertising content, which has identified that stereotypical gender portrayals and sexualised images of women are common (McKenzie et al. 2019).

In general, participants felt gender portrayals in advertising were out of step with contemporary society, with little evidence of positive change in recent decades. Although they noted that advertising portrayals were becoming more diverse, participants felt that issues such as body idealisation and sexual objectification had not abated. Some observed that these portrayals

were presented as empowering for women, however there were mixed views about this. In general, participants were sceptical about advertisers' attempts to portray women in roles that challenge gender stereotypes, describing this as tokenistic, inauthentic and driven by profit maximisation rather than a genuine desire to promote gender equality.

Consistent with other studies of community perceptions and attitudes in Australia (Colmar Brunton Social Research 2013, 2017; Jones & Reid 2011; Harker et al 2005) and overseas (Crush & Hollings 2017; Huhmann & Limbu 2016), this study found that women expressed concerns about gender portrayals more readily than men, particularly in relation to idealised and sexualised images of women.

Impacts of gender portrayals in advertising

Community members were able to articulate a range of ways in which current gender portrayals are harmful to women, men and children, particularly in relation to the reinforcement of problematic social norms.

Participants considered that advertisements placed pressure on individuals to conform to gender stereotypes. Children were regarded as a particularly vulnerable population group who learn and internalise social expectations about gender from advertising. This was seen to limit children's aspirations and interests, and to contribute to a reduced potential for men and women pursue a range of goals, roles and occupations. Participants further identified that the impacts were particularly disempowering

for women and contributed to the devaluing of women in society.

The sexual objectification of women in advertising was identified as having the potential to influence individuals' expectations in intimate relationships and, specifically, place pressure on women to please men. Participants expressed concern that these portrayals could contribute to violence against women. The objectification of women in advertisements was perceived to undermine broader efforts to educate young people about gender equality.

Community members saw advertising as an influential medium that contributed to unrealistic standards around gender roles, particularly with respect to female appearance. Idealised and sexualised images of women were considered to negatively impact on girls' and women's body image, self-esteem and mental health. Community members also noted that advertising could ostracise those who diverge from established norms.

The negative impacts raised in participant discussions have also been identified in a variety of empirical studies (as discussed in McKenzie et al 2018).

The cumulative impact of stereotyped and sexualised gender portrayals was highlighted in this study. Participants felt that these portrayals were problematic, but were so common that they had become normalised. Participants suggested that the ubiquity of these portrayals had a desensitising effect, which meant that they did not consciously reflect on or react to problematic gender portrayals, even though they were affected by them. This is worrying as the regulation of advertising in Australia relies on community members consciously recognising and reacting to problematic portrayals and having the skills, capacity and motivation to make a complaint to Ad Standards. Moreover, the Australian Association of National Advertisers Code of Ethics does not account for the cumulative impact and normative power of such gender portrayals (Gurrieri and Hoffman 2019).

Improving gender portrayals in advertising

Participants perceived that industry, government and consumers all have responsibilities in relation to improving gender portrayals in advertising. This reflects a review of promising practice in addressing and preventing sexist advertising that concluded a whole of system approach is needed that capitalises on different opportunities for influence (Gurrieri and Hoffman 2019). Overall, most considered that the primary responsibility lies with advertisers. However, there was strong agreement across focus groups that the government should be responsible for ensuring that advertisers abide by regulatory standards.

Participants lacked knowledge of how advertising was regulated in Australia. On learning that Australia has a self-regulatory system, many saw this as problematic, based on concerns that the industry is primarily motivated by financial interests and lacks external accountability. Participants believed that government intervention was needed in order to address possible social harms and to ensure regulation was enforced. Although the advertising complaints process was noted as a way that individuals can influence gender portrayals, this was limited by the length and perceived efficacy of the process. Participants stated the complaints process needed stronger sanctions in place to deter problematic advertising practice. This is consistent with international efforts towards the design of co-regulatory systems of advertising that exert pressure on industry to maintain appropriate standards whilst allowing for government intervention and the capacity for punitive action where required (Gurrieri and Hoffman 2019).

Guidelines for advertising practitioners were seen as providing another means of influencing gender portrayals in advertising. This reflects growing international practice in relation to regulatory and industry initiatives towards the development and promotion of progressive gender portrayals in advertising (Gurrieri and Hoffman 2019). However, participants observed that their efficacy would be affected by advertisers exploiting loopholes and the challenge of new media across global borders.

Participants were divided as to whether gender portrayal guidelines would stymie or encourage creativity for advertising practitioners.

Some participants considered that greater diversity and representation of women within advertising agencies was likely to promote more diverse portrayals in advertising content. In addition, participants considered there to be a need for diverse representation within regulatory and complaints bodies. This mirrors the findings of Gurrieri and Hoffman (2019) who highlighted the importance of industry-based initiatives to address problems inherent in the culture and structure of the advertising industry and the imperative inclusion of gender expertise for advertising regulation in Australia.

Participants were divided on the efficacy of consumer action (for example, making complaints or not buying products) influencing gender portrayals in advertising. Some participants advocated for advertising and media literacy programs, especially for children in educational settings. Participants also highlighted the extent of desensitisation to advertising and the power of generating insights about advertising portrayals through conscious reflection and extended group discussion. This demonstrates the importance of both advertising literacy programs and the provision of forums for open discussion. However, Australian school curricula to date has a limited focus on sexist media and advertising content (Gurrieri and Hoffman 2019) and there are limited opportunities for the community to engage collectively to unpack sexist advertising portrayals.

Research implications

The findings of this study have important implications for advertising practice and for how advertisements are regulated in Australia. The findings suggest that, in the eyes of community members, gender portrayals commonly utilised by advertisers are not reflective of society, and that community members consider the improvement of gender portrayals to be primarily the responsibility of industry.

The current system of regulation is reliant on consumer complaints to address problematic portrayals. However, as identified by participants, stereotyped and sexualised gender portrayals are normalised and members of the community are accustomed to seeing them. These portrayals can have cumulative impacts on attitudes, behaviour and wellbeing, including at a subconscious level. Research conducted by Ad Standards in 2017 (Colmar Bruton Social Research 2017) suggests that approximately half of Australians will make a complaint if they are concerned about an advertisement (for example, in 2017, 51% of participants in the Ad Standards survey said they would complain). The findings of our study suggest that this may not necessarily be the case. Although extreme examples of sexualisation or stereotyping may attract public attention, the findings of our study suggest that individuals are unlikely to complain about everyday examples of gender stereotyping that they often see in advertisements, even when they hold concerns about the impacts of these portrayals.

These findings highlight the importance of a range of stakeholders working together to address gender inequalities in advertising, with industry taking primary responsibility for improving portrayals, and government playing a more prominent role in mitigating harmful impacts, including through stronger regulatory enforcement and sanctions. At the same time, there is a need for increased education and awareness raising about the impacts of gender portrayals among both advertisers and the community, together with increased awareness of regulatory and complaints systems among consumers.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Activity	Notes
Introduction	• Welcome participants • Introduce facilitators • Discuss schedule for focus group
Background	• Project background • Purpose of focus group • How information will be used • Confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary participation
Opening discussion	• How are men portrayed in advertising? • Why are they shown in this way? • Is it appropriate? • What words would you use to summarise how men are portrayed in these ads? • Do you think these kinds of advertisements influence how men are valued and treated in society? • How are women portrayed in advertising? • Why are they shown in this way? • Is it appropriate? • What words would you use to summarise how women are portrayed in these ads? • Do you think these kinds of advertisements influence how women are valued and treated in society?

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE – CONTINUED

Activity	Notes
Perceptions of gender inequalities in advertising	• Show an example of gender stereotyping and an example of objectification as discussion prompts • How does this ad represent women/men? • What message does this ad send out about women/men? • Probe: does it reflect women/men in real life? • Probe: does it encourage people to think about men/women in a certain way? • Are there any aspects of this ad that bother you? • Probe: why? • To what extent is the ad offensive? • Probe: why? Who to? • To what extent is the ad harmful? • Probe: why? Who to?
Advertising regulation	• Whose responsibility is it to ensure that ads are not offensive or harmful? • What is the role of: • Product owners? • Advertisers? • Consumers? • What do you know about how advertising is regulated in Australia? • What could be done to better improve the regulation of advertising? • Thinking about guidelines and rules for how men and women are shown in ads: • To what extent should guidelines and rules be in place? • Prompt: for whom? • What kind of guidelines do you expect should be in place? • If you were to write guidelines about how women and men are shown in ads, what should they say? • Prompt: how they are portrayed, what they do, where ads are seen, who can see the ads
Wrap up	• Thank participants • Ask to sign incentive sheet and collect incentive

APPENDIX 2: VISUAL STIMULUS MATERIALS

Advertisement	Date	Medium	Portrayal
Big W children's toy catalogue 	2018	Print	Gender stereotyping – children
Brisbane Sofitel hotel 'breakfast in Brisbane' campaign 	2018	Print	Gender stereotyping – adults
Honey Birdette 'office party' campaign 	2017	Shop window/brand website/social media	Sexual objectification
General Pants 'fit in' campaign 	2016	Shop window/brand website/social media	Sexual objectification

APPENDIX 3: SCREENER SURVEY

What is your name?

Please provide an email address

Please provide a contact phone number

What is your preferred means of contact?

What sex/gender do you identify as?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Other

What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

What is your residential postcode?

- Is this outside metropolitan Melbourne?

Were you born in a country other than Australia?

- Yes—enter details
- No

Which category best describes your total household income:

- under 50K
- 50-100K
- 100-150K
- 150-200K
- Over 200K

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- No schooling completed
- High school
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Certificate/diploma/associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree

What is your employment status?

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Home duties
- Student
- Retired
- Unable to work

What is the composition of your household?

- Lone person
- Couple only
- Couple children at home
- Lone parent children at home
- Group household
- Other

APPENDIX 3: SCREENER SURVEY – CONTINUED

How often are you exposed to advertising?

- Often
- From time to time
- Rarely
- Never

Is inequality between women and men still a problem in Australia today?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, to some extent
- No

The statements I'm about to read out describe attitudes which different people have.

For each statement please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree

- Women are better care givers than men
- Men have more sexual needs than women
- Women's requests for gender equality are exaggerated
- Women are becoming too outspoken these days
- Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household
- Sexist jokes are harmless fun

In the study, you may be exposed to advertising materials that may cause discomfort as it contains objectified images in which women may be partially clothed, demeaned or degraded.

Will this be of concern to you?

- Yes
- No

Community responses to gender portrayals in advertising: A research paper

Women's Health Victoria Issues Paper No. 15

Researched and written by Dr. Lauren Gurrieri (RMIT), Mandy McKenzie (WHV) and Megan Bugden (WHV).

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We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.

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