

# Inquiry into the Australian Film and Literature Classification Scheme



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## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

## Comments on the discussion paper

Women's Health Victoria encourages the Australian Law Reform Commission to consider the need to ensure that objectification of women is considered in the proposed classification scheme. The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee's *Review of the National Classification Scheme: achieving the right balance* recommended that '... the National Classification Code should be expanded to take into account community concerns about the sexualisation of society, and the objectification of women'<sup>1</sup>.

The current scheme has been unsuccessful in responding to the objectification of women, particularly in relation to advertising. The national voluntary system of advertising self-regulation is ineffective in preventing the objectification of women.

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

Section 2.1 of the *Code of Ethics* states:

Advertising or Marketing Communications shall not portray people or depict material in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability or political belief.<sup>2</sup>

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

Acts with inequity, bigotry or intolerance or gives unfair, unfavourable or less favourable treatment to one person or a group because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability and/or political belief.<sup>3</sup>

'Vilifies' is defined as:

Humiliates, intimidates, incites hatred towards, contempt for, or ridicule of one person or a group of people because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability and/or political belief.<sup>4</sup>

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

...a woman's sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. To be dealt with in this way is to have one's entire being identified with the body...<sup>5</sup>

Objectification theory offers:

...an integrative framework for understanding how women's socialization and experiences of sexual objectification are translated into mental health problems: mainly eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction, each of which is more prevalent among women than among men.<sup>6</sup>

The Advertising Standards Bureau's own analysis of community perceptions of sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising, identifies that 'Reinforcement of women as sexualised

'objects' through portrayal in sexualised ads' is a factor which contributed to ads being seen as unacceptable. The results of this research show that:

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

Again, ads which portray women as sexualised 'objects' were seen to put young females at risk of mimicking or aspiring to these unacceptable SSN [sex, sexuality and nudity] attitudes and behaviours (e.g. risky and premature sexual behaviour, self esteem and body image issues). Respondents also tied this issue back to their concerns about children's exposure.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

From this determination, Women's Health Victoria can surmise that the Advertising Standards Board views objectification as something that contributes to discrimination or vilification. This fails to reflect the substantial available evidence that objectification is in itself offensive and does not meet the objective of decency promoted in the Code. As a result, advertisements that demean and perpetuate stereotypes of women are sanctioned because they fall outside the scope of the Code.

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

- *Impact on girls' health and wellbeing* including cognitive and physical functioning, body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety, mental and physical health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs<sup>8</sup>.
- *Impact on others* including boys, men, and adult women<sup>9</sup>.
- *Impact on society* including sexism, sex bias and sexist attitudes. 'Across several studies, women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media... were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths...sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships than were those in control conditions'. Exposure to sexualised content has also been shown to affect how women actually

behave and how men treat and respond to real women in subsequent interactions. These studies have generally found that after men are exposed to sexualised content, their behavior toward women is more sexualized, and they treat women like sexual objects<sup>10</sup>.

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

Advertisements should not employ sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading of any individual or group of people in society to promote the sale of products or services. In particular people should not be portrayed in a manner which uses sexual appeal simply to draw attention to an unrelated product. Children must not be portrayed in a manner which treats them as objects of sexual appeal<sup>11</sup>.

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

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

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee. 2011 [cited 3 November 2011]. Available from: [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/classification\\_board/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/classification_board/report/index.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> Australian Association of National Advertisers. Code of ethics. 2009 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: <http://www.aana.com.au/documents/AANACodeofEthicsAugust2009.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Giles F and Whelan J for Advertising Standards Bureau. Research Report: Discrimination and vilification in advertising. 2009 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: [http://issuu.com/cre8ive/docs/asb\\_researchreport\\_0309?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/cre8ive/docs/asb_researchreport_0309?mode=a_p)
- <sup>4</sup> Giles F and Whelan J for Advertising Standards Bureau. Research Report: Discrimination and vilification in advertising. 2009 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: [http://issuu.com/cre8ive/docs/asb\\_researchreport\\_0309?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/cre8ive/docs/asb_researchreport_0309?mode=a_p)
- <sup>5</sup> Bartky cited in Moradi B and Huan YP. 'Objectification theory and psychology of women: A decade of advances and future directions' *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2008; 32:377-398.
- <sup>6</sup> Fredrickson and Roberts cited in Moradi B and Huan YP. 'Objectification theory and psychology of women: A decade of advances and future directions' *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2008; 32:377-398.
- <sup>7</sup> Colmar Brunton Social Research for Advertising Standards Bureau. Research report: Community perceptions of sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising. 2010 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: <http://downloads.cre8ive.com.au/asb/research-report-violence-nudity.pdf>

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<sup>8</sup> American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. 2007 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. 2007 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. 2007 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Advertising Standards Authority. 'Code for people in advertising' in *Advertising Codes of Practice*. 2009 [cited 2 September 2010]. Available from: [http://www.asa.co.nz/pdfs/ASA\\_Codes.pdf](http://www.asa.co.nz/pdfs/ASA_Codes.pdf)