

REPORTING SEXIST ADVERTISING

A TOOLKIT FOR CONSUMERS

Concerned about sexist advertising?

This toolkit helps you to understand

- ▶ how sexist portrayals of men and women in advertising can be harmful
- ▶ what you can do to report or complain about sexist ads
- ▶ other things you can do to stop sexist advertising

Advertising is everywhere – in our homes, in shopping centres and other public spaces, and online.

From an early age, advertisements and other everyday forms of media influence our ideas about how men and women are valued, what they should aspire to, how they should look and what roles they can play in society.

So how does advertising currently portray men and women?

Here's what the research tells us

- **Portrayals of boys and men** focus on power, leadership and action. They are typically shown outdoors or in work roles. Compared to women, men are more often depicted as funny, intelligent or powerful. Men do most of the voiceovers in advertisements.
- **Girls and women** are often shown at home or in retail settings. They are often depicted caring for children or others. Ads tend to focus on women's bodies and appearance (for example, showing women as slim, large-busted, unblemished and hairless).
- **Images of women have become more sexualised in recent years** (for example, they are often shown in seductive poses, with their legs spread, lying on a bed, or simulating sex acts). Women are shown wearing less clothing than men in advertisements.

For more information see the '[Advertising \(In\) equality: the health impacts of sexist advertising for health and wellbeing](#)'.

How are we affected by these gender portrayals in advertisements?

This is what the research shows

- **Children feel pressured to conform to stereotyped ideas about gender.** This limits boys' and girls' aspirations, interests and behaviour. As adults, stereotyped portrayals continue to affect our choices and how we see ourselves.
- Children learn that men are expected to be the leaders and the voices of authority.
- **Girls and women learn that the focus is on their appearance and sexuality.** Studies show that for girls and women, this contributes to low self-esteem, negative ideas about their bodies and eating disorders. It's also been found to reduce girls' and women's participation in exercise and sport, and to make adult women feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied in sexual or intimate relationships.
- A focus on women's sexual appeal in advertising has also been found to be **linked to attitudes and beliefs that cause violence against women.**

Experiments show that after people are exposed to images that sexualise women, they're more likely to agree with sexist statements, are more tolerant of sexual aggression and are more likely to blame victims of sexual assault. These attitudes are recognised to contribute to violence against women.

Alcohol and gambling ads often focus on male bonding activities. They often portray women as demanding and interfering in men's freedom, or show women as sex objects.

When we're exposed to these images of men and women day after day, we may stop consciously noticing how we're affected by them. **A recent Victorian study** into community responses to gender portrayals in advertising found that community members felt they had become so accustomed to these common gender portrayals that they had become desensitised to them.

I've become conditioned not to be offended... I've absorbed way more than one should"

[Female participant in Community Responses Study by RMIT and WHV.]

Advertising won't change unless consumers stand together and take action. Victorian research exploring community responses to gender portrayals in advertising further suggests that many in the community are concerned about these portrayals, but are unsure how to take action. This toolkit outlines a range of different ways individuals can stand up to prevent sexist advertising.

How is advertising regulated?

In Australia, advertising is self-regulated by the advertising industry. Regulation is managed by the **Australian Association of National Advertisers** (AANA), the peak national body. The AANA promotes responsible advertising through the **AANA Code of Ethics** and manages complaints through **Ad Standards**. Industry members voluntarily agree to be bound by the code, but the code is not backed up by any government legislation.

The system relies on consumers to complain about an ad. When a complaint is made, Ad Standards review it through their Community Panel. If the Community Panel finds an ad to have breached the code or to be contrary to 'prevailing community standards', Ad Standards asks the product owner to remove or modify the ad. However, Ad Standards does not have the power to punish advertisers who ignore complaints.

WHAT RULES ARE ADVERTISERS SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW?

They are supposed to follow the Australian advertising **Code of Ethics**, which says advertisers should:

	Not portray people in a way that discriminates against their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual preference, religion, disability, mental illness or political belief
	Not use sexual images in a way that is exploitative or degrading
	Not show violence unless it is relevant to the product or service being advertised
	Treat sex and nudity with sensitivity to the relevant audience (for example, in relation to ads that might be seen by children)

What's not acceptable?

It's not always easy to say definitively whether something is discriminatory, sexist or exploitative

There will always be differing views on where exactly the line is. But here are some of the things that might lead an advertisement to be considered 'over the line'.

- **Showing one gender as inferior to the other:** For example, one gender is shown as being less intelligent or unable to do certain activities.
- **Showing someone as a 'product':** An example would be showing someone as a thing that can be bought or sold without their consent.
- **Someone's body is reduced to just body parts:** For example, an image that sexualises someone and focuses on their body parts, such as breasts or buttocks.
- **Treating people like objects:** For example, where a person's body is used as an object, like a chair or a table.
- **Someone being harmed or coerced:** An example would be showing someone being harmed, being held down or coerced into doing something or unable to give consent.



How do I report sexist advertising?

There are a few different ways to make a formal complaint.

▶ **COMPLAIN DIRECTLY TO THE ADVERTISER AND THE PRODUCT OWNER/ BUSINESS.**

Advertisers and businesses will be concerned if customers react negatively to their ad, and some may not understand the harmful impacts of sexist portrayals. So it's important to let them know your concerns. You can email or write to the advertiser or the product owner/ business (or both) and share your concerns with them directly.

Put your complaint in writing and explain:

- why you think the ad is sexist, discriminatory or exploitative, and
- why it's harmful.

The advertiser should respond to your complaint.

Keep a copy of your complaint so there's a record of it.

Encourage friends, colleagues and family to complain too.

If you are not satisfied with the response you can complain to Ad Standards.

▶ **COMPLAIN TO AD STANDARDS**

Ad Standards is the national industry body that responds to complaints about advertising or marketing that breach the AANA code of ethics. Bringing sexist, exploitative or discriminatory advertising to the attention of the Ad Standards means it will be reviewed by the Ad Standards community panel, and it puts your complaint on the public record. Case decisions are published on [Ad Standards website](#) – your name will be kept anonymous though. If the complaint is upheld the advertiser is bound to remove or modify it.

It doesn't matter if you're the only person who makes a complaint – **Ad Standards has to review all complaints**. But if friends and family also have concerns, encourage them to complain too.

You can complain directly to Ad Standards without having first gone to the advertiser.

Make a formal complaint by clicking on 'Lodge a Complaint' on the Ad Standards website

It is important to note that an anonymous complaint is not sufficient to initiate a formal complaint with the Ad Standards, but it can be included as part of a case about an ad that has already been raised or is raised later.

- **Ad Standards will inform you by email or post that the complaint is being assessed.**
 - The advertiser is notified and requested to provide a written response to Ad Standards.
 - Usually, you will be advised of a decision within 10 days of the panel's determination.
 - A case report will be made available on the Ad Standards website.
- **If you are not satisfied with the determination, you can request a review of the decision by an independent reviewer at the cost of \$100.**

Examples of successful complaints to Ad Standards:

Lingerie – store window poster in shopping centres (Honey Birdette 2018, 2019)

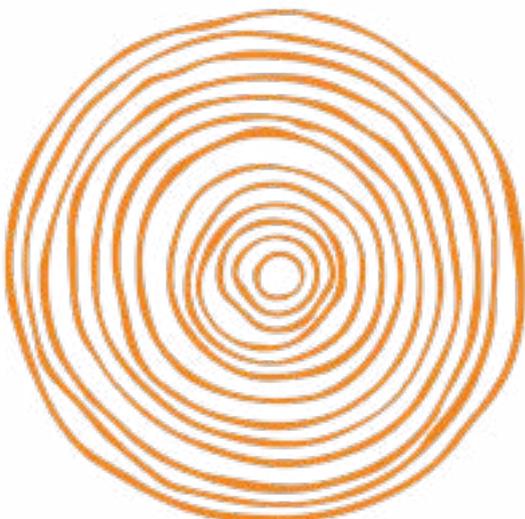
- In one ad, a woman wearing lingerie and a collar was depicted in a sexualised pose with her legs spread (0056/18);
- In a second ad, a woman wearing lingerie was depicted on a motorbike in a sexualised pose focused on her breasts (0052/19).

The Community Panel decided these ads breached the Code of Ethics because they showed a level of sexuality that was not sensitive for a broad audience, including children.

Roadside assistance – TV ad (Ultra Tune 2018 0022/19)

In this ad, two women wearing bikinis lose control of their car and crash into water, where they are assisted by actor and convicted domestic violence perpetrator Charlie Sheen.

After an independent review, the Community Panel decided the ad breached the Code of Ethics because it vilified people based on their gender, and employed sex appeal that was exploitative or degrading.



SAMPLE COMPLAINT TO AN ADVERTISER OR BUSINESS

	<p><i>I am concerned/upset/offended about the way your advertisement shows women and I would like to request that you remove it.</i></p>
<p>Describe the ad:</p>	<p>● <i>Your ad in your store window shows a woman on a bed wearing underwear, posed with her legs spread.</i></p>
<p>Let them know how the ad affects you or your family, or others:</p>	<p>● <i>My primary school age daughters/sons walk past these images every time they go into in the shopping centre. These ads promote harmful messages about how men and women are valued, how they should look and what roles they can play in society. They also encourage sexual harassment as they teach boys that girls' bodies are objects for them to look at and that girls and women are always ready for sex.</i></p>
<p>Refer to research on health impacts:</p>	
<p>Refer to international guidelines:</p>	<p>● <i>There is plenty of evidence to support my concerns. Studies have found that these sexualised images are linked with attitudes that cause violence against women. Research also shows these kinds of images cause women to feel unhappy with their bodies or that they are just valued for their sex appeal. These kinds of images are not empowering for women – they undermine efforts to promote equality between men and women in Australia. Most advertisers around the world are moving away from using stereotyped and sexualised images.</i></p>
<p>Refer to the Australian Association of National Advertisers Code of Ethics:</p>	<p>● <i>I believe your advertisement does not comply with the Australian Association of National Advertisers Code of Ethics as it sexualises, stereotypes, degrades, and/or objectifies women.</i></p>
<p>Ask them to remove it or suggest a different way they could advertise:</p>	<p>● <i>Please consider removing the ad and replacing it with a more positive image.</i></p>

What else can I do?

▶ REPORT IT TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Most social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram) have an option you can click to report offensive advertisements or posts. Most platforms have advertising policies and community standards guidelines, including that ads must not be discriminatory, show nudity or be sexually explicit or overly suggestive. You don't have to have a social media account on that platform to report it.

▶ SHARE YOUR CONCERNS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Post on the brand or company's social media page:

Post a comment and or react with angry emoji on the company's social media page (eg. on their Instagram or Twitter).

For example:

“ I find your advertisement sexist and offensive. Does anyone else feel the same way?”

or

“ Stop portraying women as stereotypes and start showing us as capable, intelligent human beings.”

Share with friends and followers:

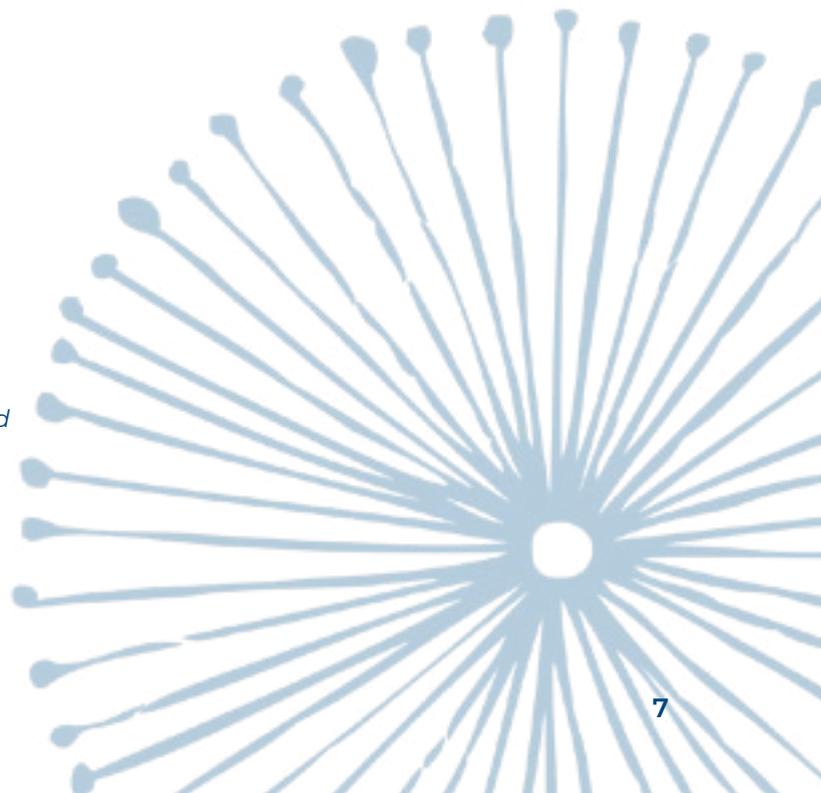
Take a screenshot or photo of an offensive ad, and share your concerns with your friends and followers on your own social media page.

Start an online petition:

For example, go to [Change.org](https://www.change.org)

▶ BOYCOTT PRODUCTS OR SERVICES

You can stop buying products or services that use sexist advertisements. Some brands repeatedly use sexist advertisements – you can see a list of repeat offenders on the website of the activist group, [Collective Shout](https://www.collectiveshout.com).



▶ TALK TO CHILDREN, FRIENDS AND FAMILY

If you see sexist or stereotyped advertising, discuss it with friends and family. Use it to raise awareness among the children or young people that you know, and encourage them to take a critical approach to the ads they see.

For example, ask:

““ *Why aren't boys playing with the dolls – why is it only girls?*”

or

““ *Why are the women wearing underwear in that ad while all the men are fully clothed?*”

▶ JOIN OTHER SOCIAL ACTION CAMPAIGNS AND MOVEMENTS

Collective Shout

An Australia-wide grassroots campaign movement against the objectification of women and the sexualisation of girls. Anyone can join or participate in a campaign or report an offending advertiser. Companies can sign the Corporate Social Responsibility Pledge. Collective Shout has led many successful campaigns to stop advertisers using sexist advertising.

Destroy the Joint

An Australian anti-sexism campaign.

Play unlimited

An Australian campaign aiming to stop gendered marketing of toys. The campaign promotes the idea that children should be encouraged to learn through a wide range of play experiences and raises parents' awareness of the impact gendered marketing has on children's development.

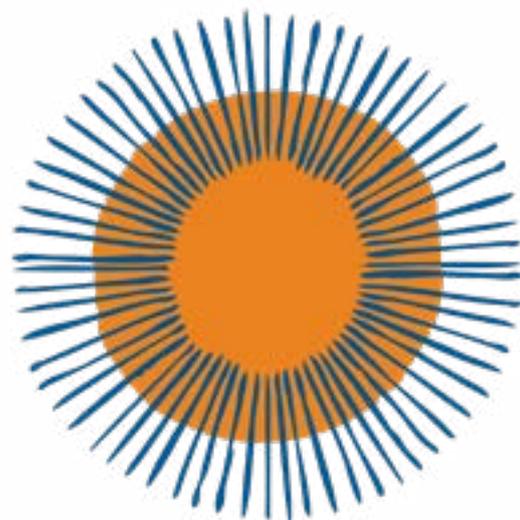
A key initiative is No Gender December, where individuals publicly pledge not to buy gender stereotyped toys as Christmas gifts.

The Representation Project

A non-profit organisation in the USA that aims to challenge limiting gender stereotypes in media, advertising and society. The project's social media campaigns #NotBuyingIt and #MediaWeLike inspire people to celebrate good representations and call out the bad in advertising and merchandising.

Let Toys be Toys

A grassroots campaign based in the UK, to challenge the use of narrow gender stereotypes in the marketing and promotion of toys and other children's products.



This Toolkit was developed by Women's Health Victoria (WHV) and the City of Melbourne.

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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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