

NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

Body image in advertising: call for evidence

Committee of Advertising Practice and the Broadcast Committee of
Advertising Practice

December 2021

Summary

1. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics' response to CAP's and BCAP's call for evidence draws on the recommendations and conclusions of our 2017 report [Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues](#). We also highlight evidence that has emerged during the last few years which may be relevant to the Committees' consideration of body image in advertising.

Conclusions and recommendations from the Nuffield Council's report

Adopting Transport for London's approach

2. Our report highlights the excellent example set by Transport for London (TfL), which – since July 2016 – [has enforced a policy](#) that states: “Advertisements will not be approved for, or permitted to remain on TfL’s services if... it could reasonably be seen as likely to cause pressure to conform to an unrealistic or unhealthy body shape, or as likely to create body confidence issues particularly among young people”. **Our report encourages the ASA to follow TfL’s approach in its own guidance. We continue to urge the Committees to do so.**

The importance of a proactive approach

3. Should the Committees decide to introduce new standards on body image for advertisers, we would like to highlight a further recommendation in our report: that **there should be a proactive approach** to monitor compliance with such standards. We are pleased that CAP has [stated](#): “we don’t just wait to receive complaints – we proactively monitor ads across different sectors and media to make sure standards are being maintained.” This proactive approach will, we suggest, be particularly important to support the introduction of any new guidance on body image advertisements, given that it would be a new area of oversight for the Committees. Understanding TfL’s processes to manage advertisements which might have a negative impact on body image could be instructive for the Committees in this respect.

Evidence gathered as part of our project

4. As part of our project, we carried out an online public survey to gather people's views on the questions we sought to address. In a [summary](#) of this survey, to which 448 people responded to some or all of our questions, we highlight that nearly 73% of respondents indicated that people's attitudes to cosmetic procedures were influenced by advertising. While not representative of the entire UK population, our findings offer an insight into public opinion.

Additional evidence on body image in advertising

5. In addition to the Council's own recommendations and evidence, we would also like to draw the Committees' attention to other developments relevant to the question of advertising and body image. Alongside the key studies and surveys outlined in the Committees' call for evidence document, we would like to highlight additional UK-based research:
 - [Surveys conducted](#) by the Mental Health Foundation with YouGov in 2019 highlighted that just over one in five adults said images used in advertising had caused them to worry about their body image.
 - [Research from Credos](#) in 2016 indicated that 53% of boys felt that advertising was one of the biggest influences to look good (along with friends (68%), social media (57%), and celebrities (49%).
 - A June 2021 [study](#) with gay or bisexual men living in the UK and other northern hemisphere countries (US, Canada), and those living in the southern hemisphere (Australia) highlights that body image dissatisfaction can change depending on the season: in summer, researchers "*observed peaks for body dissatisfaction, pressure from media advertisements, pressure from peers on social media, the feeling that one's body is on public display, and appearance comparisons.*"
6. Evidence from outside the UK may also be instructive for the Committees in their consideration of advertising which might promote negative body image:
 - A survey from [YouGov America](#) published in May 2021 indicates that 76% of US adults think that the media promotes an unattainable body image for women.
 - [A US study](#) from March 2021 examined advertising campaigns on body image suggests that advertisements have the power to shape attitudes and beliefs around weight. Participants' self-esteem improved after viewing the Dove Real Beauty campaign, but women "*feel bad about themselves and their bodies after viewing Victoria's Secret campaign.*"
 - A [study](#) from April 2017 examined the impact of advertisements on 915 Indian women's body image. It concluded that around 30% of women were pressurised by advertisements, and that "*advertisements without a doubt have an influence on... body dissatisfaction.*"

- A [Swiss study](#) from 2016 suggested that exposure to advertising for cosmetic surgery resulted in women's increased dissatisfaction with both bodyweight and appearance.

Conclusion

- We look forward to CAP's and BCAP's analysis of this call for evidence, and its forthcoming outline of related actions. If we can be of further support in the Committees' consideration of body image, we would be delighted to assist.

Contact

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