Public Attitudes Towards Outdoor Advertising

February 2012
About this research

In 2011, the Bailey Review into the Sexualisation and Commercialisation of Childhood was published, and the government called upon advertisers to reduce the amount of sexualised imagery in outdoor advertising. Following this, the Outdoor Media Centre commissioned Credos, advertising’s think tank, to conduct research into which images or image types found in outdoor advertising might be considered inappropriate, and which are not, focusing specifically on sexualised imagery and parents’ reactions.

Methodology

Qualitative

Credos worked with Andy Davidson at The Sound Research to interview BC1C2 parents in Nottingham and London, between 21-22 November 2011. 8 mums aged 26-43 with children aged 2-12 were interviewed in Nottingham; 6 dads aged 39-55 with children aged 12-20 were interviewed in London. Prior to attending the focus groups, participants kept a diary of out of home advertising that they noticed (made them laugh, smile, surprised, angry, upset, or found offensive) over the previous three days. They brought photos on cameras/mobile phones to show their group.

The respondents were recruited specifically on the basis that they had come across advertising that they had found offensive in the past. This was to ensure that respondents would be able to contribute in discussions around offence in adverts, but it therefore means that their opinions are not necessarily representative of the general public, most of whom do not tend to find advertising offensive.

The focus group responses were therefore principally used to help develop survey questions, by determining which images would be suitable to show in the questionnaire, and the choice of descriptors offered to describe those images. In addition, focus group respondents were asked to discuss things that might offend them as parents. The dads in the London group came up with a list of things (to which the moderator added ‘outdoor media’) which they then ranked in the following order, and the questions asked in the quantitative survey were based on this list:

1. Internet / YouTube
2. Rap music
3. Music Videos
4. Computer Games
5. TV
6. Outdoor media

This explains why the focus of this report is on the quantitative results, rather than the qualitative results, as the former offers a far more representative view of the British public’s opinion.

Quantitative

Credos commissioned TNS Omnibus to conduct an online survey as part of their omnibus with a nationally-representative sample of 1051 GB adults aged 16-64. This took place between 20-22 December 2011. 12 potentially contentious outdoor ads, all of which actually ran as outdoor campaigns, 4 of which were subsequently
banned, and most of which have been complained about to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), were selected as visual prompts.

**General offence**

Source: Q1 ‘Thinking about the following things that you might see or listen to on a daily basis, how likely are you to be offended by the following, if at all?’

Options: Very likely / Fairly likely / Fairly unlikely / Very unlikely / Not at all.

- Of these options, outdoor advertising is the least likely to offend (12%).
- Parents are more likely to be offended than non-parents.
- Perhaps surprisingly, the most likely to be offended are those in the 16-24 age group – more than three times as likely to be offended than those in the 55-64 age range (22% vs 6%).
- Londoners are the most likely to be offended by outdoor advertising: over a quarter (27%) say they are likely to be offended, compared to the national average of 12%.

**Advertising offence**

- When it comes to different forms of advertising media, outdoor advertising sits in the mid-point level of likelihood to offend (11%), with ads sent to mobile phones (27%) the most likely to and cinema advertising (8%) the least likely to offend. It may be that ‘offence’ is understood by respondents in its broadest terms, relating not just to indecent or offensive content, but to advertising’s ‘intrusion’ into their daily lives. Direct mail, internet and TV were all cited as being more offensive than outdoor ads.
Source: Q2 ‘Now thinking specifically about advertising, how likely are you to be offended by the following, if at all?’

How likely are you to be offended by .......

Advertising and young people – after exposure to test ads

Source: Q6 ‘In general, how concerned are you about the kind of advertising young people are seeing outdoors?’

- It’s important to note that this question was asked after respondents had seen the stimuli, which may account for the levels of concern expressed.
- Nearly half of women (48%) say they are either very or slightly concerned about the exposure of young people to offensive advertising. However, only just over a quarter of men (26%) feel the same.
• It is perhaps surprising that the difference between parents (44%) and non-parents (34%) is not greater.
• Regionally, Londoners are the most likely to be very or slightly concerned (53%).
• Comparisons based on newspaper readership are more in line with what one would expect, with The Sun readers being least concerned. Interestingly, Daily Mail readers are less concerned than readers of other newspapers, e.g. The Guardian, The Times and The Telegraph.

What does it take to make someone complain?

• Although some adverts – generally images which were banned by the ASA, such as those for Perfect 10s, Opium and Diesel – provoke strong emotional reactions, the public are generally unlikely to consider an advert so offensive that they would complain about it. Only 11% of the population would complain about the Perfect 10s advert, for example, despite the fact that almost a third (31%) of the population finds it offensive.
• However, very few people have ever complained about outdoor advertising: less than 1% of those surveyed. Of these, all are under the age of 34.

Source: Q4 ‘On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is ‘Very offensive: I would definitely complain about this advert’, and 1 is ‘Not at all offensive’, please give your reaction to the following outdoor advertising images’ (adverts shown in random order).
Summary of reaction to specific ads

Source: Q4 ‘On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is ‘Very offensive: I would definitely complain about this advert’, and 1 is ‘Not at all offensive’, please give your reaction to the following outdoor advertising images’ (adverts shown in random order).

• Differences between the genders are significant, with women much more likely to find the adverts inappropriate, sexist or rude. Given that the majority of ads depict women in a state of undress, it is perhaps not surprising that they have greater appeal to men.
• As expected, parents tend to be more cautious than non-parents.
• What is perhaps surprising is that the 16-24 age group are more likely to be critical.
• Interestingly, there is little difference in perceptions across social grades.
• The most likely region to find an advert offensive is undoubtedly London.
• Among newspaper readers, as might be expected, broadsheet readers are more likely to be critical.

Words/phrases chosen to describe ads

The words offered in the online survey reflect the choice of words used by participants in the focus groups, when discussing the outdoor adverts they had noted in their pre-task diaries, and when discussing the stimuli in front of them in the groups. ‘Funny’ and ‘eye-catching’ were often used, and there was much discussion over the location of the advert, as well as whether it was considered suitable for the product and the brand.
Source: Q5 ‘Which of the following words or phrases would you choose to explain how you feel about this advert? You may choose as many as you like’ (total number of mentions across all ads tested).

Harmless was the most used adjective to describe the outdoor advertising (total of 3466 mentions), followed by eye catching. Funny was least mentioned (just 815).

Respondents in the online survey were given a choice of 4 positive words/phrases (funny, light-hearted, suitable for the product, harmless), 4 negative words/phrases (vulgar, rude, sexist, inappropriate) and 2 neutral words/phrases (depends on location, eye-catching). Respondents were more likely to choose positive words/phrases than they were to choose negative words/phrases to describe the stimuli. This was the case for all adults, as well as parents.

Reactions to specific ads shown

The following adverts were shown to participants in the online survey. They are displayed in order of offensiveness, from most to least offensive. In the survey they were presented in randomised order.
1. Perfect 10s Gentlemen’s Club
Placed near a park in Preston, Lancashire; banned by ASA in 2009

Offensive?
All adults: 31%
Parents: 39%
Non-parents: 27%

Top descriptors
#1 Inappropriate
#2 Vulgar
#3 Rude
#4 Eye-catching
#5 Sexist

- Heavily criticised by women, whereas men are more likely to call it harmless – same percentage of women find it vulgar as men find it eye-catching (40%).
- The younger age group are most likely to find it inappropriate and rude (under 24s).
- Parents are significantly more likely to find it inappropriate and rude than non-parents.
- Guardian readers tend to find it sexist more than other newspaper readers, with Sun readers the most likely to describe it as harmless.
2. Yves Saint Laurent, Opium perfume
Banned by ASA in 2000 (730 complaints)

- Second most likely to be described as inappropriate, rude, sexist and vulgar.
- It bucks the age group trends: older age groups are more likely to state it is sexist.
- Over a third of women say it’s inappropriate, and a quarter find it vulgar and rude. Men, however, find it eye-catching (44%) and harmless (24%).
- Women, parents and Londoners are most likely to find this offensive, with Sun readers being the least likely.

- Bar graph showing:
  - 60% not at all offensive (1 or 2 out of 10)
  - 40% very offensive (9 or 10 out of 10)
3. Diesel
Banned in outdoor by ASA in 2010 (33 complaints), but allowed in magazines

- A quarter of women find it offensive, but 4/5 men find it inoffensive.
- Large differences regionally: nearly a third (32%) of Londoners find it offensive.
- Men tend to find it funny, harmless, light-hearted and eye-catching; women tend to find it inappropriate, rude and vulgar.
- 35-64s are more likely to find it light-hearted, with 16-24s feeling it is inappropriate and sexist.
- Londoners feel most strongly about this ad, being more likely to perceive it as sexist and vulgar. Fewer Londoners find it funny than any other region.
4. Lynx shower gel
Placed near schools; banned by ASA in 2011 (113 complaints)

- 64% of men and 38% of women say it’s ‘not at all offensive’ (1 out of 10).
- However, a quarter of Londoners rank it 7+ on the offensiveness scale.
- Men are significantly more likely than women to find the Lynx advert eye-catching and harmless. Women, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to find it inappropriate, rude, sexist and vulgar.
- This ad scores the second highest for “funny”, and relatively high for sexist.
- Guardian readers are the most likely to find it sexist.

Offensive?
All adults: 13%
Parents: 15%
Non-parents: 12%

Top descriptors
#1 Eye-catching
#2 Harmless
#3 Light-hearted
#4 Funny
#5 Suitable for the product

- Half of men find it eye-catching.
- 45-64s are significantly more likely to find the advert harmless.
- No consensus amongst all women: nearly a third state the ad is suitable for the product, but nearly 1 in 5 feel it is inappropriate.
- Significant differences between parents and non-parents – parents are more likely to describe it as rude than as harmless.
- Londoners find the advert more inappropriate than all other regions.
- Interestingly, the offence taken regarding this ad in the focus groups was based on the fact that it’s an M&S advert: the image didn’t fit the brand. Some dads claimed that this image wouldn’t be considered vulgar if it was used in an Ann Summers advert, for instance, but it is considered vulgar because it’s an M&S advert. They didn’t expect to see images like this associated with a brand like M&S.
6. Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue fragrance
On the IMAX, London, 2011

- Only 1% would complain and over half (53%) find the advert not at all offensive (rising to 68% amongst men).
- Londoners are most likely to find it offensive – nearly a quarter (23%).
- Not surprisingly, given the size, this scores high for eye-catching.
- The content is not generally considered harmful – this is particularly so amongst men.
- However, women, parents and Londoners are more critical.
7. Chlamydia screening programme, NHS
On South East Essex buses, 2010

- Few respondents have a problem with the Chlamydia advert: it is generally considered suitable.
- However, 14% of parents find it inappropriate, and 1 in 10 parents rank it 7+ on the scale for offensiveness.
- Overall, the general feeling is that it’s harmless and appropriate, albeit one of the least eye-catching.

Offensive?
All adults: 7%
Parents: 10%
Non-parents: 6%

Top descriptors
#1 Suitable for product
#2 Harmless
#3 Eye-catching
#4 Depends on location
#5 None of the descriptions fits

- Very little offence taken to this advert, except in London, where more than 10% find it offensive.
- Harmless and eye-catching are the key adjectives selected here. As with many ads, Londoners react more strongly, with 1 in 7 feeling it is inappropriate.
- Interestingly, Times readers are more likely to say it is suitable for the product.

How offensive do you find the Jessie advert?

- Not at all offensive (1 or 2 out of 10)
- Very offensive (9 or 10 out of 10)
9. Reebok EasyTone trainers

- 1 in 10 women find this ad offensive, and just 5% of men. Londoners are most likely to find this offensive (18%).
- Minimal differences by demographics, except for 16-24s and Londoners, who tend to find it more inappropriate than other groups.
- Not surprisingly, nearly twice as many men as women find it eye-catching (25% vs 13%).

![Offensive? Top descriptors](image)

Offensive?
All adults: 7%  
Parents: 10%  
Non-parents: 6%

Top descriptors
#1 Harmless  
#2 Eye-catching  
#3 None of the descriptions fits  
#4 Light-hearted  
#5 Suitable for product

![How offensive do you find the Reebok advert?](image)

- General feeling the ad is harmless and suitable for the product.
- Women particularly feel it is suitable and, as might be expected, men find it eye-catching.
- 35-64s find it harmless, but some 16-24s object (9% rating it as offensive).
- Even most Londoners find it inoffensive.
- This advert is rated as the most suitable for the product.

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**Armani Jeans (2011)**

Offensive?
- All adults: 5%
- Parents: 8%
- Non-parents: 4%

Top descriptors:
- #1 Suitable for the product
- #2 Harmless
- #3 Eye-catching
- #4 Depends on location
- #5 None of the descriptions fits
7 out of 10 respondents rate this ad just 1 out of 10 for offensiveness (rising to 76% amongst those in the South East/East of England, and most complaints in London).

- Parents are the most likely to object.
- This advert is deemed the most harmless of the eleven test ads.
- Not surprisingly, this is the one advert women find more eye-catching than men.
12. Footloose movie (2011)

- Even Londoners are not particularly offended (although still higher than other regions, with 1 in 10 ranking it 7-10).
- Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents use the lowest offensive rating of 1 out of 10.
- Few problems with this advert – across the board, the public feels that it is harmless and suitable for the product.
- However, the advert appears least likely to grab their imagination, with nearly a quarter (23%) unable to describe the advert with the supplied adjectives.

Top descriptors:
#1 Harmless
#2 None of the descriptions fits
#3 Suitable for product
#4 Eye-catching
#5 Light-hearted

Offensive?
All adults: 3%
Parents: 5%
Non-parents: 2%

How offensive do you find the Footloose advert?
Concluding remarks

We were surprised to discover that Londoners are more likely to be offended by outdoor advertising than those in any other region. This may be partly because there are generally more outdoor adverts in London – and in more prominent sites – than in the rest of the UK, so Londoners are more likely to encounter them on a day-to-day basis. In addition, perfume or fashion adverts are more likely to be concentrated in London than in any other region; some brands have London-only campaigns.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, women and parents are more likely to be offended than men and non-parents. This is possibly because most adverts we used in our survey included images of women, and because parents are likely to be concerned on behalf of their children.

However, generally, the British public is not offended by outdoor advertising. The public is more likely to be offended by things they encounter on the internet than by advertisements they see outdoors.
About Credos

Credos is advertising's think tank, launched by the Advertising Association in 2010. Its mission is to ‘understand advertising’: its role, how it works, how it is perceived, and its value to UK society and the economy. Credos is funded by the advertising industry, but overseen by an advisory board which assures the quality, objectivity and transparency of our research.

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