

Concern for children is key driver of advertising complaints

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Care for the well-being of children is a commonly cited reason for people making a formal complaint about an advert, a study shows.

The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*.

The representation of children and potential harm caused to them from seeing offensive adverts accounted for 46% of the grounds for complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), according to a study.

The research considered thousands of customer grievances relating to ads from the non-profit sector. Graphic portrayals—such as violence, sexual acts or disease—also appear highly problematic, accounting for a further 20% of complaints. Some depictions of crime, weapons and drugs were also sources of offense.

A team at the University of Edinburgh analyzed 9055 complaints received over a six-year period about adverts from the not-for-profit, third and public sectors—such as charities, government bodies and pressure groups.

They focused the study on the non-commercial sector where the use of shock appeals to attract attention or connect with audiences is more prevalent and where such tactics result in more complaints.

Adverts from this sector may also be perceived by consumers as

tolerable, due to the ultimately good cause of the organizations, experts suggest. The complaints related to adverts in a range of media—including television, print and online.

Charities had the most complained-about adverts, with 38% of the complaints, followed by governmental organizations at 29%. Campaigns from medical and children's charities triggered many offense or harm-based complaints.

The data used covered the period 2009 to 2015 and the associated regulatory response in the form of the ASA's adjudications.

Researchers found a prevalence of offense and harm-based complaints in the non-commercial sector with 62% of all complaints under that category, compared with the commercial sector in which complaints about misleadingness prevail. The representation of children was the top complained-about issue with 4,157 complaints during the six-year period. Of the 9,055 complaints, only 138 (1.5%) were upheld and 629 (6%) were upheld in part.

Researchers say this raises questions about possible bias of the advertising regulator and whether it is protecting advertisers, likely based on the idea that their messaging is justified within the non-profit context.

The study calls on advertisers to test their advertisements with intended and unintended audiences, including relevant vulnerable groups and parents, and to carefully schedule and position their advertisements to targeted audiences in order to minimize offense and harm caused, particularly to children.

It also urges the advertising regulator to consider whether its management of the non-[commercial sector](#) may need to differ from the commercial contexts.

Dr. Kristina Auxtova, of the University of Edinburgh Business School, who led the study, said, "The findings help us understand the breadth of sources of offense and harm in non-profit and public sector advertising. It is crucial for advertisers and regulators to understand what the public perceives to be offensive or harmful and for regulators to be able to respond to and regulate issues of contemporary concern."

More information: Kristina Auxtova et al, Offensive and Harmful Advertising: A Content Analysis of Official Complaints, *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/10495142.2024.2345908](https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2024.2345908)

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