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TITLE: Why we should give a FCUK about advertising standards

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FCUK. We have all seen the billboards and shop windows advertising the clothing brand. In fact, so massive are the billboards around Melbourne that they can't be missed.

When the ailing company French Connection decided to rebrand itself in the early 1990s, the marketing strategy was clear. It would set out to offend some people in the community to appeal to others, selling to cool young people who like to think of themselves as breaking the rules by attracting the disapproval of the old fogies.

It's an adolescent strategy for an adolescent market. Children learn that there is a distinction between language used in private and language used in public. Some words that are acceptable in private may offend or insult when used in public so we internalise a mechanism that enables us to switch effortlessly from one mode to the other.

Teenagers go through a phase when the use of private language in public seems like some sort of rebellion or transgression. The juvenile minds at advertising agencies — generally referred to as "the creatives" — understand this. The FCUK brand is designed to elicit the kind of sniggering defiance teenagers like to practise on their teachers.

For twenty-somethings, the company's older customers, social transgression still appeals, but they are above giggling at dirty words; for them, not laughing at the misspelling of f--- becomes an expression of their sophistication.

The use of offensive words in public is a sign of the coarsening of the culture, a trend that the advertising industry is in large measure responsible for. The FCUK "joke" has gone beyond the name itself, what the company calls an anagram of a "cheeky word". Of course, cheeky is a euphemism for offensive. Saying "f---" in public is not cheeky, it is unacceptable, which is why newspapers still use hyphens.

The clothing company consciously pushes the boundaries of acceptability, aiming to remain just on the right side of being banned. The slew of public complaints its name has provoked has been dealt with by the Advertising Standards Bureau, an industry body with a voluntary code of conduct which arbitrates on "community standards". By mysterious criteria it has judged that writing FCUK on a giant billboard does not violate community standards.

Pushing the boundaries even further, the FCUK company has recently brought out a range of fragrances called "Fcuk Her" and "Fcuk Him". The flyer shows a young woman and a young man in bed with a flap marked "Open here to try fcuk her". The pornographic genre has spilled into mainstream advertising aimed at a market segment that proves its cool credentials by adopting an ironic attitude to explicit and even extreme sex.

Now some young people have turned themselves into walking billboards for this odious multinational company, wearing T-shirts declaring "Fcuk this", "Fcuk me" and "Too busy to fcuk". I'm sure I am not alone in feeling concerned when I see a young woman walking down the street with a T-shirt that reads "f--- me". Why does she want to attract that sort of attention?

The burning question is why the majority of Australian adults, for whom the FCUK ads are offensive or disturbing, tolerate them. There are perhaps two reasons. No one in a society dominated by the cult of cool wants to be seen to be a fuddy-duddy. This is especially true of baby boomers who, desperate to cling to their youth, attempt to emulate today's teenager.

Second, after decades in which the boundaries of good taste have been breached over and over again, most people have simply resigned themselves to the intrusions and the colonisation of public spaces by the brash, tacky and the offensive.

Our state and local governments have also been cowed by the cultural and economic momentum of the marketing industry and their squadrons of boosters and lickspittles in the media. In the relentless drive to attract advertisers' dollars into supporting public facilities and events, the guardians of public morals have lost their way, blinded by the glitter of corporate culture.

But it is time to call a halt and demand that "community standards" be defined once again by the community instead of the advertising agencies and brand consultants who see public decency as little more than an opportunity to flog us more stuff.

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