

# Billboards in Manchester

## Progress Report

### The story so far

The Board of Billboards group was set up to research people's opinions of billboards in Manchester. There are a group of 10 of us that are participating in the research, yet we are a flexible group that is open to new people wanting to get involved.

We have designed a questionnaire in order to get people thinking about billboards and the issues connected with them. We hope to use the information gathered as a campaign tool and also to generally raise awareness.

The questionnaires have been put online for easy accessibility and convenience, with flyers and posters advertising the web address.

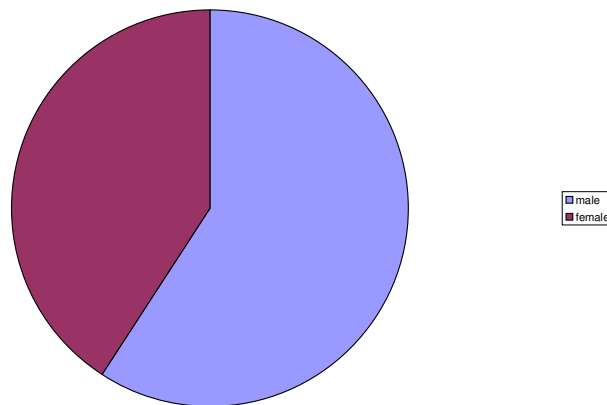
### Results

The following results are those collated from the web survey:

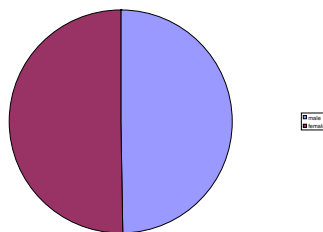
#### Equal opportunities monitoring.

We aimed to take a sample that reflected the community of Manchester and so we asked respondents to complete a monitoring form to see whether we had managed to do so. This pie chart illustrates the gender of those participating in the survey.

Gender of those filling in the survey



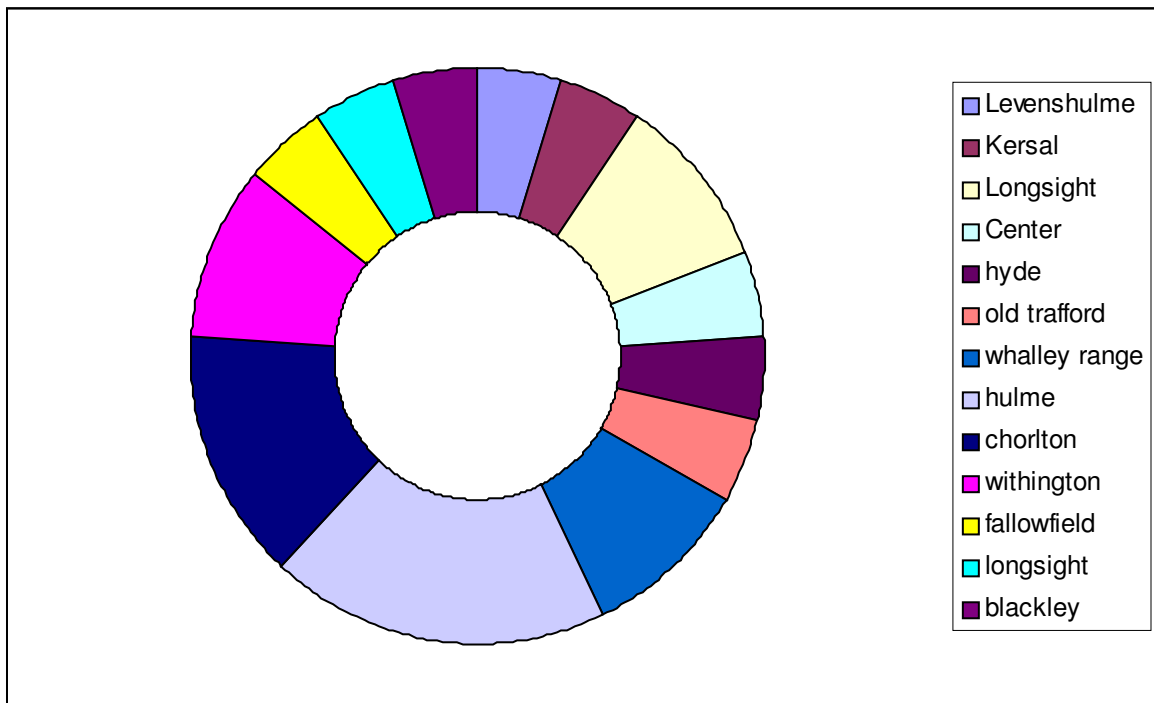
Unfortunately it doesn't reflect the population of Manchester in that actual statistics of gender in Manchester would look like this:



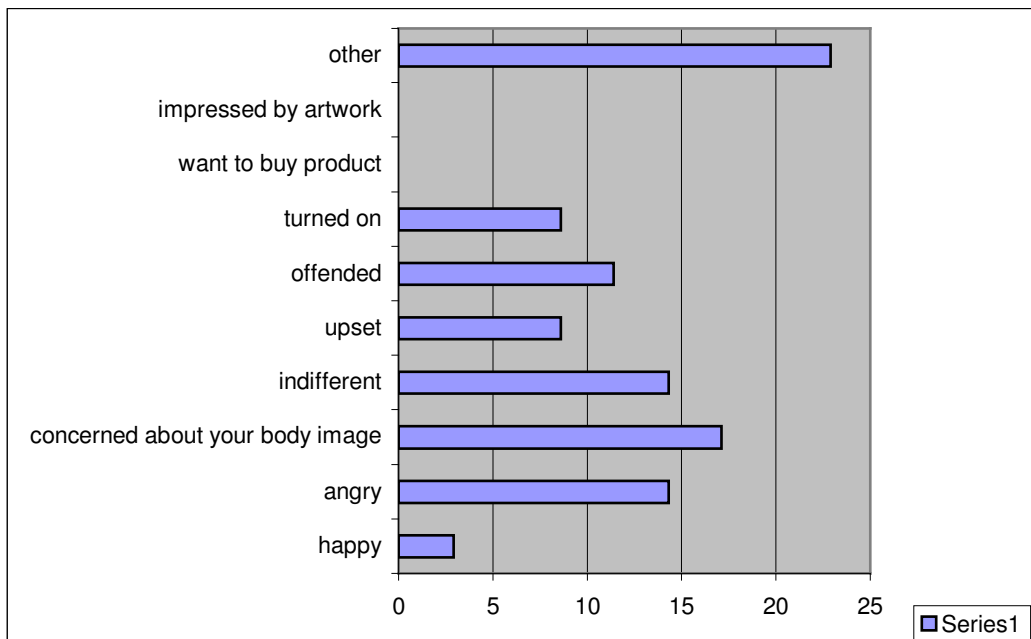
In order to make the sample more relevant we aim to organise focus group sessions, for women only in order to attract more female participants and to get more reliable and appropriate results. The sexuality and ethnic origin of participants also did not fairly reflect the population of Manchester and so we hope to do the same with the marginalised groups identified

**Area of residence**

We managed to get people from a variety of places in Manchester to complete the survey, providing a well rounded sample. Though there were a lack of respondents living in North East Manchester.



**Q5 Please look at this billboard advertisement below and then circle the words reflecting how it makes you feel.**



**'Other' comments included:**

Contempt

Disappointed & resigned to the fact that companies resort to using sex to sell their products

Blatantly using sex to sell, those models also look very thin which is a bad image to promote

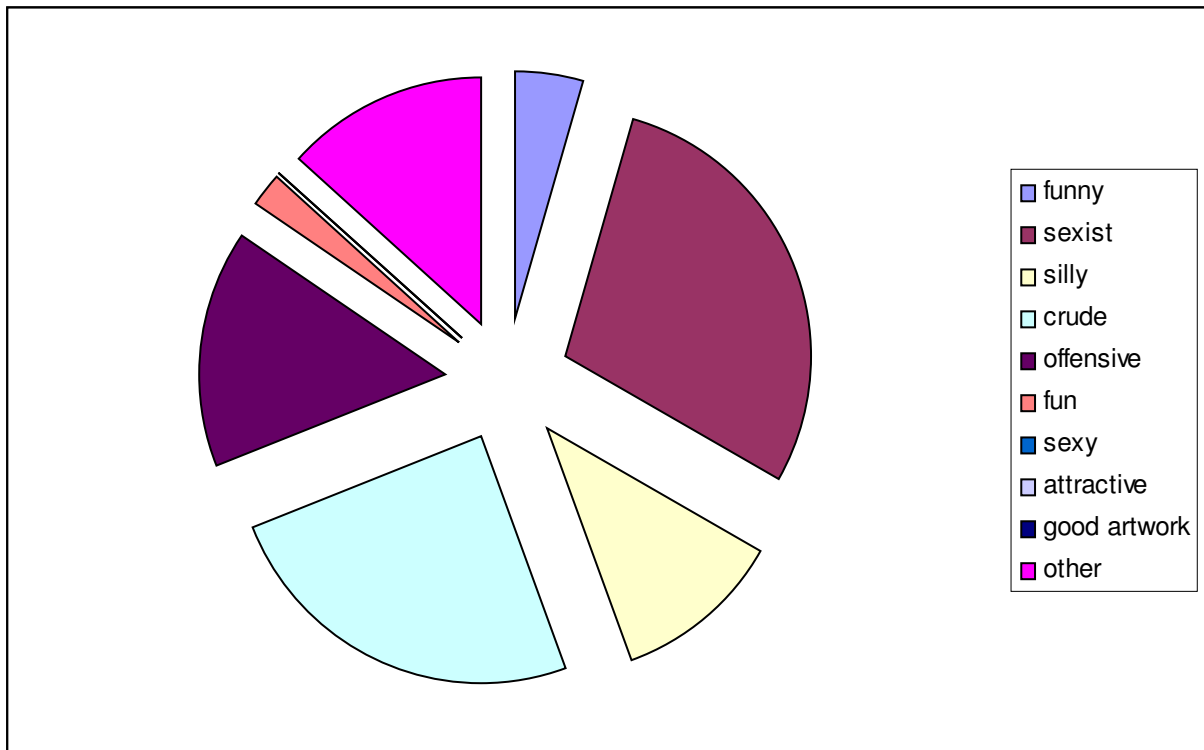
Confused

Bored

Aroused

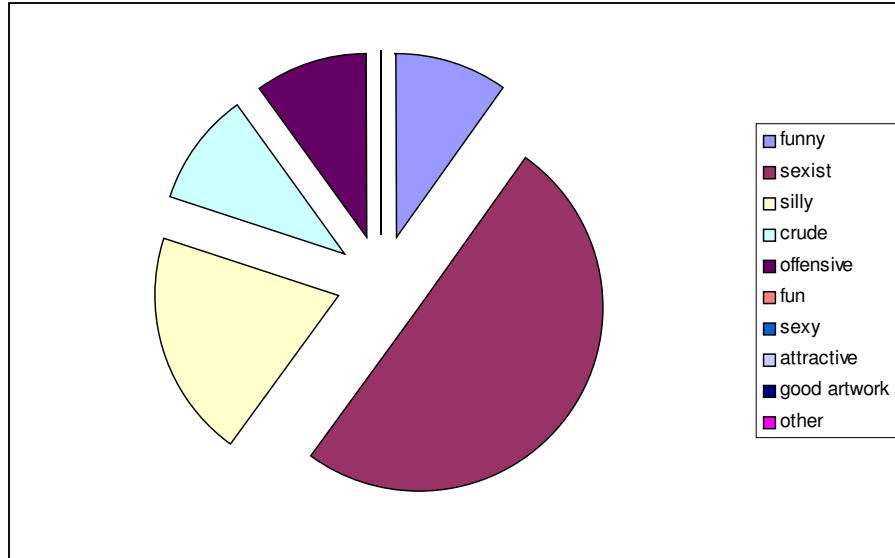
Concerned about model's nutrition awareness

**Q6 Please look at this billboard and circle the words you think appropriate to describe it (please add your own comments too)**

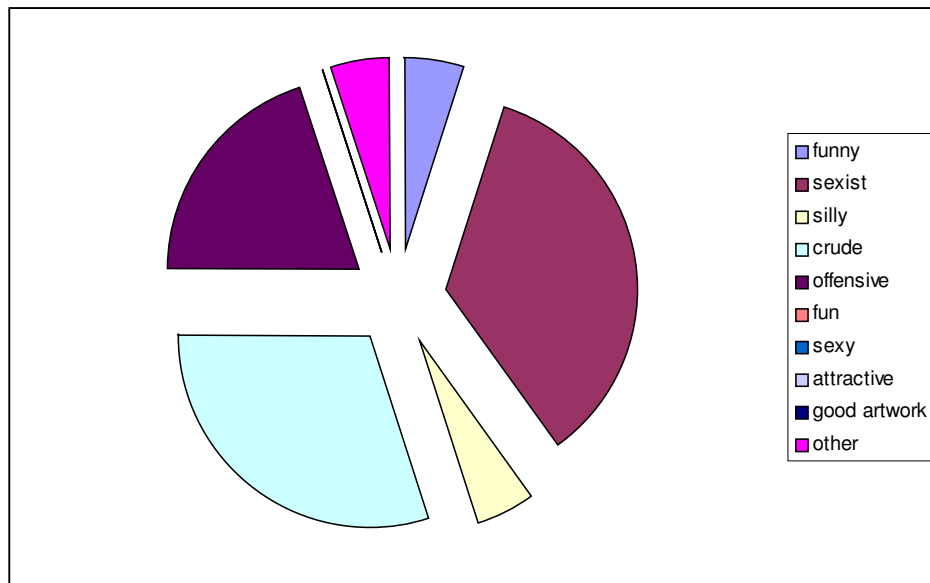


We thought, as it was a picture of a woman it would be interesting to see the males results compared to the females.

### Male results



### Female Results

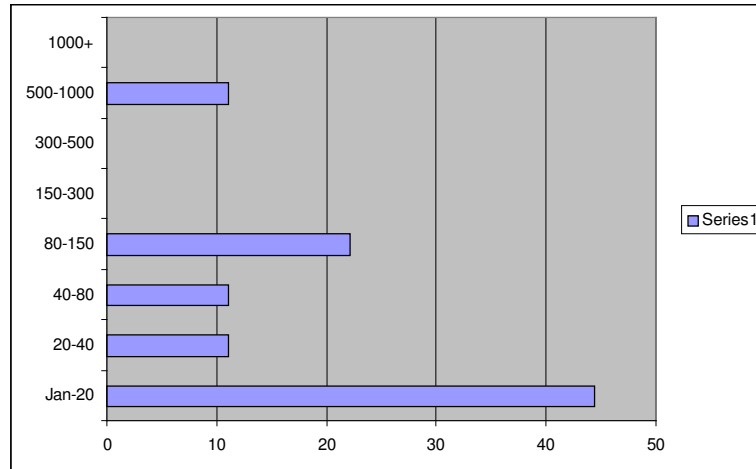


Though more male respondents found the image sexist, more females were more negative about the image, with half the amount of females compared to men finding it 'funny' and double the amount compared to males finding it 'offensive'.

Men also didn't make any 'other' comments whereas women had something to say about it. For example:

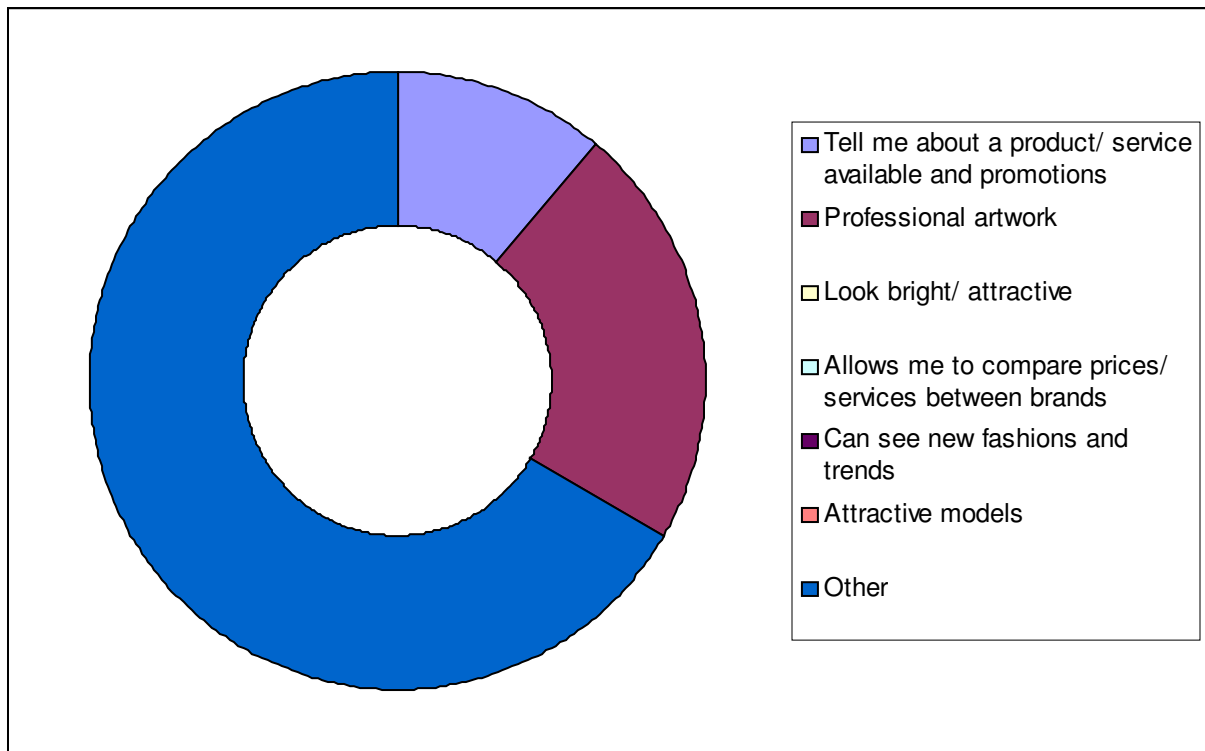
"Very sexist, why is there no equivalent advert with a man with a nice bulge?!"

**Q7 How many adverts do you think you see every day?**



It was interesting to see that most people underestimate how many adverts they see every day. Our secondary research shows that the average person sees between 400 and 600 ads per day<sup>1</sup>, most people taking the survey thought they saw much fewer than that, showing that we don't see the impact they have on our lives and our unconscious.

**Q8 What do you like about billboard adverts?**

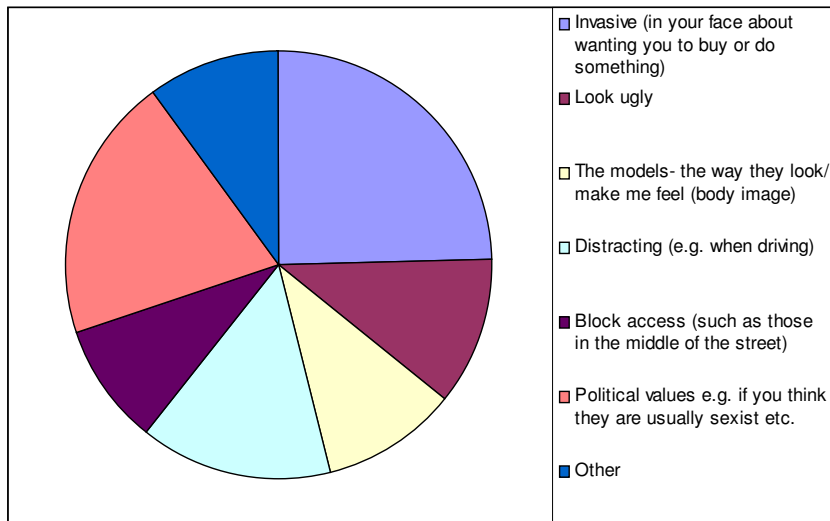


Most respondents answered 'other', their comments included:

"very little", "NOWT!", "nothing", "Nothing: I find them offensive, they clutter up the scenery with meaningless and distracting nonsense", "Nothing! Too invasive", "Nothing, i generally only like the subverted ones", "nothing really", "Nothing in particular". Basically the most common answer, 55% of the respondents, was that they liked 'nothing about billboards.

<sup>1</sup> About Face facts on the MEDIA Compiled by Liz Dittrich, Ph.D.  
<http://www.about face.org/r/facts/media.shtml>

## Q9 What do you dislike about adverts?



The 'other' responses included:

"The city should be more than just a market place." "Can be very manipulative and prey on your insecurities to make you buy things" "imposed on us. no legal redress." "Trying to make life be all about consuming" "Make streets look cramped, untidy" "usually promoting rampant consumerism" "forcing me to look at things I'm not interested in" "Imagination sapping" "encourage consumerism and greed, rather than simplicity and contentment"

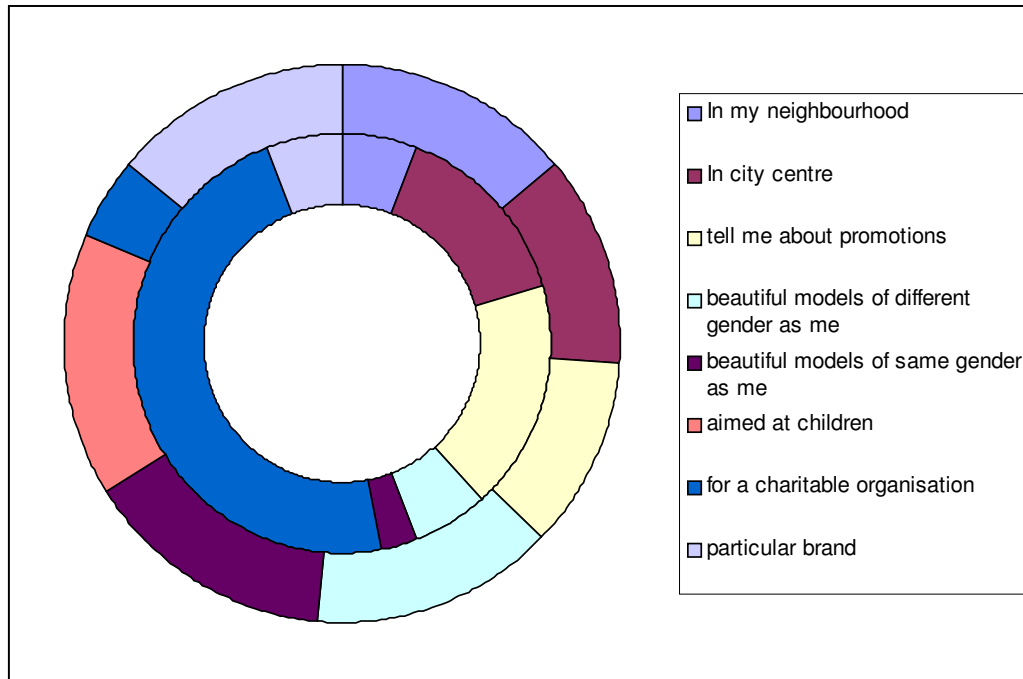
These are very different to the results of the survey conducted by the ASA (advertising Standards Agency) who state their results show that 'Mostly they (billboards) were viewed very positively as bringing welcome enlivenment and colour to the streets and a diversion from boring journeys in the car or on the bus'<sup>2</sup>.

The contradictions of findings may show researchers or organisations bias, the ASA for example may be unlikely to want their respondents to dislike billboards, as they would be out of business.

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<sup>2</sup> "The public's perception of advertising in today's society" Report on the findings from a research study Prepared for the Advertising Standards Authority  
[http://www.asa.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/A351FFA3 22D2 4A03 942E F653A700B6EC/0/ASA\\_Public\\_Perception\\_of\\_Advertising\\_Feb\\_2002.pdf](http://www.asa.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/A351FFA3 22D2 4A03 942E F653A700B6EC/0/ASA_Public_Perception_of_Advertising_Feb_2002.pdf)

**Q10 Do any of these things affect the way you feel about adverts? (please state whether it affects the way you feel in a positive or a negative way e.g. you might like adverts that are from a certain brand (brand = positive) or you may dislike billboards in your own community (in your community = negative))**



**The outer ring is negative responses, the inner ring positive responses.**

	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
In my neighbourhood	8.7	91.3
In city centre	21.74	78.26
tell me about promotions	26.09	73.91
beautiful models of different gender as me	8.7	91.3
beautiful models of same gender as me	4.35	95.65
aimed at children	0	100
for a charitable organisation	69.57	30.43
particular brand	8.7	91.3

All respondents thought that advertising aimed at children was negative. Most respondents answered 'negative' to all options, suggesting a general negative attitude towards billboards, whether in the city centre or their own neighbourhood, whether they feature attractive models and despite any informative use.

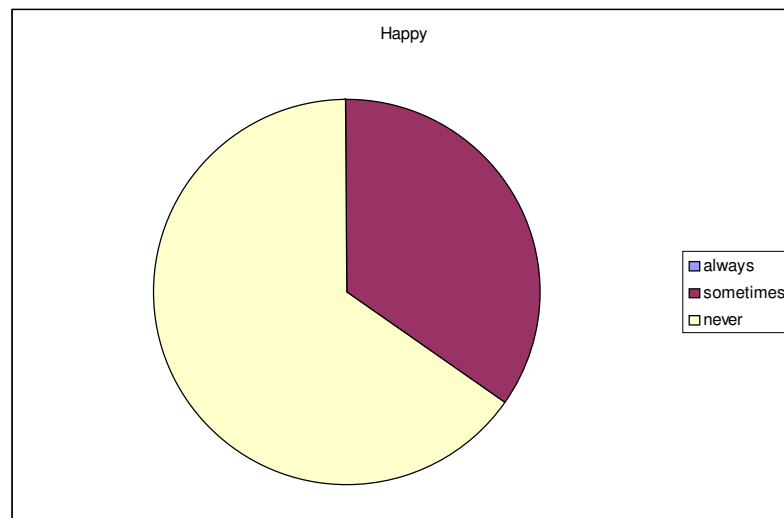
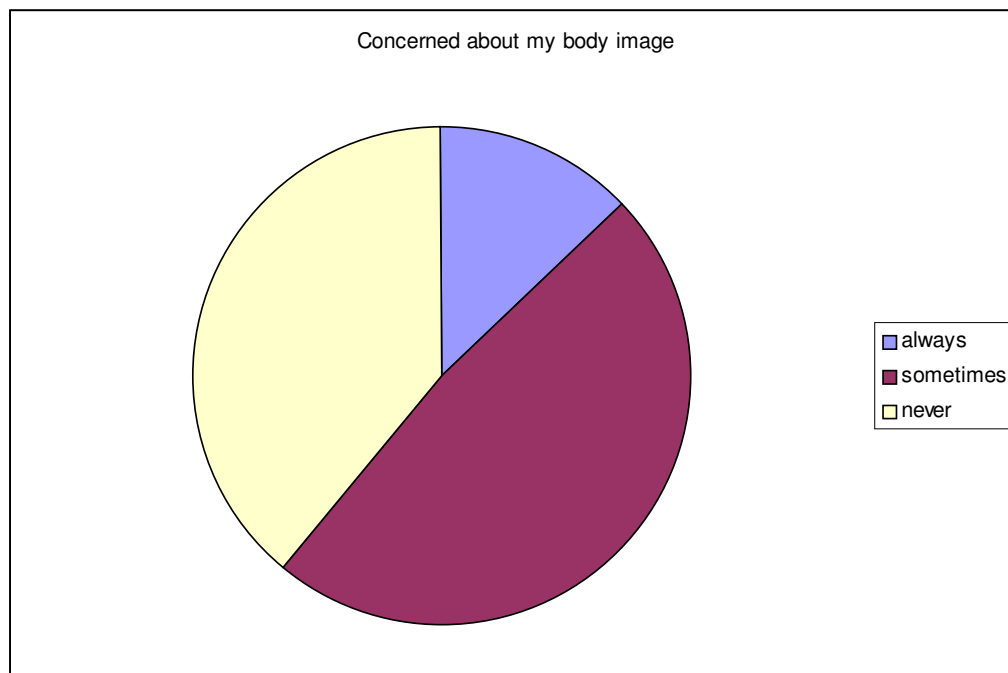
Again the ASA shows very few negative responses in their report, they only provide a paragraph that talks about respondents concerns with false advertising and lies in advertising. When asked about billboards one of their respondents states: "We like them because you're stuck in a traffic jam and it stops you from going insane". After receiving results that are so negative it seems strange that the ASA's results show only positive answers. This may be due to coincidence or they may have simply chosen to only include these answers.

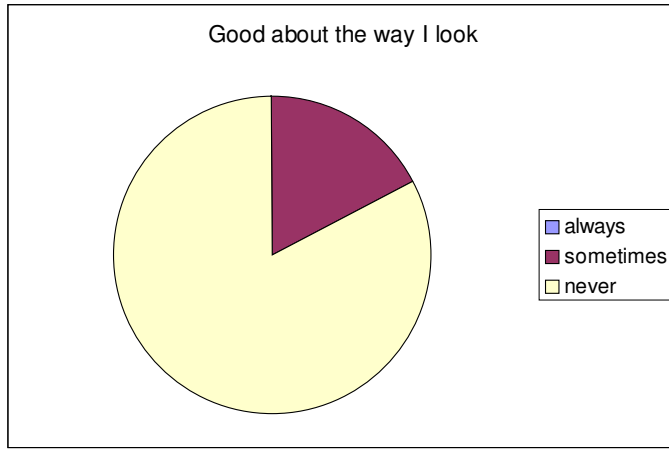
### Q11 How do billboards, in general, make you feel?

Research done by Richins (1991) found that exposure to idealised images lowered subjects' satisfaction with their own attractiveness. Stice and Shaw (1994) studied subjects' reactions to pictures of thin models in magazines. Their results indicated that exposure to the thin ideal produced depression, shame, guilt, body dissatisfaction, and stress. Stice et al. (1994) found a direct relationship between media exposure and eating disorders symptoms.

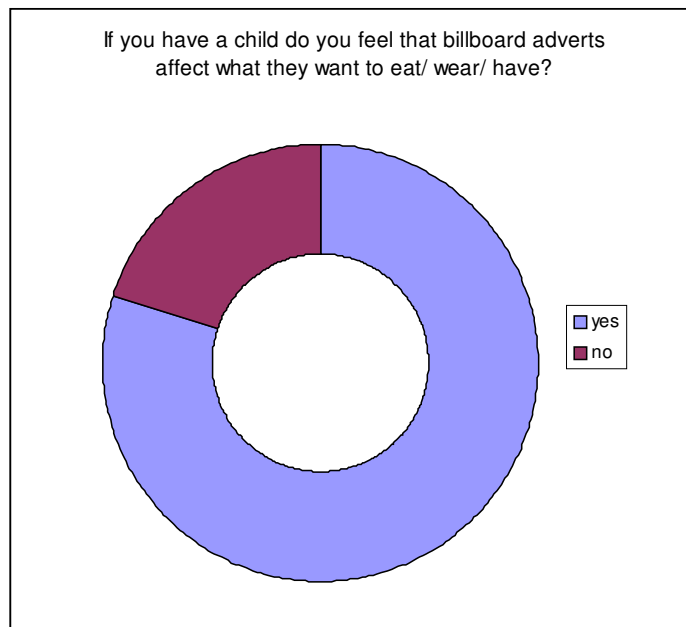
Advertising that links food to other needs and desires such as love and happiness (while simultaneously promoting the thin-ideal body image), can encourage eating disorders, especially in relation to empty-calorie, high sugar and high fat content foods like chocolate. (J. Retzinger Ph.D, Dept. of Mass Communications, UC Berkeley, 2004.)

We wanted to find out whether our sample had experienced feelings and problems similar to these.

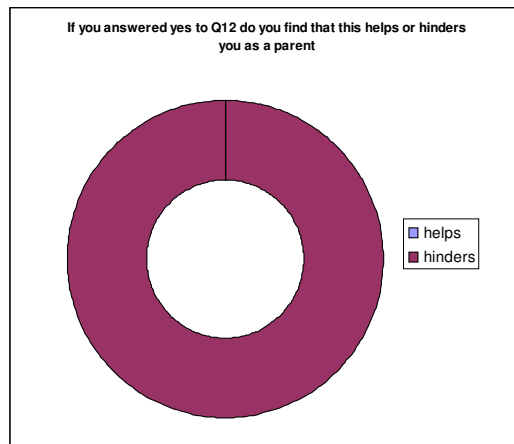




**Q12 If you have a child do you feel that billboard adverts affect what they want to eat/ wear/ have?**



**Q13 If you answered yes to Q12 do you find that this helps or hinders you as a parent**

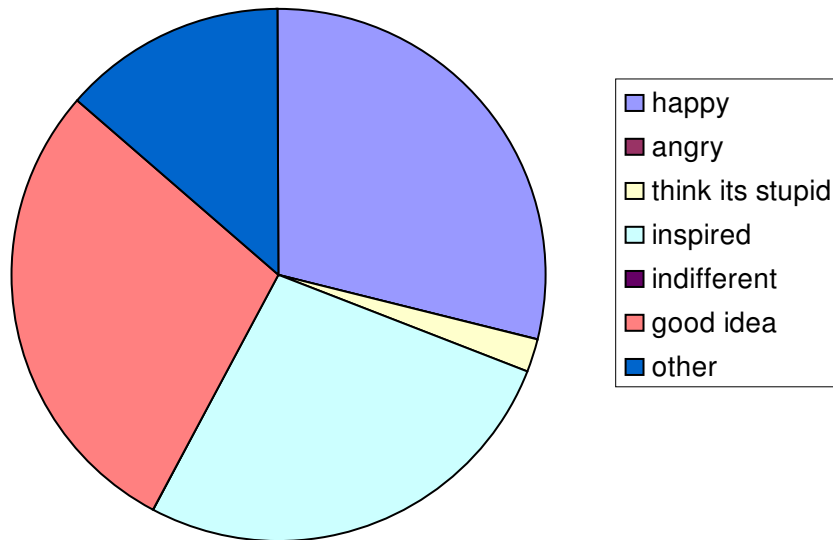


100% of respondents said that when adverts affect what their children wants, it is a hindrance and not a help.

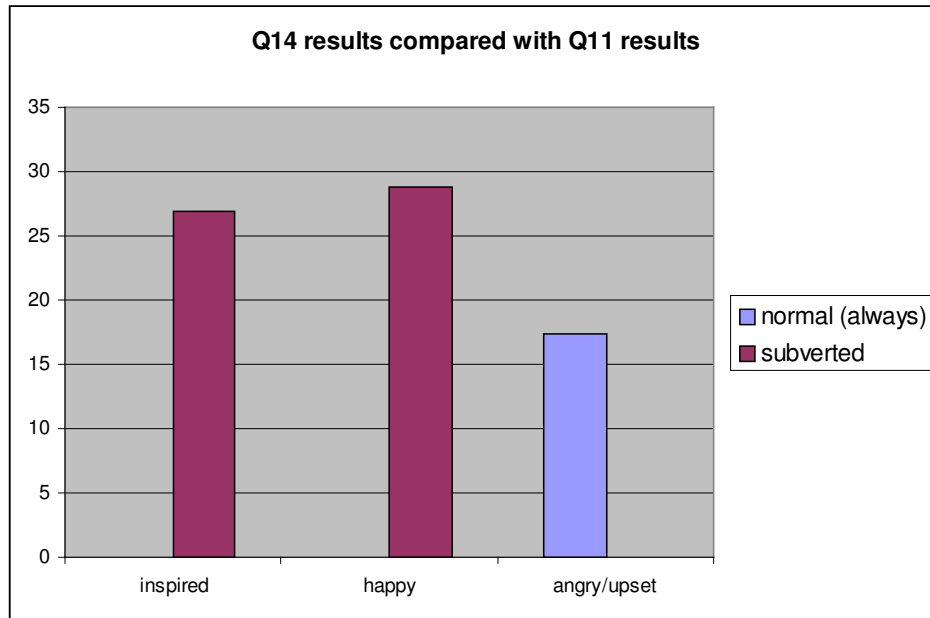
**Q 14 This billboard has been changed by community activists, who do not want billboards in their area, to be used instead as a community notice board. How does this make you feel?**



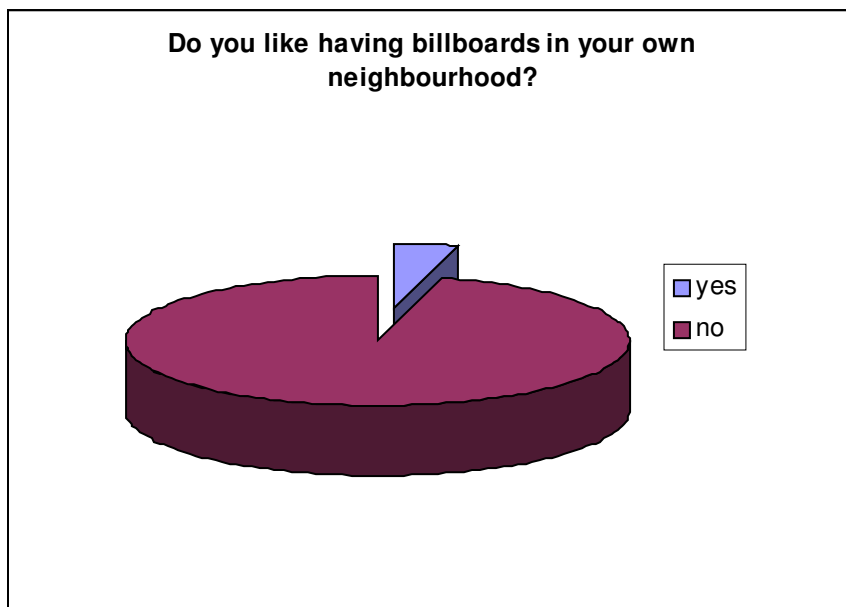
**This billboard has been changed by community activists, who do not want billboards in their area, to be used instead as a community notice board. How does this make you feel?**



Compared with answers from question 11, how people see normal adverts compared with how they see subverted/ reclaimed ones shows that whilst subverted billboards are found to be inspiring and make respondents feel happy, the normal billboards make them feel angry and upset.



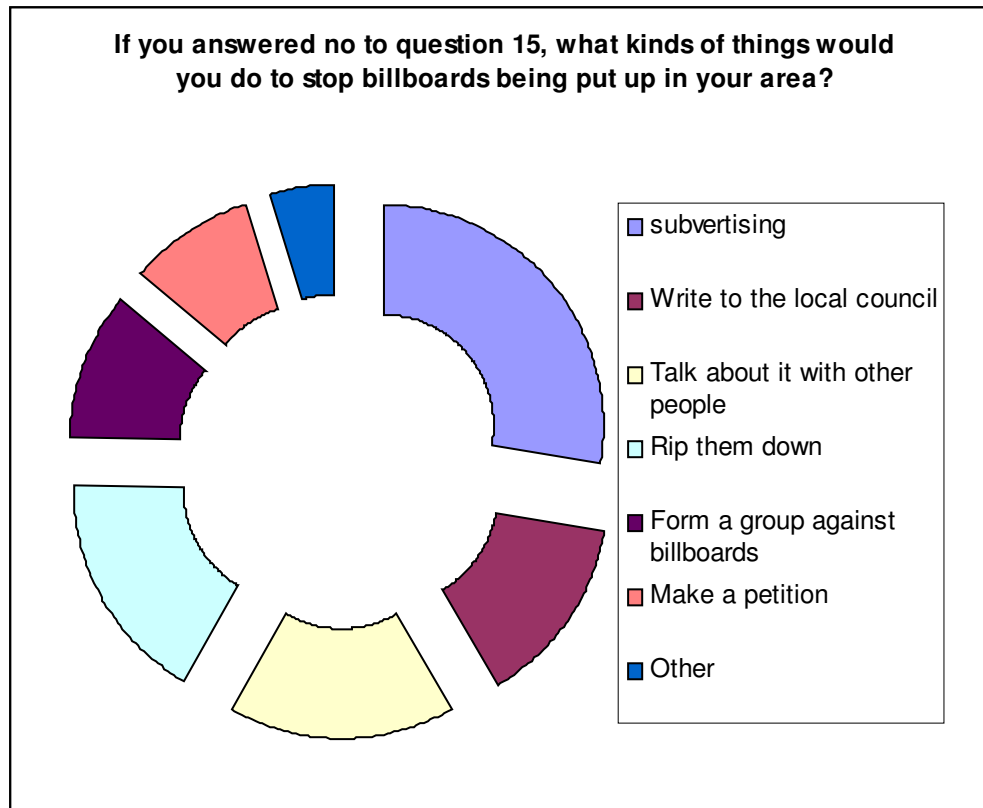
**Q15 Do you like having billboards in your own neighbourhood?**



Secondary research confirms these results: a group in Bristol<sup>3</sup> carried out similar research, with a sample of 6 St.Werburghs streets, and found that 93% people were against billboards.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.stwerburghs.org/article.php?code=54&search=billboard&issue=>

**Q16 If you answered no to question 15, what kinds of things would you do to stop billboards being put up in your area?**



'Other' answers included:

"Burn them" "Replace them with our own artwork" "Question the company's policy + avoid buying the product"

**Q17 Please describe your opinion of having billboard adverts in Manchester in 20 words.**

This question was designed to allow respondents to make their own comments about billboards without guidance. Though we have tried to have the option 'other' for most questions the 'other' answer would still be guided by the question. So the qualitative research for this question is highly important.

Not every respondent answered this question, maybe because it would take more time than simply clicking on a box, yet 34.8% of the respondents did answer. Their comments included:

*"The constant barrage of corporate propaganda is an assault and needs to be countered."* (male, heterosexual, Blackley, Irish)

*"I think they are unnecessary, and if we cannot get rid of them completely then there should at least be far less of them."* (female, bisexual, Fallowfield, white British)

*"Its amazing how they are always there and people are usually indifferent to them but when you think about it they are just another worthless form of capitalism."* (female, bisexual, Vietnamese)

*"The city would be better off without them."* (male, heterosexual, chorlton, white and middle east)

The survey up to now indicates that there is a general negativity around billboard advertisements. With 95.7% of respondents not wanting billboards in their own neighbourhood, and many willing to take action against them.

### **What next?**

We hope to continue the research by a variety of methods including:

Holding focus group meetings whereby we shall advertise for specific groups of people, such as Asian women, who are least represented in our sample, this will mean that our survey will be more representative of the community of Manchester.

These focus groups will involve group discussions about people's opinions of billboards with visual aids and set topics to stimulate discussion. In order to increase attendants we intend to publicise the events widely, taking into account the most likely places for the identified groups to see the publicity, such as refugees may be more likely to see a poster in a particular project. We shall also offer free tea and cake to all participants.

In addition to focus groups we also wish to continue with the questionnaire, asking passers by in the street and also leaving more questionnaires in local projects and facilities, such as libraries.

### **Results**

We aim to have finished the audit by mid- July 2005 and hold an event to display the results and to encourage more people to discuss the issues. This event will feature an art exhibition with images of billboards and quotes and diagrams illustrating how people responded. We shall also show a film of our research journey, which will show us giving out questionnaires and conducting focus groups (filmed with the permission of the participants, so as not to contravene confidentiality).

The event will also feature workshops in subvertising and billboard alteration, which has been a request of many of the participants.

We also hope to display the results on a website so that it is easy for them to be accessed by many. We shall ensure we reply to and send a comprehensive report of the results to all of those participants requesting a copy.