The Year in Sensitive Creative

Provocative, Adult, and Alcohol are
top contentious ad categories during a
12-month period full of social, economic,
and political tensions

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Headline Stats

To gauge the extent of consumer exposure to sensitive or offensive ad content, The Media Trust analyzed tens of millions of creatives between March 2020 and February 2021 and identified more than 1 million that fell into 30 categories of questionable subject matter.

▶ **Viewer discretion advised:** Adult (nudity, sex toys, and adult services) and Provocative (sexually suggestive imagery and profanity) ads accounted for two-thirds of all sensitive creative.

▶ **Nearly half of Coronavirus ads are scams:** Dubious ads focusing on high-demand PPE equipment and pandemic misinformation accounted for 2.4% of contentious ads.

▶ **Adult and Alcohol lead creative storm during first Covid wave:** April 2020 saw 50% more contentious ads than the monthly average, with major spikes in Adult and Alcohol ads accounting for 44% and 17.5% of ads respectively.

▶ **Suggestive creative surged during holidays:** An influx of evocative holiday content in November 2020 prompted a 3.4X month-over-month increase in Provocative ads, which accounted for 57% of all creatives flagged.

▶ **Adult ads tumble over year:** An 85% decline between August 2020 and Feb. 2021 implies effectiveness of categorization for removal of brand-tarnishing content.

▶ **Political explodes in October:** Political ads made up 37% of October's sensitive ad pool, growing 6.7X from August 2020.

▶ **Weapons and Violence surge:** Ads in these two categories rose an alarming 4X between September 2020 and February 2021.

Executive Summary

If you were to ask a digital publisher what kind of ad creative would appear on a random page on its domain—A car ad? A beauty product? A movie trailer?—it's more than likely they would simply shrug.

This lack of foresight leaves consumers vulnerable to an array of objectionable content—from ads with nudity, sexually suggestive imagery, and obscenities to inflammatory political content or even scams around crpytocurrencies and other trends. As ad-supported media makes up the majority of the web and ad units can account for as much as 50% of site content, the potential exposure for adults and children is massive.

For all of the innovations in the programmatic ecosystem—including the open market fueled by real-time bidding—the digital advertising world has taken a giant step backward. When advertising is bought and sold through

The coronavirus pandemic has unleashed worldwide health and safety concerns, economic woes, and political tensions clearly reflected in the ad creative flowing throughout digital media.

"indirect" channels like the open programmatic marketplace, publishers and down-chain platforms like supply-side partners (SSPs) have very little knowledge about or control over the contents of the end creative.

Advertisers have the option to pre-declare the content in their creatives through the IAB Content Taxonomy, but there's little incentive to accurately label ads related to weapons, adult material, alcohol, pharmaceutical, and outright scams.

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While a great deal of industry attention goes to advertiser brand safety concerns over appearing on offensive digital media, there's less talk about the risks publishers face when objectionable ads endanger user experience—whether they offend consumers with nudity and adult products or bring potential legal liability (e.g., medical and pharmaceutical ads) to the publisher.

In programmatic advertising, the supply side is left flying blind, trusting upstream partners to look out for their best interests—and those of end users—when it comes to creative content. All too often, this trust is broken. Premium publishers find themselves:

▶ **Hosting ads with nudity, sex acts, and related devices;**

▶ **Promoting alcohol and marijuana banners on sites aimed at younger users;**

▶ **Serving ads endorsing violence or selling weapons in prominent placements;**

▶ **Propagating scams and fostering the spread of misinformation;**

▶ **Threading the needle between health-oriented and pharmaceutical and/or regulated content.**

In addition to these perennial concerns, the coronavirus pandemic has unleashed worldwide health and safety concerns, economic woes, and political tensions that are clearly reflected in the ad creative flowing throughout digital media. In the US, potentially objectionable advertising is also fueled by widespread social unrest and the fallout from a highly contentious presidential election.

Premium advertisers' decision to pause their ad spend at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic opened the programmatic pipes to a wealth of malvertising and low-quality ads—but also a major influx of advertising around highly sensitive areas. This further highlighted SSPs' and publishers' inability to control the categories of creative coming from demand sources.

The Categorization Effect

AdTech providers and their publisher partners have varying parameters for assessing the quality of ads that flow through their digital advertising supply chains—and that includes evaluating creative content that consumers may find objectionable.

To recognize at-risk creatives at scale, The Media Trust leverages AI-powered object and text identification to flag creatives with potentially sensitive content. Those creatives are then reviewed by human analysts to confirm the category designation, resulting in an unrivaled false positive rate below 2%. Ad content is classified according to more than 30 categories developed in partnership with major buy- and sell-side AdTech companies; in addition, The Media Trust monitors dozens of custom categories developed for clients with specific concerns.

TOP 10 SENSITIVE CREATIVE CATEGORIES
MARCH 2020 - FEB. 2021

Pharmacuetical 1.8%
Weapons 1.6%
Cannabis (CBD) 1.5%
Cryptocurrency 0.4%
Coronavirus 5%
Political 7.4%
Medical 8%
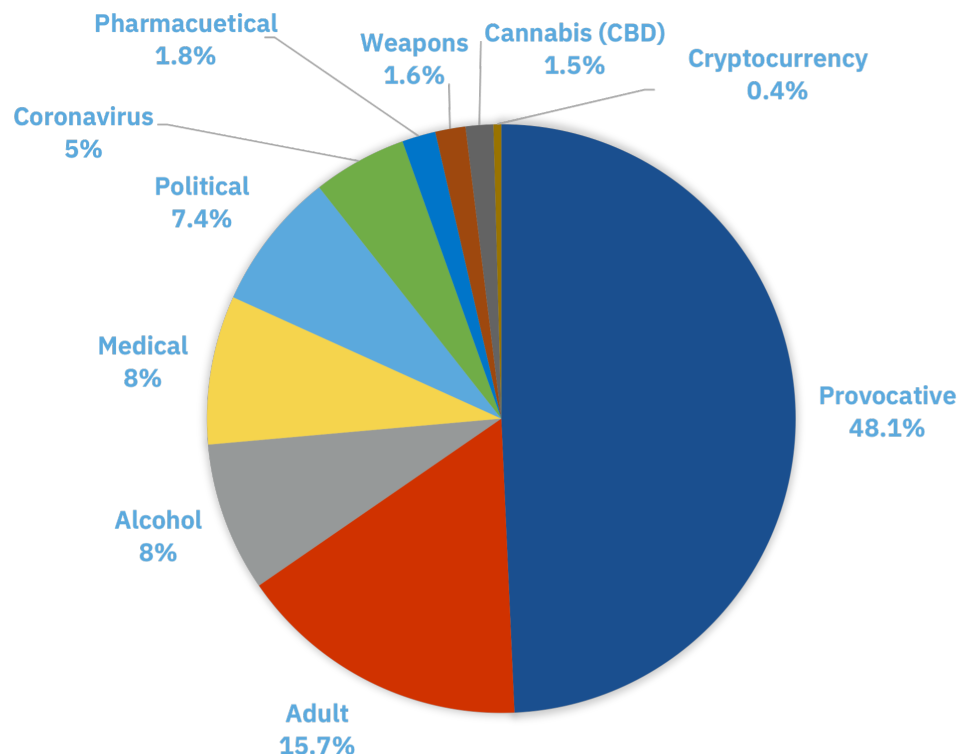Provocative 48.1%
Alcohol 8%
Adult 15.7%

Figure 1: Provocative content accounted for nearly half of the 1 million+ pieces of sensitive creative identified by The Media Trust's Ad Categorization tool.

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The more than 1 million pieces of sensitive creative identified between March 2020 and February 2021 reflect a highly volatile social, economic, and political moment. [Figure 1] Many pandemic-fueled campaigns fell afoul of publisher and AdTech standards. Nearly half (48.1%) of the flagged creatives fell into the Provocative category—content, imagery, or text considered unsavory, offensive, or sexually suggestive—while 15.7% were labeled Adult and 8% Alcohol. The next largest categories were: Medical (8%), Political (7.4%); and Coronavirus (5%).

April 2020 was a remarkable month—as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were being felt all over the world on both the personal and economic levels, premium brands paused their ad spend and objectionable creative flooded into the programmatic market.

The Media Trust identified 47% more sensitive ads than the monthly average, and most of them were Adult content (44%)—49X growth from the month before. [Figure 2] The other big category was Alcohol, increasing 5X from the month prior and accounting for 17.5% flagged ads. No surprise that these two industries were eager to reach consumers struggling with a lockdown.
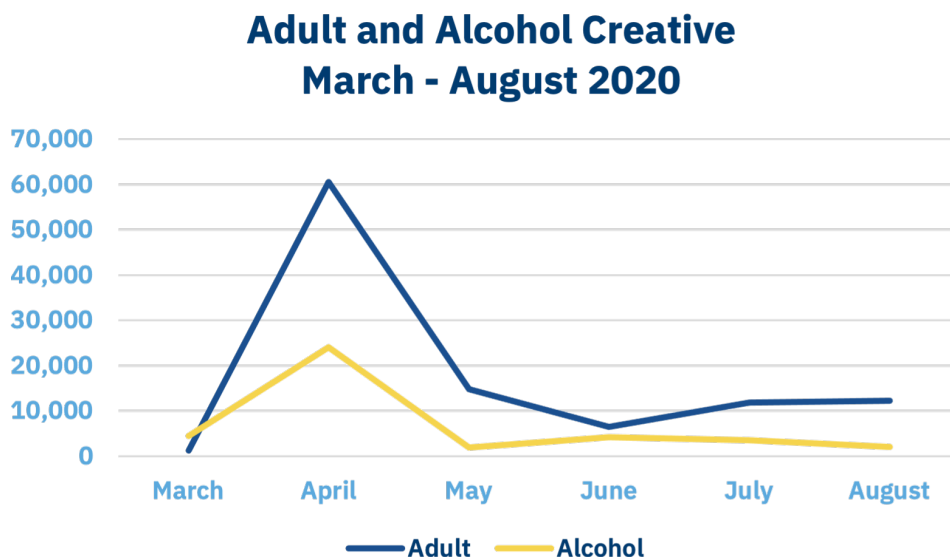
Adult and Alcohol Creative March - August 2020

Figure 2: The 5X jump in Alcohol creatives somehow looks small compared to the 49X month-over-month growth in Adult ads.

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The latter six months of this period—September 2020 to February 2021—paints a different picture. [Figure 3] The average number of flagged creatives per month was 18% lower at 59,582, and though Provocative remained the dominant category (45.2%), political ads jumped to 12.6% in the midst of a tense US election. Interestingly, the amount of Coronavirus-related creative decreased slightly (4.6%), but the share of Adult ads fell greatly to 7.6%.

Number of Sensitive Creatives by Month
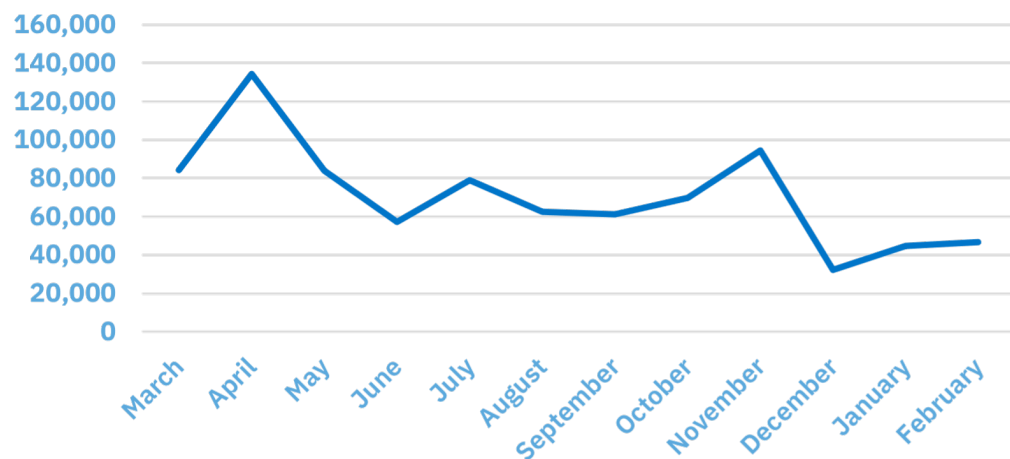## March 2020 - Feb. 2021

Figure 3: The amount of contentious ads flagged each month was generally lower in the most recent six months, with the exception November 2020's deluge of holiday-related provacative creative.

The sinking amount of sensitive creative and Adult ads suggest ad categorization tools are having an impact, and advertisers are increasingly cognizant of SSP and publisher acceptable creative policies—as well as more aware of what consumers could find objectionable.

Via ad categorization and other ad quality tools, DSPs and other buying platforms are increasingly serving consultative roles, helping their buyers navigate creative challenges and overall tightening their relationships. These key digital players realize that media responsibility—and supply-side brand safety—starts at the top of the chain.

Scammers Exploit Coronavirus

As coronavirus affected so many aspects of life and knowledge of the disease has changed greatly over the past 12 months, creatives in the Coronavirus category truly ran the gamut, from B2B ads discussing economic impact and public service announcements to products related to

Figure 4: Scam Coronavirus creatives often featured unverifiable claims as well as misleading information regarding treatments and vaccines.

protection and self-care—with not all of those offers legitimate.

As the reality of the pandemic set in, ads promoting false claims, fraudulent remedies, price gouging over PPE, and "miracle cures" quickly hit the digital ad pipes, quickly becoming a serious concern for platforms and publishers alike. The Media Trust carved out a subcategory for scam Coronavirus ads [Figure 4] that featured:

▶ **High demand or short supply PPE products (masks, gloves, sanitizers, etc.)**

▶ **False or unverifiable claims (cures, treatments, preventatives, etc.)**

▶ **Coronavirus-branded merchandise**

▶ **Spread of public fear or panic**

Scam Coronavirus ads made up 47% of all identified Coronavirus creative, and 2.4% of all ads flagged during the analysis period. Between July and November, scam creative accounted for nearly two-thirds (62%) of Coronavirus ads. [Figure 5]
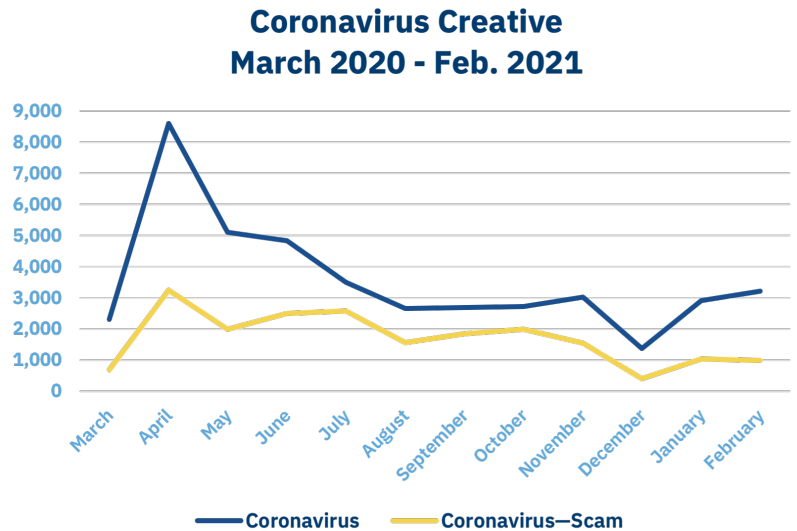

Figure 5: Between July and November, nearly two-thirds of Coronavirus creatives were scams, but the two have diverged going into 2021.

The amount of Coronavirus creative has generally been trending downward but remains a problem. The December valley marks an 85% slide from the heights of April 2020 as AdTech progressively removed these ads from their digital advertising supply chains.
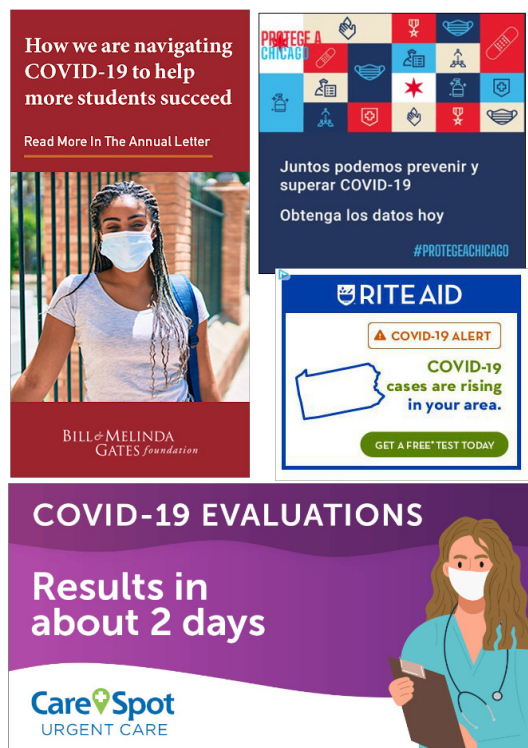

Figure 6: Examples of benign Coronavirus creative.

An influx of public service announcements and ads related to vaccine availability [Figure 6] drove a 2.4X increase in Coronavirus ads in the first few months of 2021, and the share of scam ads declined to 31% in February. This could easily spike again as bad actors try to take advantage of widespread vaccine access. AdTech providers continue to scrutinize which coronavirus creatives cross the line.

Adult and Provocative top the charts

Adult and Provocative ads made up nearly two-thirds of all sensitive creatives. The preponderance of Adult creative [Figure 7] is tied to a massive spike in April 2020, when the category accounted for 44% of ads in violation. When examining the most recent six months, however, Adult's share declines to 7.4%, and since November 2020, the amount of Adult creative detected has fallen 73%. It appears ad categorization has forced many Adult advertisers to switch tactics or find other buying platforms.

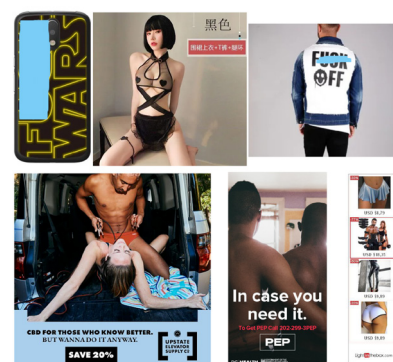Figure 7: Adult creative includes nudity, sex toys, and adult services.

Provocative creative [Figure 8] shot through the roof in November 2020, 3.4X higher than the month before and 57% of all flagged ads. The timing suggests a flood of evocative ads to ring in the holiday season.

Figure 8: Provocative ads feature sexually suggestive imagery and/or profane language.

Provocative and Adult Creative March 2020 - Feb. 2021

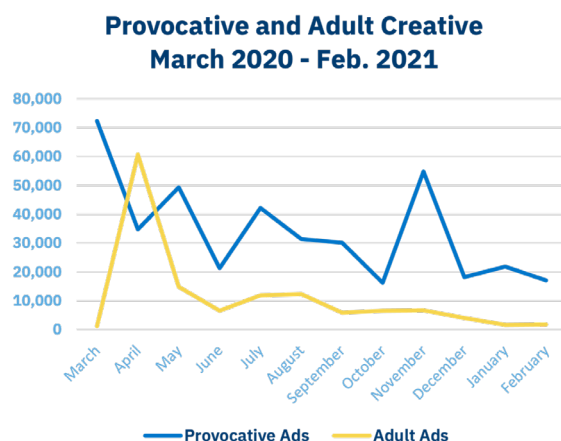— Provocative Ads   — Adult Ads

Figure 9: Adult ads have declined greatly since an April spike, while Provocative creative had an eventful November 2020.

Since the November spike, the amount of Provocative creative dipped around 70%. Year over year, the number of Provocative ads has fallen more than 75%, again suggesting that ad categorization has had an impact on the way advertisers approach the market. [Figure 9]

Political tsunami in October 2020

No surprise, Political creative showed up in force right before a major US presidential election. [Figure 10] Yet with a highly charged political atmosphere, major ad platforms were discerning about the political ads they were willing to send to downstream partners. [Figure 11] By identifying Political creative both innocuous and incendiary, The Media Trust's Ad Categorization tool aided these platforms in building policies and tolerance thresholds.

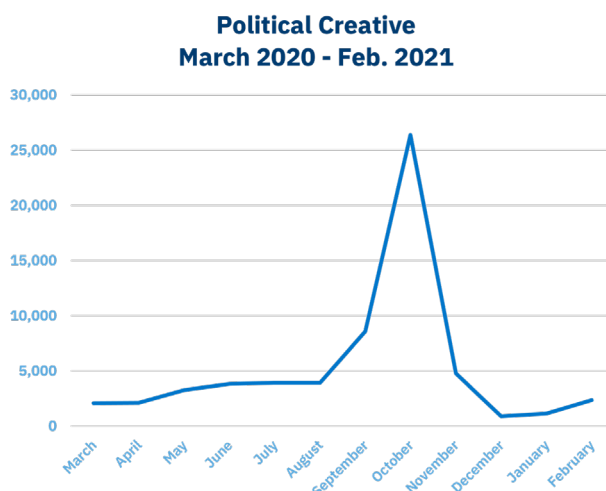**Political Creative
March 2020 - Feb. 2021**

Figure 10: Political's dramatic incline from August to September 2020 was followed by a more extreme decline in November.

Political ads accounted for 37% of all creative flagged in October, resoundingly higher than all other categories. The amount grew nearly sevenfold in the runup to the election, and then immediately slipped 82% in November. While Political accounted for 12.2% of all ads flagged between Sept. 2020 and Feb. 2021, it only claimed a 3.7% share of ads categorized between March 2020 and August 2020, which is more representative of periods outside an election.

Figure 11: Although Political creative was diverse, the ferocity of the inflammatory ads resulted in some AdTech platforms abstaining from political ads entirely.

Weapons and Violence Rising

Alongside a tense political climate and social unrest, creative featuring Weapons (guns and knives) and Violence (fighting, combat, blood, etc.) have been appearing in greater frequency. [Figure 12]

Cycling up to the US elections, the amount of ads in these categories grew 2.5X. The category stabilized at an elevated level in December and January, and then exploded in the post-Capitol, growing 4X since September. This is a category AdTech companies must continue to watch out for as social unrest and political dissent continue to dominate headlines. [Figure 13]

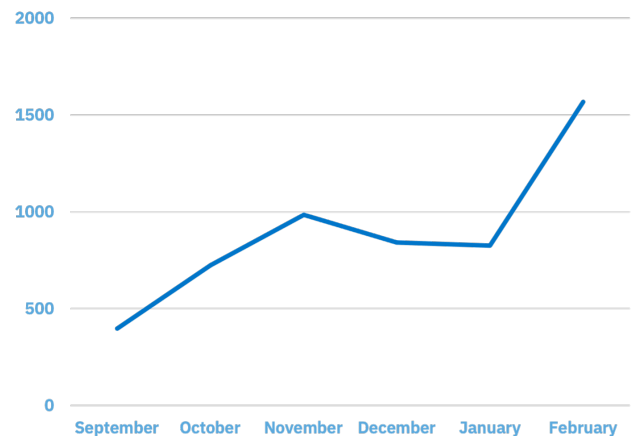**Weapons and Violence Creative Sept. 2020 - Feb. 2021**

Figure 12: Weapons and Violence ads saw a disturbing increase in February 2021 following the Capitol Hill Riot.
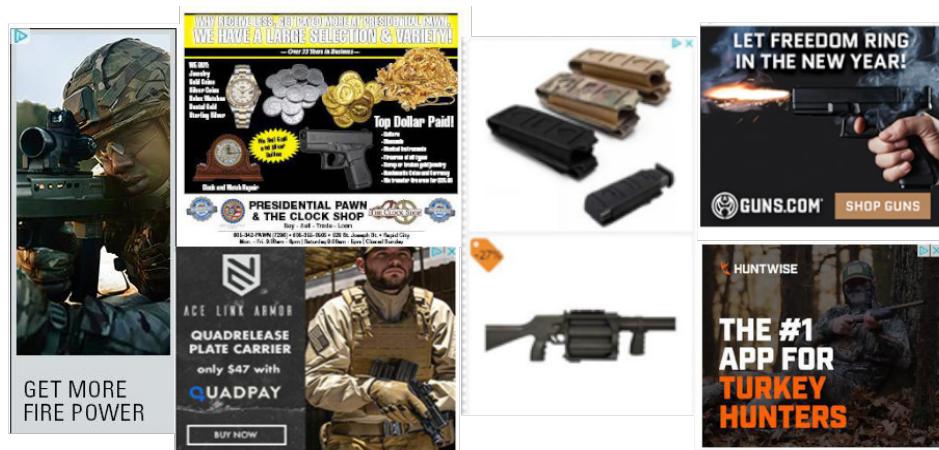

Figure 13: Weapons and Violence ads range from images of combat to pictures of guns, knives, and body amor for sale.

Conclusion: Changing Sensitivities

What consumers find objectionable is subjective, and tolerance levels vary greatly among consumers, publishers, AdTech companies, and brands. Cultural norms are also constantly evolving, meaning something scandalous today may be commonplace in five years.

Sensitivities around various categories of creative—in particular, Coronavirus and Political—rapidly fluctuated in the past 12 months. A strong ad classification tool requires constant adaptation as ad tech platforms react to wild shifts. This requires the categories themselves to keep up with the times: both in terms of changing cultural viewpoints and increasingly perceptive AI.

To offer advertisers and ad tech platforms more nuance in labeling Adult creative in the future, The Media Trust has broken down the category into three more descriptive ones:

▶ **Nudity: Ads that contain exposed genitalia (male or female) or exposed nipples (female).**

▶ **Adult Products: Ads for products to enhance sexual intercourse, including lubricants, condoms, and toys.**

▶ **Adult Entertainment: Ads promoting the selling of sex, including strip clubs and adult video sites.**

The Provocative category has also been refined to focus on ads designed to deliberately arouse sexual desire or interest, highlighting innuendo, intent, and implication. Carved out of Provocative are new categories for Undergarments & Bathing Suits and Profane Language. These changes will help both publishers and SSPs in setting granular acceptable creative policies and advertisers and buy-side platforms in complying without sacrificing creativity.

The buy side must recognize its responsibility in protecting consumers from harmful or unwanted creative.

The past 12 months proved to be a wild moment to examine advertising creative around sensitive subjects, and it appears ad categorization efforts has had an effect on the creative submitted to top-tier DSPs. Political and social tensions remain high throughout the US and the pandemic isn't over, but new sensitive categories will surely emerge. As ad creative reflects the cultural climate, what's considered sensitive will always be shifting—and DSPs, SSPs, and publishers will need the flexibility to keep up.

More important, a larger portion of the buy side must recognize their responsibility in protecting consumers from harmful or unwanted creative, as well as complying with publisher and downstream AdTech partner policies designed to shield users. Employing solutions that can independently verify sensitive ad content is a huge step toward a safer media ecosystem for consumers.

In a rapidly transforming digital advertising landscape, this is change for the better.

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Methodology

Ad Categorization by The Media Trust is used by premier DSPs and SSPs to analyze ad creative at scale for sensitive content that matches more than 30 categories, including:

- **Nudity**
- **Adult Products**
- **Provocative**
- **Marijuana**
- **Medical**
- **Pharmaceutical**
- **Weapons**
- **Violence**
- **Political**

Custom categories are also developed for clients based on regional or industry requirements.

Ad Categorization is an AI-human hybrid tool. The Media Trust leverages AI-powered object and text analysis to recognize objectionable content in large batches of creative. Ads flagged in contentious categories are then verified by human analysts and returned to clients. This system has proven highly effective with an industry-low false positive rate of less than 2%.

The Media Trust reviews more than 5 million display creatives a month for top-tier DSPs and SSPs. Between March 2020 and February 2021, tens of millions of ads were processed and more than 1 million were identified as belonging to sensitive categories.

Learn more about Ad Categorization here:
https://mediatrust.com/how-we-help/ad-categorization

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About The Media Trust

The Media Trust is on a mission to make the internet a healthier, more valuable place for publishers and consumers. Working with the world's largest, most-heavily trafficked digital properties and their upstream partners, The Media Trust delivers real-time security, data privacy, performance management and quality assurance solutions which help protect, monetize and optimize the user experience across desktop, smartphone, tablet and gaming devices. More than 600 enterprises, media publishers, ad networks/exchanges, and agencies—including 40 of comScore's AdFocus Top 50 websites—rely on The Media Trust to protect their website, their employee internet use, their revenue and, most importantly, their brand.

Ask about how to evaluate your ads:

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