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Challenging the Stigma of Mental Illness in Pizza Advertising

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Abstract
In 2005, letters were written by a number of community agencies to the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) and Sane Australia (Sane) regarding advertising by a well-known pizza company. Objection was raised to the use of the word maniac/s based on the grounds that it was offensive and that it added to the stigma of mental illness. Stigma has a major impact on the lives of people with a mental illness and on their families and carers. The responses by ASB and Sane demonstrated that these agencies did not believe that the pizza company breached the Code of Ethics or that a pizza flyer put into private letterboxes constituted advertising. If the pizza company could see the impact then they would have considered their words more carefully and not risked offending. This paper argues that we all have a responsibility to reduce stigma that people with a mental illness face.

Introduction
In 2005, the Rockhampton Mental Health Promotion Committee, Consumer Advisory Group and the Bidgerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service wrote to the Advertising Standards Bureau and Sane Australia regarding advertising by a number of agencies, including a world-renowned pizza company. The advertising by the pizza company included television commercials and flyers. The flyers appeared in letterboxes in the greater Rockhampton area as part of an advertising strategy. Rockhampton is situated on the Central Queensland coast and has a population of approximately 60,000 people. The television commercials feature three young friends as they wait excitedly for their pizza to arrive. The commercials feature similar wording to the flyers. Some of the wording on the flyers included:

A Menu to Make you Maniacs Squeal!
Maniac Pizzas
Our new Ham and Bacon Maniac Pizzas will make you Squeal!
You Maniacs will love our Chicken!
A Menu for all you (pizza company name) Maniacs
The Maniac Range (a listing of pizzas available)

Offensive Language
Members of the Rockhampton Consumer Advisory Group (CAG), and the Rockhampton Mental Health Promotion Committee and Bidgerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service wrote to the Advertising Standards Bureau and Sane Australia regarding pizza advertising that they believed was offensive and that the use of the word maniac was adding to the stigma of mental illness. A stigma is a type of branding and a sign of shame and disgrace, which leads to discrimination. We know that there is a long history of stigma attached with and associated with mental illness and a history of misunderstanding, confusion, mystery and discrimination. People are less aware of how
people with a mental illness are discriminated against in comparison to other forms of discrimination. Indeed, the Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 does not legislate against vilification of a person with a mental illness. Sometimes it is obvious and at other times it is not so obvious. Mental illness can be a hidden disability in that it is not visible to the human eye when we look at a person. The discrimination may be hidden even though it is insidiously embedded in our society. The discrimination may be a form of prejudice that is hard to define and might be difficult for those people not affected by mental illness to appreciate that it occurs, how it occurs and how it is experienced. There is one thing that is certain, the stigma of mental illness is real and impacts on the lives of people with a mental illness. It can be painful and result in on going hurt. It also prevents people acknowledging and accepting the onset or presence of a mental illness and discourages early help seeking, thereby prolonging the duration and severity of an acute episode.

One in four / five adults in Australia experience a mental health issue. Many of these people don’t want to be labelled as “crazy” or “mentally ill”. People with a mental illness are often portrayed in the media as being manic or violent or people that are calm one minute and go into wild outbursts the next minute (split personalities). People with a mental illness may also be viewed as brain damaged, intellectually impaired, disabled, unimportant, worthless and untrustworthy. These are inaccurate portrayals and add to the fears people have of people with a mental illness and add to exacerbate the thoughts people with a mental illness have of themselves. When you are fed these stereotypes for long enough you may internalise them. This can happen for people with a mental illness. People with a mental illness often become vulnerable and experience forms of rejection and dismissal. The media needs to be accountable and portray people with a mental illness accurately, not adding to the stereotypes by inaccurate portrayals.

Far too often language is used to perpetuate stereotypes rather than to challenge and change stereotypes. At times words act like poison. Programs, training and websites that specifically explore issues around mental illness encourage people not to use generic labels such as retarded or the mentally ill, or terms like crazy, lunatic, manic, schitzo, depressive or slow functioning.iii The Mental Health Promotion Committee, Consumer Advisory Group and the Bidgerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service asserted that the term maniac also sits within the list of terms that should not be used.

**The Response**

In responding to the concerns on behalf of people in our community, the pizza company (in writing to Sane Australia) explained their advertising

Seeks to show the humorous behaviour of three young friends as they wait excitedly for their pizza to arrive. They are filming their fun experiences of each other on a handicam that becomes the main vehicle of the commercials. They are lovers, zealots and advocates of (pizza company name) new pizzas and as such, within a thesaurus definition, can be described as “maniacs” in that their behaviour reflects a maniacal element.

In stating the above they also make the point that they do not believe they breached the AANA Code of Ethics. The representative from the pizza company states that the pizza company does not “deliberately go out of our way to offend or alienate our customers”. Furthermore, the Advertising Standards Bureau, in their response regarding the complaint state, “A card, leaflet, pamphlet or other material (such as the pizza flyer) is not considered an advertisement for the purposes of the advertising self-regulation system, and we are
unable to assist you in this regard". They also explain that they have passed our complaint to a researcher at the Sunshine Coast University who is undertaking research regarding community attitudes and concepts about advertising. We add at this time that no consent was obtained for the complaint letter to go anywhere other than be dealt with by the Australian Standards Bureau. There is an ethics issue here with regards to the process and the research being undertaken by the Sunshine Coast University.

Ending Stigma
Stigma is about disrespect. Stigma can affect you whether you have or don't have a mental illness. It might not affect you directly. It might affect someone you know. Stigma is reinforced through the continued myths and stereotypes such as the use of the word and concept of maniac as expressed by this particular pizza company. If only this pizza company could see the effect that stigma has on the lives of individuals with mental illness and on their families and carers, maybe then they might choose not to use the words they do in their advertising. Maybe then they might consider that their words are offending and have alienated what are now past customers.

We all have a responsibility to reduce the stigma that people with a mental illness face. We all have a responsibility to treat people with the dignity and respect and that they deserve. This includes whether we eat or sell pizza. Remember people with a mental illness may include your family members, friends, neighbours and people in your community. It may also include you now or in the future.

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1 At the time this advocacy action took place, Bronwyn Fredericks was the Chairperson of the Bidgerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service Central Queensland Region, Rockhampton; Chairperson of the Rockhampton District Indigenous Health Forum; and Chairperson of the Central Highlands Primary Health Care Access Planning Committee.

2 The Rockhampton Mental Health Promotion Committee includes representatives from Mental Health Services - Queensland Health, Carers Queensland, Capricornia GP Division, Central Queensland University, ARAFNI and the Rockhampton Consumer Advisory Group.

3 www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/OEL99-0004, 13/11/05