

# DEFINING BRAND SAFETY

A report commissioned by the Trustworthy Accountability Group  
and Brand Safety Institute





## Introduction

Brand Safety is a term that has exploded over the last few years in its use, and misuse, to describe topics in digital advertising. In various industry meetings, articles and opinion pieces, Brand Safety has been used to describe everything from ad fraud, viewability, user experience, and adjacency or placement in contextually appropriate environments. While these appear to be mostly B2B related issues in the digital advertising supply chain, one agency executive interviewed depicted the challenge:

*“The problem with brand safety is it’s a consumer issue. And so it touches on a lot ... strikes a lot more chords with our Brands, with our clients, and goes to their trust in the industry, their trust in our ability to find the right places for them. It erodes the trust, when violated, between the CMOs, to the media director who’s responsible for placing those dollars. It erodes the CEO trust that in the CMOs are making good decisions. It erodes the board of directors trust in a CEO to be able to make the decisions if their brand is on the cover of the Wall Street Journal.”*

While general industry references to Brand Safety as a term describe it as the protection of Marketers’ brands, Publishers have claimed their brands are also at risk to inadequate controls of the advertising supply chain. This big tent description of the who and what of

Brand Safety has caused confusion amongst many supply chain parties and in some cases has contributed to seismic marketing budget shifts in the name of transparency. In this, our first paper in a series on the evolving field of Brand Safety, we will seek to create a common definition for the term Brand Safety and point to the next phases of research and discussion that will follow over the rest of the series.

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### Key Takeaways

- Adoption of industry best practices around supply chain issues, including those offered by the MRC, IAB, and TAG;
- Creating a new position of “Brand Safety Officer” dedicated to addressing these challenges;
- Ensuring that the internal brand safety lead at every company has the education, training, and resources necessary to fulfill their responsibilities.

## Methodology

In order to create a clear definition of Brand Safety, we developed a methodology for understanding how different parties define Brand Safety and how we can help educate the industry and promote better and more consistent marketplace execution. To this end, we interviewed more than 20 company executives operating in the digital advertising supply chain including Marketers, Agency Buyers, Intermediary Platforms and Content Publishers. In these interviews we:

- Asked very broad questions relating to how companies define Brand Safety,
- Requested detail on how they execute Brand Safety actions and activities,
- Asked interview subjects to rate keywords used in the market for their relevance to the overall concept of Brand Safety
  - » Example: *Adjacency to content* as a phrase on a scale of 1-5, 5 being high or very much, is *adjacency to content* linked to Brand Safety. We then grouped the keywords into categories and those categories revealed a Net Score of Brand Safety on a scale of 1-5.
- Asked for a description of how each company executes Brand Safety and asked who is responsible for Brand Safety.

The results of these interviews allowed us to narrow the definition of Brand Safety, discover newly used descriptions in the market, isolate execution issues around Brand Safety, and understand how various companies in the digital advertising supply chain view their responsibility with regards to the safety a Marketer's brand executed via digital advertising.

## Definitions

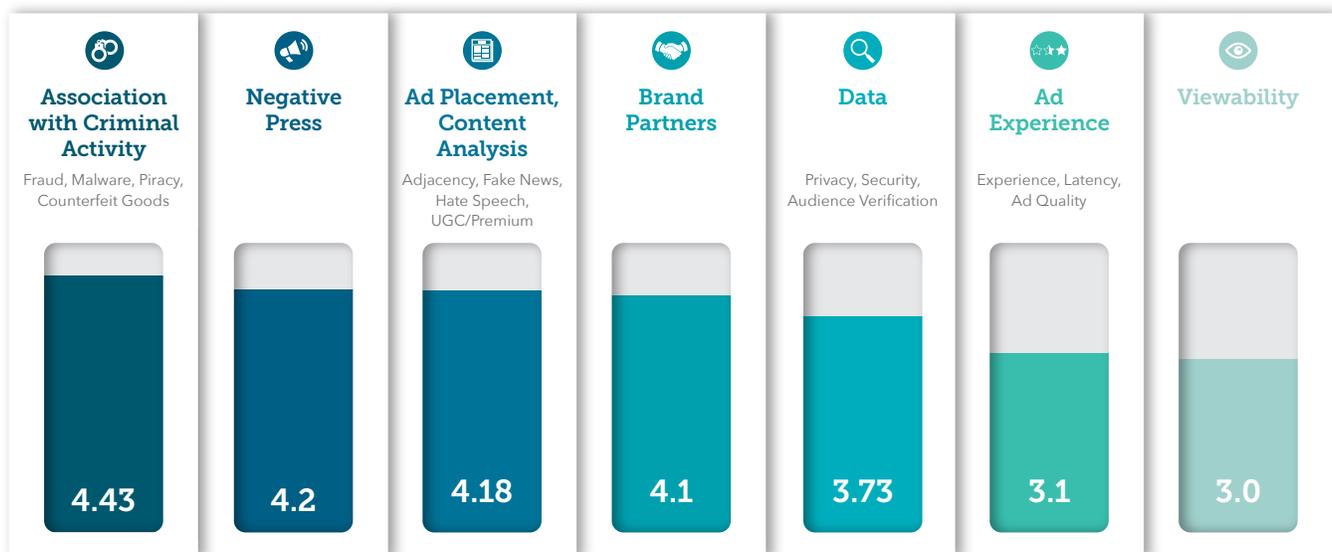
As we look to define terms including Brand Safety itself, notable trends among respondents emerged to help solidify our definitions.

- Brand Safety is reputational and about consumer perception of a Marketer's brands.
- Nearly all respondents interviewed use Brand Safety to define the safety of a Marketer's brand with the exception of Publishers and a handful of sell side platforms who also include the Publisher's brand in the definition.
- In the majority of our interviews we heard Brand Safety narrowly defined as how brands safely execute campaigns with adjacency to inappropriate content in mind.
- Brand Safety is different than Brand ROI, but ROI has a dependency on Brand Safety as it relates to a Brand's reputation and potential harm to goods and services sold to consumers.
  - » For example, digital advertising delivered to Invalid Traffic is considered advertising waste therefore impacting cost controls as it relates to ROI. However, a Brand's digital advertising when shown to be supporting ad fraud can negatively impact consumer behavior therefore influencing top line revenue and the Brand's profile.
- Marketers (and some Buyers) bundle Brand ROI issues and Brand Safety issues under Brand Safety. This bundling of the nomenclature has caused confusion around definitions and diminished trust in execution of advertising spend by third parties.
- Brand Safety is a component of a larger effort to control ad placement that a few digital advertising Buyers and many Sellers are now starting to label as Brand Suitability.

These points of view allowed us to shape a concise definition of Brand Safety.

**Brand Safety defined:** The term "Brand Safety" describes the controls that companies in the digital advertising supply chain employ to protect brands against negative impacts to the brand's consumer reputation associated with specific types of content, criminal activity, and/or related loss of return on investment.

In support of this definition, we ranked the words most commonly associated with the term Brand Safety and assigned them categorical buckets where appropriate. For example, we know that Piracy, Fraud, and Malware are examples of criminal activity. A full list of keywords and their rankings can be found in exhibit A.



Some industry terms associated with Brand Safety are subjective. For example, those interviewed correlated *adjacency to content* highly with the field of Brand Safety. Contextual targeting practices aligning to types of content with ads adjacent is perceived to sponsor that content can be viewed negatively by the consumer of that content. Therefore content that is more violent or for more mature audience carries a risk for many brands. Ironically, marketers and buyers interviewed understand that this type of placement might lead to better conversion results. However, the potential reputational damage to the Brand caused by associating with some content might also lead to devaluation of the brand in the long term.

Those interviewed often described the variance in the definition of Brand Safety and how it is referred to throughout the supply chain as a result of lack of definition and education on a brand's desired risk profile. Often a buyer or intermediary discusses Brand Safety with a marketer client including ROI and waste as part of the conversation. This has given rise to the term describing Brand Safety and ROI together: **Brand Suitability**.

**Brand Suitability** is used to describe a marketer's desired targeting parameters on variables that are subjective such as content adjacency (Brand Safe), viewability (ROI)

and others. Brands have varying degrees of tolerance for content types, audience demographics, viewability percentages if data is captured. A package offered to a Brand is *suitable* based on the Brand's tolerance in these areas and others.

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The challenge to meet these *suitable* and *safe* environments according to our interviews is that the execution is heavy on tools, light on understanding and knowledge. To marketers and buyers interviewed, Brand Safety execution issues have significantly contributed to the in-housing movement that has seen marketers bringing more buying services in to their organizations. While Brand Safety and Transparency were commingled as terms relating to in-housing, they are not considered the same by the majority of companies in our interviews as it relates to Brand Safety.



## Challenges and Next Steps

This paper set out to define Brand Safety in the market and contribute common terminology that aligns to Brand Safety by interviewing over 20 top companies operating in the digital advertising supply chain. **Brand Safety is defined as the controls that companies in the digital advertising supply chain employ to protect brands against negative impacts to the brand's consumer reputation associated with specific types of content, criminal activity, and/or related loss of return on investment.**

This definition and the drive to a more Brand Safe digital advertising supply chain has already driven some action within the industry with more to come.

**Safer Targeting.** The Media Ratings Council has begun to issue technical guidance with the recently released addendum to the 2012 Ad Verification Guidelines with deeper contextual interrogation of content to ensure safer targeting of ad adjacency, a part of the Brand Safety equation as we have defined. This at a minimum will start to standardize the tools used by practitioners of media buying. Additionally, marketers have begun to assign the role of "Brand Safety Officer" or identified a role to help close the skills gap. However, we found execution challenges abound, primarily but not exclusively a result of lack of education and knowledge to execute a brands reputation safely across the defined areas.

**Brand Safety Officers.** Since many Brand Safety challenges are based on risk tolerance, the first recommendation is for every marketer to identify a Brand Safety Officer or a individual executive with a remit to pursue quality control processes around the definition outlined. Additionally, the industry needs better identification of individuals and certification of these skills to ensure their qualifications is critical. Marketers and buyers must have the appropriate skills but also have a benchmark to hire personnel and grow the future skills and talent executing Brand Safety.

With a definition of Brand Safety in place, future white papers in this series will focus on better understanding the current state of the practice of Brand Safety across the various nodes in the Digital Advertising Supply Chain including roles and responsibilities, education and certification, and what department or departments have responsibility for Brand Safety throughout the supply chain.





## About The Author

Scott Cunningham, is owner of Cunningham.Tech Consulting and is Founder of the IAB Tech Lab. He has worked with TAG since its inception in 2014 and was author of the IAB's LEAN principles around User Experience in digital advertising and publishing. His publishing and technology experience expands over 20 years prior to his industry work. He can be reached at [scott@cunningham.tech](mailto:scott@cunningham.tech). [www.cunningham.tech](http://www.cunningham.tech)

Special recognition goes to Neal Thurman, Co-Founder, BSI, who contributed to the paper. Mr. Thurman brings significant experience in the digital advertising supply chain from leadership roles working with the McGraw-Hill Companies, Vox Media, and NBC Sports Digital as well as having served as the Managing Director of the digital agency MediaSphere.

## About the Trustworthy Accountability Group

The Trustworthy Accountability Group (TAG) is the leading global certification program fighting criminal activity and increasing trust in the digital advertising industry. Created by the industry's top trade organizations, TAG's mission is to eliminate fraudulent traffic, combat malware, prevent Internet piracy, and promote greater transparency in digital advertising. TAG advances those initiatives by bringing companies across the digital advertising supply chain together to set the highest standards. TAG is the first and only registered Information Sharing and Analysis Organization (ISAO) for the digital advertising industry. For more information on TAG, please visit [tagtoday.net](http://tagtoday.net).



## About the Brand Safety Institute

The Brand Safety Institute was founded to support education on and the practice of Brand Safety in the Digital Advertising Supply Chain. Through a program of research, education, and certification BSI offers knowledge, tools, best practices, and a community of peers to the individuals charged with championing the cause of Brand Safety.



## Appendix A

*These terms were used with the short descriptions with interview subjects to rank their association with Brand Safety.*

**Ad Blocking** - A process by consumers of content or services that uses software to block digital advertising. 1.7

**Adjacency to Unsafe Content/Misplacement** - Advertising appearing next to or in front of content the marketer deems not appropriate for their brand. 4.8

**Ad Quality** - General makeup of the ad itself: size, duration, in ad content, audio on are examples. 3

**Ad Experience** - Overall Ad Experience on a page; percentage of ads versus content. 3.4

**Audience Verification** - Verifying of ads targeted to right audiences for example home buyers, geo targeting, etc. 3.2

**Brand Partners** - B2B companies hired to work with a marketer or publisher to execute digital advertising. 4.1

**Consumer Privacy** - Advertising that uses consumer data that is deemed too personal. 3.8

**Counterfeit Goods & Services** - Advertising delivered to digital websites or apps that support illegal Counterfeit Goods & Services. 4.8

**Data Protection** - Data Protection is consumer data protected from unauthorized access by unauthorized parties. 4.2

**Fake News, Bad News, Hate Speech, Divisive Politics, Sensitive topics** - Terms used to describe types of content that have potential brand risk. 4.5

**Ad Fraud** - Fraudulently representing online advertisement impressions, clicks, conversion or data events in order to generate revenue, with a focus on non-human traffic. 3.9

**Inventory Quality Content** - Inventory quality in this context follows the inventory quality guidelines of content based targeting distinguished for example by user generated content versus premium content. 4.2

**Latency** - Latency is used to describe the consumer experience of a website or application being slow, often times the result of poor ad creation or delivery. 2.6

**Malware/Malvertising** - Two unique attack scenarios either by webpage/destination or compromised advertising campaign. 4.3

**Negative Press** - Trade or mainstream articles that are directly or indirectly associated with a marketer brand. 4.2

**Piracy** - Advertising delivered to websites or applications that publish pirated, stolen content. 4.8

**Political Advertising** - Advertising from a candidate or issue that could be considered sensitive for a brand to be associated with via a publisher allowing via adjacency. 3.1

**Revenue Reclamation** - The process a publisher takes that uses software to bypass a consumers ad blocker and show advertising thereby reclaiming potential lost revenue. 2.4

**Viewability** - Percentage and duration of advertising viewed by consumers as defined by the Media Ratings Council. 3