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THE IAB EUROPE GUIDE TO BRAND SAFETY AND SUITABILITY

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Introduction

In December 2019, IAB Europe' Brand Advertising Committee conducted an industry poll to ascertain how brand safety was tackled in 2019 and understand what needs to happen in 2020 to ensure brand-safe environments in digital advertising. 90 senior European leaders from across the digital advertising ecosystem gave their opinions.

The results revealed that brand safety and privacy remained important, with 77% of respondents saying that brand safety was their key priority. 57% of respondents agreed that brand safety was top of mind to a greater degree than in the previous year, citing increased understanding and knowledge of brand safety by advertisers. Brands are asking more questions than ever about where their ads are running and are becoming more conscious and stringent in their media plans, highlighting the importance that the industry enables brand-safe environments. A common theme within the poll was the ongoing need for industry education, with wider discussion about definitions, solutions and differences.

At the beginning of 2020, IAB Europe's Brand Advertising Committee formed a new taskforce called The Quality & Transparency Task Force. The aim of the taskforce is to combat stakeholder quality and transparency concerns and address the challenges that the industry is facing in order to fuel consumer trust and brand investment in the digital advertising and marketing ecosystem. Following on from IAB Europe's research on brand safety and the need for more education and guidance, the taskforce agreed that their first priority was to address the need for harmonised pan-European brand safety and brand suitability definitions.

Members of The Quality & Transparency Task Force include publishers, agencies, advertising verification companies, technology partners and national IABs. As a group they have reviewed existing brand safety and brand suitability criteria to establish clear and concise definitions that can be used at a European level. The aim of this guide is to share background context on brand safety in Europe, the agreed definitions with accompanying key considerations, best practices and case studies to help educate all stakeholders on ensuring brand safe environments. With the introduction of brand suitability in the last couple of years, the guide will also provide an overview of how this can complement and enhance brand safety tools to ensure a more relevant content environment for brands.

Section 1 - Definitions

IAB Europe's Quality & Transparency Task Force has agreed on the following European level definitions for brand safety and brand suitability:

Brand Safety	Brand Safety describes the practices and tools that are put in place to ensure that a digital advertising campaign will not appear next to any content that is illegal (e.g. drug related content) or dangerous (e.g. pornogrphy or violence). It should be applied to every campaign to protect a brand's reputation and not fund any illegal or dangerous content providers. *The categories defined by the Brand Safety Floor Framework, initially drafted by the 4As and now supported by the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM), are applicable here.*
Brand Suitability	Brand Suitability describes the practices and tools that are put in place in addition to brand safety controls to ensure that a digital advertising campaign appears against content that is deemed relevant and appropriate for the brand. *It equally refers to the ability of a brand to choose the risk profile suitable to their brand.- low, medium or high risk. The scale was, as well, developed by the 4As and endorsed by GARM.*

Section 2- Background Context

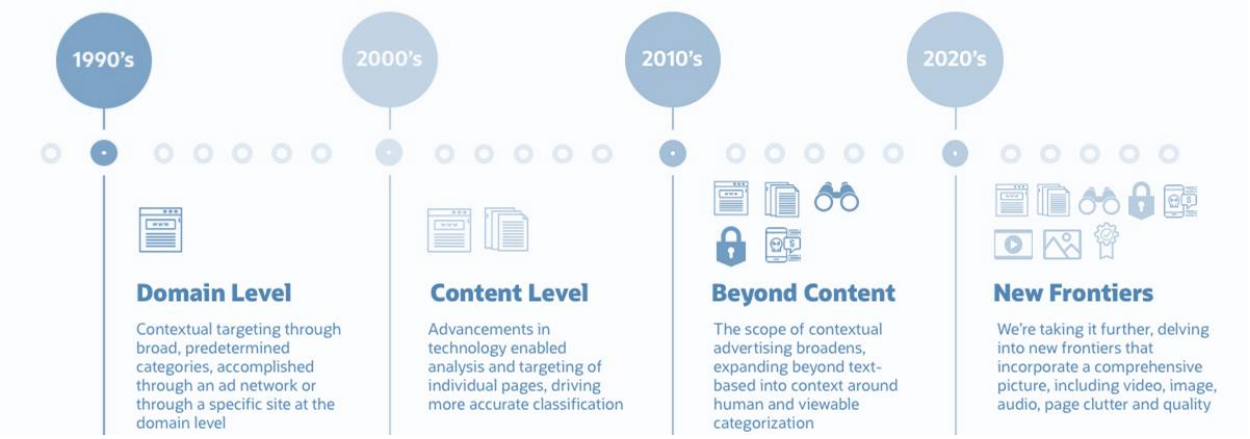
Brand safety came under the spotlight in 2017, when numerous high-profile incidents occurred involving ads from major brands showing up next to unsuitable content. Marketers were made acutely aware of the negative impact of passive brand safety strategies on brand equity and reputation. The enormous risk and ensuing cost, both in revenue and brand image, were finally appreciated across the supply chain. Since then, brand safety has become a common discussion as a top priority among marketers and publishers.

Today, the modern marketer is equipped with a variety of solutions for brand safety and content verification. But take a quick look back at the last three decades and you'll see a progression, from rudimentary to sophisticated, that details the development of one of our industry's most useful tools.

Brand safety isn't a new concept, although it has come a long way over the past 30 years. When the first banner ads appeared on the internet in the early 1990s, brands had simple controls over where to align themselves online, which were limited to domain level targeting and exclusions. This simple domain-level categorisation seen in the 1990s progressed into page-level content analysis in the early 2000s.

Fairly quickly, this version of brand safety evolved to keyword blocking and URL exclusions, two heavy-handed approaches that rely on blocking ads from appearing alongside content that includes specific terms. What has become increasingly apparent is that those blunt tactics don't offer the flexibility of customisation and control that savvy marketers need to safely advertise in today's programmatic market.

Contextual Advertising Over the Decades *(Source: Oracle Data Cloud)*

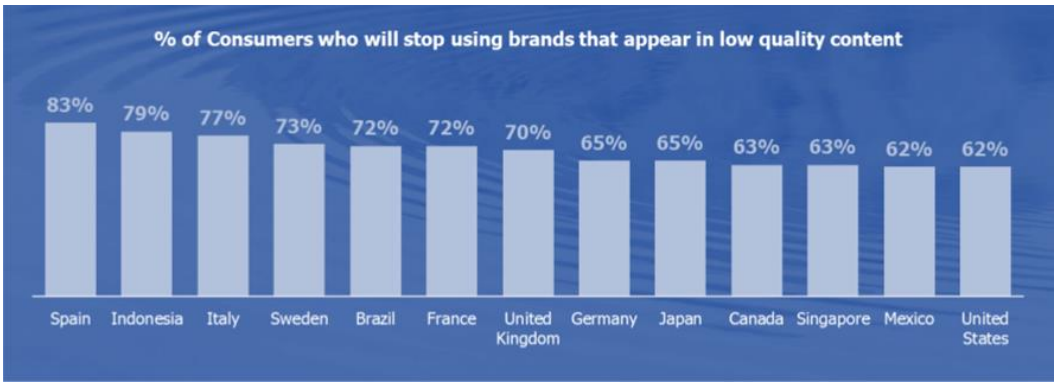


Today, the pitfalls of naively blocking specific keywords or entire domains are glaring. The main problem with avoidance/exclusions based on exact-matching keywords is that it misses one vital ingredient—context. Context is critical when defining suitable inventory versus isolating damaging content. Research has shown that 90% of brands intend to increase their budgets for contextual targeting in 2020 and that 99% of brands would like to see more customised technology to ensure their advertising appears in the right environment (Theorem Research, May 2019; CHEQ and Digiday: Why Advertisers Turn Off Brand Safety Controls Report, Jun 2019). The great news is that technology is already evolving: today not only page text, but video, image, audio and page quality can all be categorised to provide the context of a piece of content.

In parallel to this evolution, the longstanding alternative to contextual targeting - audience buying - has confronted increasingly significant headwinds in recent years, especially following the implementation of privacy protection legislation such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018 and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in 2020. These regulations, alongside others under consideration, have led to some business reorientations designed to reduce 100% reliance on audience targeting and include more contextual targeting in media plans.

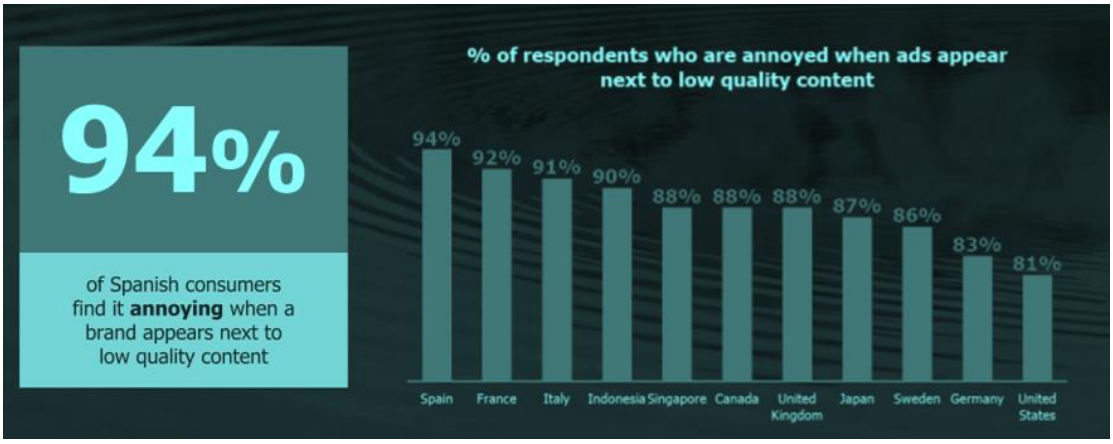
Finally, the unprecedented events of 2020, from a global pandemic to international protest movements, have thrust brand safety into the spotlight yet again. As the digital advertising industry grapples with economic uncertainty, publishers and advertisers must simultaneously wrestle with the challenges of a news cycle that's dominated by complex, evolving topics whose suitability for marketing placement is highly variant by brand, publisher, and editorial tone.

Consumers care too, according to research from Integral Ad Science, a large number of consumers will stop using a brand's products if their ads are found near unsafe content.



Source: Integral Ad Science Ripple Effect Study, April 2020

Placing ads in low quality environments also has consequences; 94% of Spanish consumers find it annoying when a brand appears next to low quality content according to the same research from IAS.



Source: Integral Ad Science Ripple Effect Study, March 2020

The introduction of Brand Suitability

Born from brand safety but significantly evolved, brand suitability is the answer to many of today's toughest brand stewardship questions. Where traditional brand safety tools relied on cookie-cutter approaches to avoid unsafe or inappropriate content, brand suitability is more nuanced and attuned to individual brand risk sensitivities.

Brand suitability identifies the advertising environments that will help digital campaigns drive outcomes for the business and uses individual brand profiles, market research insights, and strategic positioning to find and target specific environments for advertising, using a customised approach. Brand suitability is at the core of a brand's values; it's critical that a brand's ads not appear in the context of/or adjacent to unsuitable content. Eighty-two percent of marketers say appearing next to unsuitable content impacts a brand's reputation, and one in four brands and agencies have experienced negative press due to brand suitability incidents, according to eMarketer.

These incidents can have a real and lasting impact on consumers attitudes and purchase behaviours. A Harris poll found 87% of consumers feel that it is the brand's responsibility to ensure their ads are appearing in brand safe environments, and two-thirds of consumers say they would likely abandon a brand they see in questionable content.

But outside of clearly inappropriate content, such as hate speech, most content is neither all good nor all bad. Brand suitability is unique to each brand. Nevertheless, we should not forget that while suitability is the new game in town, brand safety is an absolute basis which we should all be upholding day in, day out. Brand safety should be applied to every digital advertising campaign. Brand suitability is an important, additional layer.

Brand Suitability and COVID-19

Advertisers want their messages seen by receptive audiences who have a positive contextual association. And along the way, their work can help fund reputable news organisations and publishers. It's doubtful that any advertisers' goal is to penalise media organisations for covering current events and providing essential content to their audiences. While there will always be high-risk content that's not suitable for all advertisers, a blanket, keyword-centric approach is not the answer.

Brand suitability can help bridge that divide. It provides rigorous context-based protections for advertisers from appearing near unsafe, illegal, or inappropriate content, whilst green-lighting significant inventory that is safe and best-suited to the brand. Shifting to a brand suitability approach enables advertisers to confidently navigate the online news cycle. And, importantly, it helps publishers fully monetise their inventory, so the health of the advertising, news, and media industries is maintained well into the future.

In the midst of the evolving coronavirus pandemic, the advertising industry continues to seek guidance on how to best navigate these unprecedented circumstances. Research from Integral Ad Science highlights that advertising alongside positive headlines generates the most favourable response from consumers; consumers in the UK would be 2.5x more favourable towards a brand and consumers in Germany 2.4x more favourable.

Section 3 – Key Considerations

3.1 Tailoring Your Brand Safety Strategy

Brands invest a significant amount of time creating an image, cultivating consumer perception and fostering associations. Therefore, it's very important to ensure digital messages appear in suitable environments, not solely to avoid risk, but also to effectively reach the right consumers.

All brands are unique and their definition of suitability is driven by their values and goals. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to brand suitability, and using blunt instruments such as avoiding or blocking all news or certain sites may not be appropriate and can lead to missed opportunities. For example, the content on Cosmopolitan might be perfect to reach makeup buyers, but it might be inappropriate for family-friendly brands. Brand suitability allows brands to have the confidence and flexibility to run on nuanced content.

Here are three tips on how to employ a multi-layered approach, with customisation and comprehensive protection:

1. Set your base protection

To ensure your reputation is undamaged, ensure that you avoid the 11 evil categories of the Brand Safety Floor. This should be an absolute baseline.

2. Risk calibration

Having avoided the content falling under the Brand Safety Floor, brands need to define what level of risk each of these have. Start with your brand values, to determine your risk tolerance, then set your brand suitability settings to balance campaign goals with the brand's risk tolerance. As the industry is moving towards the standardisation of suitability tiers: low, medium or high this task is made easier. This brand risk generally involves specific types of content covered by standard content categories and site inclusions. Some may be high, some low - this level of risk will be different for all brands. Consider the potential impact on scale.

3. Customise with context

For an additional layer of customisation, brands should consider the specific nuances around context and sentiment - this can be used for both negative and positive targeting. For more granular content adjacency control, brands can upgrade keyword URL blocking to page-level analysis that takes into account context, semantics, sentiment, and emotion of the content.

4. Invest in quality

There is no industry-established measure of quality. However, you can work with your partners to understand how brand suitability, viewability, fraud and user experience correlate and indicate quality. Experience from across the board shows that quality is a proxy for low brand safety risk and good suitability, high viewability and low fraud. Depending on the type of campaign you decide to run, the first thing on your check-list should be: investing in quality.

3.2 Buying Models

When approaching brand safety and suitability, buyers should consider that different inventory and buying models offer different levels of knowledge and control over the contextual environments where ads will be displayed.

There is a diminishing scale of insight when moving from single to aggregated inventory sources and from direct to indirect buying models. For example, consider a direct buy with a publisher who owns all content creation and exercises full editorial control and compare this to buying on the open exchange across several inventory aggregators, which include non-curated and user generated content.

For programmatic buys, pre-bid technology is utilised to minimise impression waste and to ensure that buyers do not bid on impressions that will eventually end up failing due to brand safety concerns. Pre-bid targeting segments are integrated within all major Demand Side Platforms (DSP), allowing brands to target only safe impressions before ever placing a bid.

3.3 Device Types and Environments

Brand risk is measured differently depending on the device and the environment. Display ads, for example, use the same measurement methodology on desktop as on mobile web with certain nuances considered. In-app ads however, are handled differently.

1. Mobile in-app

As consumers are spending more time on their mobile devices, in-app has become a key focus for campaign planning. With eight in 10 mobile display ads being traded programmatically, it is imperative that advertisers leverage targeting tools that are built specifically for mobile in-app environments.

Programmatic in-app environments, while slightly more brand safe than desktop environments, produce significant challenges for brands. This is mainly due to a lack of reporting and optimisation tools across the industry.

That said, when in-app pre-bid targeting or automation is applied to programmatic environments, brands can virtually eliminate brand safety violations.

2. Video
Video advertising is rapidly growing across all devices and for good reason: it continues to be the most impactful medium for reaching consumers. Despite witnessing growth across the board, video is still causing a challenge for advertisers in terms of measurement due to the mix of devices and environments used when video is consumed.

3. Social
The proliferation of user-generated content and sharing of risky content on social media can pose a significant challenge for a brand. Understanding the content you want your brand to be aligned to is absolutely critical. No matter how sophisticated brand safety solutions become, you will need to understand what are the suitable environments and the audiences you want to target.

3.4 Choosing a Brand Safety Verification Partner

With a variety of brand safety partners available today, all with different offerings and capabilities, it is important to pick the right partner for you and your brand. Ultimately, you need a partner that will enable you to meet your business needs.

Brand safety partner checklist:

- ✓ Is this a global partner, with multi-language capabilities?
- ✓ What kind of certifications does this partner have (e.g. MRC, JICWEBS) and for what environments?
- ✓ Has this partner adopted the Brand Safety & Suitability Framework and do they support Tier 1 or 2 contextual categories?
- ✓ Is their solution and technology that is scalable, and able to work with billions of impressions?
- ✓ Does this partner understand my business needs and challenges?
- ✓ Do they have pre-bid targeting segments integrated within major DSPs?
- ✓ Can they measure across all devices, formats, and environments?
- ✓ Do they provide page-level protection?
- ✓ Can their technology block impressions from appearing?
- ✓ Do they remove fraud from their brand safety reporting?
- ✓ Does this partner allow for verification and enable it for every buy?
- ✓ Is this partner working with an industry association?

Section 4 – Best Practices

Start off by considering the following:

- Apply your brand values to understand and establish clear brand suitability guidelines.
- Constantly ask key questions such as, “Is there content that only our brand would want to avoid?”
- Leverage and recognise the purpose of each tool to refine strategy.
- Don't avoid news. Instead, work with trusted news sources containing content that aligns with the brand’s values.
- Work closely and communicate with verification providers that will support unique suitability preferences.

Domain and Keyword lists for editorial control

Keywords have been a helpful proxy for avoiding content that is not in line with a brand’s values. This is an effective tool for blocking content in real-time, but it doesn’t take into account whether the environment is actually right or wrong for your brand.

Here are some best practices when using keyword blocking:

- Keywords
    - Start with a concise set of keywords deemed unsuitable for your brand to appear alongside
    - Use keyword pairs where possible to add additional context and avoid nondescript or ambiguous words on your keyword lists
    - Review whether these keywords are appropriate to the level of brand safety in place and only address the types of content to be avoided
- Customise for brand specific requirements, for example to address known negative PR topics
- Ask, “would blocking this keyword prevent my ad from also appearing alongside safe content?”, and adjust accordingly
- Do not use a one-size-fits-all and all-risk encompassing list
- Do not adopt a past and potentially out of date list
- If using a domain or keyword list for editorial control, review and refresh these lists often, at least once a month; ensuring clear ownership of changes
- If used to address a public crisis or negative PR issue, ensure these specific terms are part of the review cadence
- Understand the trade offs across scale, reach, cost and quality of using excessive lists and the risk of blocking safe content

Steps to protect brand image and reputation

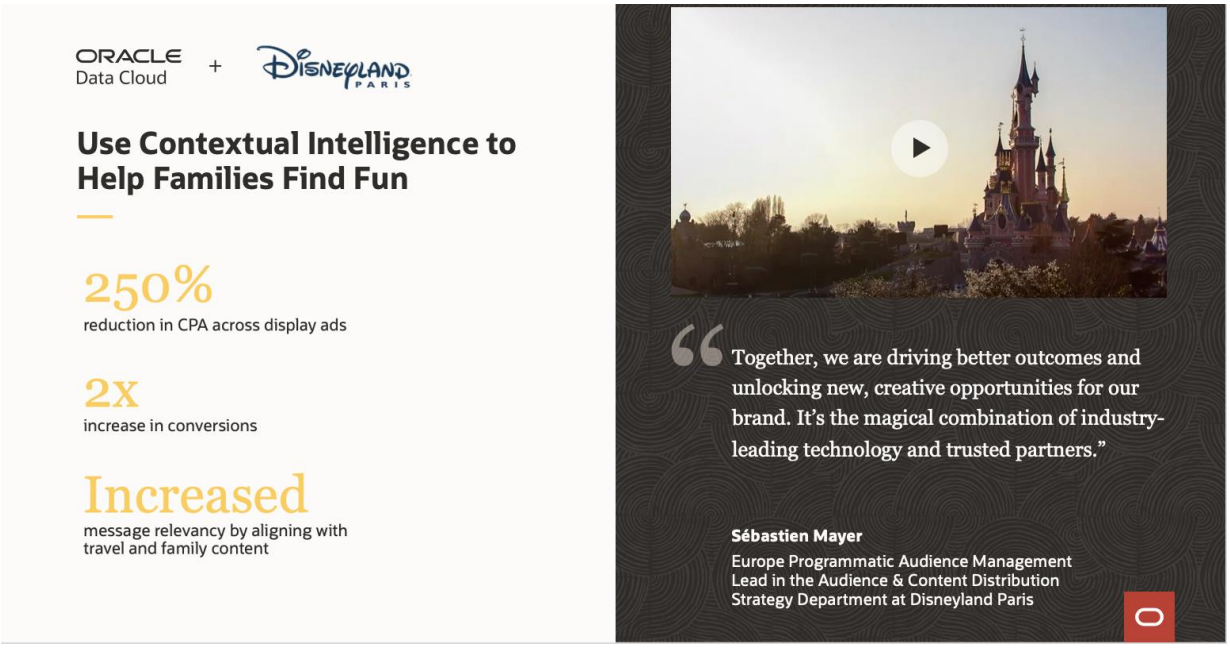
Here are some easy-to-implement best practices that can help protect your brand's reputation when advertising online.

- Risk thresholds differ amongst brands and can change. Define, customise and revisit them often.
- Prepare for a crisis by partnering with your communications team and verification partners to prevent this from happening. Create a plan in case the worst does happen.
- Be honest with your partners and publishers – make your expectations clear from the start and keep an open dialogue throughout your partnership.
- Ensure your programmatic buys are protected with pre-bid targeting, to avoid appearing adjacent to risky content.
- Keep track of industry benchmarks to ensure you're performing at your best.
- Stay informed. Know your partners, their capabilities and how they can help you achieve your campaign goals.
- Don't just set it and forget it. Keep your exclusion list and keyword lists up to date and review them regularly.

Section 5 – Case Studies

Disneyland Paris

Disneyland Paris adopted a brand suitable approach by specifically aligning their brand with travel and family content, whilst also applying curated custom brand safety segments to protect Disney from brand-unsuitable content and environments. This resulted in a 250% reduction in CPA across their campaigns and a 2x increase in conversions.



Vice Media

Vice analysed 18 months of Vice keyword blocklisting data and found that LGBTQIA, politicized, heritage, and race terms within their content were often flagged as unsafe, and in some instances were flagged more than terms like 'rape' and 'death.' They decided that this blunt force approach to brand safety was actually more harmful to brands and to the future of inclusive and diverse youth experience and so took it upon themselves to adopt a brand suitable approach.

They worked closely with their contextual targeting provider and developed the first contextual brand safety solution for video, giving brands the control to take a custom approach and assess if the content of a Vice video is suitable for the brand.

Mondelez

VaynerMedia North America, on behalf of Mondelez, recorded post-bid block rates of 11% from 7/1/2018 to 12/31/2018, with over 275 million impressions blocked on DV360 (DBM). More than 2/3 of these blocks were due to stringent post-bid brand safety settings. There was a need to increase efficiency while maintaining the Mondelez brand safety standards. As a result of implementing the DoubleVerify pre-bid brand safety and fraud avoidance segments, block rates were reduced to the 4% range by March 2019, minimising the impact of blocking on scale while ensuring brand protection. Find out more here.

Summary

Harmonised and common definitions are essential to ensure all stakeholders are on the same page and business can be done efficiently. The contributors to the Guide have developed clear and concise definitions for brand safety and brand suitability to align the industry across Europe.

The Guide highlights that brand suitability has been born out of evolving and increasingly sophisticated brand safety strategies. There are a number of key considerations and best practices for both areas summarised in the Guide. Advertisers have been quick to make adjustments, but it's important to remember that brand suitability requires a nuanced, strategic approach.

One thing is certain: brand safety and suitability will continue to dominate the CMO conversations. As the 2019 IAB Europe Brand Safety poll indicated, more than 75% respondents said that they agreed that brand safety was a more of a priority this year than in 2019.

Issues such as fake news and their more deceiving sister - deepfakes will continue to be our challenge. What we are seeing in programmatic display and video campaigns, we will experience in CTV, gaming, audio and other newly digitised channels. Industry cooperation must play a decisive role in addressing these old and new challenges to ensure a sustainable future for digital advertising and marketing. However, the industry continues to work hard to mitigate any risks and raise standards and expectations within brand safety. IAB Europe's Quality Initiatives Navigator provides an overview of the national initiatives demonstrating the vast amount of work being undertaken in Europe and beyond to build and ensure a sustainable future for digital advertising and marketing.

Finally, it is worth noting that addressing the brand safety challenge is not a task for any one stakeholder alone, be it an advertiser, an agency or a verification technology provider. It requires common effort and sound cooperation between all parties involved: publishers, advertisers, technology providers, agencies and others.

The work has long started and we invite you to acquaint yourself with global initiatives such as the WFA Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) or Trustworthy Accountability Group, national ones such as JICWEBS (UK), Digital Ad Trust (France) or Digital Trust Initiative (Germany). At a European level, stakeholders are invited to join IAB Europe's Brand Advertising Committee.

Contributors

IAB Europe would like to thank the following contributors who helped to author this Guide

Tanzil Bukhari, Managing Director EMEA, DoubleVerify

Stevan Randjelovic, Director, Brand Safety & Digital Risk EMEA, GroupM

Karim Attia, Ambassador, BVDW / IAB Germany

Myriam Hamied, Communications & Program Manager, IAB France

Giordano Buttazzo, Ad Tech Manager, IAB Italy

Małgorzata Walendziewska, Special Programs Manager, IAB Poland

Craig Ziegler, VP Verification Product, Integral Ad Science

Nick Morley, MD EMEA, Integral Ad Science

Andreas Dooley, Head of Agency Sales, EMEA, Oracle Data Cloud

Joanne Coombs, Senior Business Development Partner, EMEA, Oracle Data Cloud

Laura Stokes, Senior Technical Account Manager, Oracle Data Cloud

Lisa Kalyuzhny, Senior Director, Advertiser Solutions EMEA, PubMatic

Marie-Clare Puffett
Marketing & Industry Programmes Manager
puffett@iabeurope.eu

Helen Mussard
Marketing & Industry Strategy Director
mussard@iabeurope.eu

iab europe
Rond-Point Robert
Schumanplein 11
1040 Brussels
Belgium

@iabeurope
/iab-europe

iabeurope.eu