



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FOR GENDER STEREOTYPING IN ADVERTISING

Report for the Advertising Standards Authority,
prepared by GfK UK

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Final issue: 13 July 2017

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1 Executive summary

Background, Objectives and Methodology

In 2016, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) announced its intention to review issues around gender-stereotyping¹ in ads, in order to assess whether current regulatory policy and practice are sufficient. The review consisted of a three stage process research involving qualitative research with the public. The objectives for the research were:

1. Exploring attitudes towards gender stereotyping in adverts, encompassing three categories: gender roles and characteristics in advertising to children; gender roles and characteristics in advertising to adults; objectification, sexualisation and body image
2. Understanding how, if at all, ads that fall into the above categories may impact on public attitudes and actions; considering both the impact of individual ads and whether there is any cumulative impact in relation to different types of ads.
3. Exploring the areas of harm, offence and social responsibility in relation to the categories identified in Objective 1; understanding how much of a role advertising may play in relation to cultural and other factors.

The research employed a two-phase approach with mixed methods:

- Hall tests: 2 days of 'hall tests' involving mini-depth interviews with people recruited 'on-the-spot'.
- Mini-group discussions: 8 mini group discussions with adults; 2 mini group discussions with parents of pre-school children; 6 mini group discussions with teens.
- Depth interviews: 8 depth interviews with adults; and 6 paired depth interviews with tweens.
- A Child Development Psychologist added insight and interpretation to the research, commenting on factors likely to influence attitudes advertising and gender portrayals.

Factors that influence attitudes towards gender portrayal in adverts

Attitudes toward gender portrayal were influenced by a range of primary and secondary factors. Primary factors played a key role in how participants reacted and responded to gender portrayal. Overall, participants tended to feel more negatively about gender portrayal in an advert when:

- It challenged their personal beliefs or 'worldview'.
- They identified with the role or person being depicted.
- They felt the advert was overly idealised or perfect.

Three secondary factors acted to either distract from the gender portrayal or reinforce an emotional response to the advert. These were: lack of understanding of the message or where the target audience was felt to be unclear; a strong reaction to the brand or product being advertised; and components of the advert production such as humour or visual imagery.

¹ Stereotyping is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. A gender stereotype is therefore an image or idea of a group or individual based on their gender.

Attitudes towards gender roles and characteristics in advertising

Views focused on three broad themes: relationships; roles and aspirations; and portrayal of the perfect person or scenario.

Views amongst children (including teens, tweens and parents of pre-schoolers) and adults were generally similar. Overall, adverts were not felt to reflect modern-day society and the depictions of men, women, families and relationships in advertising were felt to be generally clichéd and stereotypical. These stereotypes were generally not considered offensive or harmful, but rather uninspiring and lacking diversity, and suggested that the advertising industry is 'behind the times'. With this in mind, participants often responded positively to adverts they felt showed greater realism in terms of family make-up, gender roles and interactions.

Most participants noted that adverts included perfect or idealized portrayals. These were not felt to be problematic and would not be taken at face value. There was an expectation that adverts would depict these characteristics, but there was a desire for greater realism. Where participants strongly identified with the people or scenarios, they suspected that an unrealistic and unattainable lifestyle or image could make more vulnerable groups in society feel negatively about themselves.

Attitudes towards objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising²

This was a topic of much debate across the research with three broad areas generating discussion:

Attractiveness: Adults felt that adverts promoted a problematic message to society when they ridiculed those not considered to be stereotypically attractive. This was often conflated with views that there was lack of diversity in the types of people shown in adverts. Teen girls noted that whilst they were aware that images may be photo-shopped, the way that females looked in adverts were often aspirational and could make people feel negatively about the way they personally look.

Portrayal of the perfect body: Adults felt that adverts often portrayed a perfect, idealised body or way to look. Overall participants agreed that care needed to be exercised when promoting a body image that could be seen by vulnerable groups including children. Teen girls recognised that many adverts portrayed the perfect body. The more 'perfect' the body shown in an advert, the more participants felt that the advert could pressurise people to feel negatively about themselves, and want to change their own appearance.

Objectification and sexualisation: Adults felt that objectification was old-fashioned. They generally felt more negatively about adverts that were considered to objectify or sexualise where the person depicted wore few clothes, were shown in a sexual pose and in a situation they felt promoted inappropriate behaviour in a realistic setting. Whilst teen boys expressed some discomfort in discussing adverts showing men wearing few clothes in sexualised poses, teen girls were more overtly critical towards adverts that used nudity, feeling that this could create unrealistic expectations

² These themes were explored with adults and teens (where appropriate to age, teenagers were also shown adverts with different portrayals of the male and female body)

for how women behave and encourage young women to emulate this behaviour.

Impact of gender stereotyping in advertising: harm and offence

Overall, four broad areas of potential **harm** emerged across the research:

1. Portraying the perfect person, scenario or body.
2. Gratuitous and unnecessary sexualisation and objectification of the body.
3. The use of stereotypical gender roles and characteristics.
4. Perpetuation of these messages and stereotypes over time.

The placement of adverts (whether vulnerable groups would be exposed to the advert) was also a related factor when considering harm.

Across the research it was clear that an advert could be **offensive** when:

- Participants related to the role/ people/ scenario depicted and it strongly challenged their personal beliefs and opinions.
- The advert ridiculed individuals or groups in society who do not conform to ‘norms’.

Roles and responsibilities

Participants felt that brands and those who created adverts held the responsibility for ensuring adverts are not offensive or harmful. Whilst a few adults were aware of a regulatory body for advertising, few spontaneously mentioned the ASA.

Whilst some felt that not all brands used gender stereotypes, participants agreed there was scope and opportunity for the industry to move away from stereotypes and represent a more diverse society. Participants agreed that advertising plays a role in societal norms and expectations for gender roles, characteristics, behaviours and appearance.

Participants generated a number of suggestions for ways in which the advertising industry could address potential harm and offence in adverts:

- Consider where and when the advert is shown
- Avoid ridiculing those who do not conform to stereotypes or norms
- Advertise the product in an appropriate way.
- Avoid promoting behaviour that is perceived to be inappropriate
- Avoid targeting vulnerable groups
- Increase diversity of people shown in adverts
- Safe-guard creativity within the advertising industry

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the independent regulator for advertising in the UK, ensuring that advertising remains responsible by enforcing the advertising codes, which are written by the Committees of Advertising Practice (CAP and BCAP). Broadcast and non-broadcast media platforms and marketing communications are within the ASA's remit and subject to the advertising codes. The ASA is an evidence-based regulator and the Committees of Advertising Practice strive to ensure that their rules strike a proportionate balance between protecting consumers, including vulnerable groups like children and young persons, and respecting the rights of companies to advertise their products and services responsibly.

In 2016, the ASA announced its intention to review issues around gender-stereotyping in ads, in order to assess whether current regulatory policy and practice are sufficient. Stereotyping is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. A gender stereotype is therefore an image or idea of a group or individual based on their gender. The remit of the review included adults and children.

The review began with an analysis of advertisements that portrayed men, women, boys or girls and that generated complaints to the ASA from members of the public. This analysis identified that gender portrayals fell into the following x categories:

- Stereotypical gender roles – for example, women shown carrying out domestic chores or men shown leading business meetings
- Stereotypical gender characteristics – for example, men shown as stupid or women shown as passive
- Non gender conformity – for example, men being mocked for acting sensitively
- Stereotypical gender portrayals of children – for example, girls shown with dolls or boys with toy guns
- Objectification and sexualisation – for example, ads depicting nudity where it is unrelated to the advertised product or where models are shown in sexualised poses
- Body image – for example, ads which could cause pressure to conform to an unrealistic or unhealthy body shape, or create body confidence issues

The ASA announced a three stage process for their review – a call for evidence from experts; seminars with stakeholders; and research with the public. This report sets out the findings from qualitative research undertaken with the public.

2.2 Objectives

The research objectives for this study focused on the following three key areas:

1. Exploring attitudes towards gender stereotyping in adverts, encompassing the following categories
 - Gender roles and characteristics in advertising to children
 - Gender roles and characteristics in advertising to adults

- Objectification³, sexualisation⁴ and body image⁵⁶
2. Understanding how, if at all, ads that fall into the above categories may impact on public attitudes and actions. There is a need to consider both the impact of individual ads and whether there is any cumulative impact in relation to different types of ads.
 3. Exploring the areas of harm, offence and social responsibility in relation to the categories identified in Objective 1; understanding how much of a role advertising may play in relation to cultural and other factors.

2.3 Research approach

2.3.1 Method and sample

The research employed a 2 phase approach and mixed methods comprising:

- 2 x 'hall tests' which involved 20 minute depth interviews with general public recruited 'on-the-spot' to specific criteria;
- 8 mini group discussions with adults, each lasting 90 minutes;
- 2 mini group discussions with parents of pre-school children, each lasting 60 minutes
- 6 mini group discussions with teens, each lasting 60 minutes
- 8 face to face depth interviews with adults, each lasting 90 minutes
- 6 paired depth interviews with tweens, each lasting 45 minutes

This gave a total sample of 157 participants. This was to ensure maximum participation in the study from a geographically dispersed sample, with fieldwork taking place in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The sample included a good mix of demographics including a spread of gender, socio-economic group and age. The full sample and quotas are detailed in the Appendix.

³ Objectification is when the viewer is invited to view women or men as sex objects. This may involve depicting individuals as sexual objects in a way that could be seen as demeaning, subservient, exploitative, degrading or humiliating ways, or portraying them as controlled by others. Examples may include focusing on a person's body while obscuring their faces or if a woman is included in an ad in a way that is unrelated to the advertised product in order to draw attention to an ad. Such portrayals are often, but not always, presented in a sexual manner.

⁴ Sexualisation is when women or men are presented in an overly sexualised manner, typically through imagery that depicts or is highly suggestive of sexual acts, sexual pleasure or being sexually available. Concerns with sexualisation are much more likely to arise when ads depict young people in a sexualised manner.

⁵ Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self. It encompasses how they see themselves and how they believe others see them, as well as the thoughts, emotions and behaviours that accompany those perceptions.

⁶ Based on ethical considerations, the research did not seek to explore the issue of body image amongst children, but young people aged 14-16 years did have the opportunity to comment on adverts with content within this category.

2.3.2 Use of stimulus materials

During the research sessions all participants were shown a variety of adverts depicting men, women or children. This included a range of television, print, radio and social-media adverts. The selection of adverts was based on certain criteria—

- Ads that might be considered to fall into one or more of the categories identified:
 - Gender roles and characteristics in advertising to children
 - Gender roles and characteristics in advertising to adults
 - Objectification, sexualisation and body image
- Ads the ASA had received complaints about⁷, as well as other ads could reasonably fall within one of the 3 categories.
- Ads that were drawn from a broad range of media – to reflect the range of advertising mediums that fall within the ASA's remit.

The selection favoured current or very recent ads that met these criteria – with the exception of a small number of ads placed or scheduled within the last few years (none of which were more than five years old).

As well as looking at ads individually, participants were also shown collage mood boards - which were A3 size sheets showing a range of adverts of either men, women, boys or girls. These mood boards contained a variety of print, social-media adverts, and stills from television adverts put together to allow participants access to a wider number of examples of gender roles and characteristics, and body image and sexualisation in order to prompt discussion in each research session. Parents of pre-schoolers were shown advert breaks to simulate the way in which adverts are shown on television, and to enable them to reflect on the potential cumulative impact of adverts.

To ensure the adverts were tested fairly and to prevent ordering bias, rotation plans were devised for both phases of the fieldwork.

Details of the adverts tested can be found in a separate Appendix.

2.4 Homework pre and post-tasks

Pre and post tasks were assigned to about half of participants. About a quarter of the sample were asked to complete a homework pre-task, asking them to consider the way in which men and women are shown in adverts before they attended a focus group or depth interview session.⁸ These participants had time to reflect on their thoughts before they came to the research. It was generally the case that participants who had been asked in the pre-task to notice the ways in which men and

⁷ Some adverts included in the research had received complaints prior to the commencement of the research study, and some subsequently received complaints.

⁸ Participants completing the pre- and post- tasks were not asked specifically about gender stereotyping. Rather, they were asked to consider how women, men, boys and girls were portrayed in the advertising they saw and how they felt about this.

women were depicted in advertising had more developed views to contribute during the group discussions or interviews and these are discussed further throughout the main findings.

Two types of pre-tasks were assigned to participants. One type of pre-task asked participants to complete a ‘viewing diary’ of adverts viewed over the course of five days. The other type of pre-task asked participants to form a collage of adverts and comment on the way in which men, women and children were portrayed in advertising.

A quarter of the sample were asked to complete a homework post-task, also asking them to consider the way in which men, women and children are portrayed in adverts. These participants were able to reflect on their thoughts following a focus group session or depth interview, and share further insights on the adverts they saw or heard outside of the research session. This is discussed further in section 6 of the report.

Details of the groups of participants who completed a pre or post task are included in the Appendix together with examples of the pre and post tasks.

2.5 Strengths and limitations of this research

Employing a qualitative approach to this research allowed researchers to gather rich insights into the general public’s understanding and interpretation of the topic. These insights were increased by using a blend of methods.

The key strength of a qualitative approach is that it enables researchers to gather spontaneous attitudes and insights, as well as nuanced feedback. Whilst qualitative discussions follow a clear structure, they emphasise the role of the participant in leading and driving the conversation, and allowing them to answer in their own words, resulting in responses that are full of rich insights. Participants are not limited in the way they answer the questions by being required to choose from multiple-choice answers as they would in a quantitative study. The requirement for exploratory, discursive and detailed views regarding the issues meant that qualitative research (as opposed to quantitative research) was the best-fit method for this study.

The main limitation to using a qualitative research approach is that it emphasises self-expression and insight over numerical outcomes and so relies on detailed discussion with relatively small sample sizes. Whilst we included people from a wide range of backgrounds and with a variety of characteristics, the overall sample size means it is not statistically representative. The findings in this report focus on participants understanding and interpretation of the issues addressed, and suggestions for improving current practices. The findings do not attempt to quantify the number of participants who preferred specific courses of action.

The aim of the research was to understand views regarding gender portrayal in advertising. To facilitate this, participants were asked to do the following which should be borne in mind when reading this report:

- About half of participants were asked to complete pre and/ or post tasks to comment on advertising seen in day-to-day life: this may have encouraged participants to deconstruct adverts to a greater extent than they would do in real life.
- View adverts as part of the research sessions: adverts were viewed in an atypical setting which may have encouraged participants to focus on their content in more detail than they would in real life.

3 Factors that influence attitudes towards gender portrayal in adverts

Chapter summary:

- Across the research, attitudes toward gender portrayal were influenced by six factors.
- Three of these were identified as primary factors, playing a key role in how participants reacted and responded to gender portrayal: reflecting personal beliefs and views; identification with the role or person depicted; and resonance of the scenario depicted.
- Three secondary factors also emerged which acted to either distract from the advert message or reinforce an emotional response to the advert: understanding of the message; relationship with the brand or product; and components of the advert production
- Some differences in views and reaction to gender portrayal in adverts were also noted across demographic factors including gender, ethnicity and age.
- The research consulted a Child Development Psychologist to add insight to analysis and interpretation when considering marketing aimed at children. The input of the Psychologist included commenting on the cognitive vulnerabilities of children participants and any age-specific developmental characteristics likely to influence attitudes towards advertising and gender portrayals

Across the research, participant views towards gender portrayal in advertising were largely driven by:

- Personal beliefs and views
- Whether participants personally identified with the role or person depicted
- Whether participants personally identified with the scenario depicted

These are referred to as **primary factors** within this report and comprise the key drivers to responses and reactions to gender portrayals in advertising. In addition to these primary factors, three **secondary factors** also emerged which acted to either distract from the advert message or reinforce an emotional response to the advert. These factors are described below.

3.1 Primary factors

As set out above, the three primary factors to emerge from the research were:

Reflecting personal beliefs and views

Identification with the role or person depicted

Resonance of the scenario depicted

These factors tended to generate an emotional reaction from participants which resulted in a positive or negative perception regarding the way in which men and women are portrayed in adverts and whether this was felt to be harmful or offensive. The intensity of this feeling was dependent on how

strong (and therefore influencing) each of these primary factors was for the individual participant either in isolation or combination.

These primary factors frequently emerged across the research and are therefore summarized below and discussed in detail throughout the remainder of the report.

3.1.1 Reflecting personal beliefs and views

Participants felt more positively about an advert where it echoed their personal beliefs or 'worldview', and more negatively where these were challenged. This was often in relation to behaviours portrayed in adverts that opposed participant beliefs regarding acceptable behaviours, or suggesting that certain behaviours are gender-specific. This was a crucial factor for participants who tended to feel more negatively about an advert where their beliefs and views were challenged. For example:

- Where participants found the stereotype portrayed to be old-fashioned, dated and not reflective of current society.
- Where participants felt that the advert promoted a negative message (either for themselves or other groups in society). This included:
 - Adverts depicting idealised roles or 'perfect' people. Participants noted that there was a fine line between providing a gender portrayal that is aspirational as opposed to a portrayal and image that is potentially harmful. For example, an advert that showed a slim body type could be considered aspirational by some, but could make others feel negatively about their own body.
 - Adverts that relied solely on sexualisation and objectification of men or women including part or fully naked models whose roles were not considered to be related to the product.
 - Adverts that ridiculed individuals or groups in society who do not conform to 'norms'.
 - Adverts that promoted behaviours that participants felt were not acceptable or set a problematic role model for children.
 - Adverts that lacked diversity in gender roles and depictions which could limit aspirations.

Personal beliefs and opinions regarding gender portrayal in advertising were shaped by social and environmental influences.

Homework pre-tasks

Those who had completed a homework pre-task indicated an awareness and dislikes of the way in which men, women and children were portrayed in advertising. They reflected that gender roles and characteristics used in adverts did not keep pace with changes in society and were felt to be generally stereotypical, although participants did include positive examples, for examples where roles were reversed. Pre task participants also commented on how women were shown as mothers, or performing serving roles in adverts whilst men were shown either as businessmen or as stupid/handsome/ lazy. Scenarios depicted pristine home environments which was perceived as unrealistic.

Participants also noticed and commented on body image and sexualisation in adverts noting that adult females and girls tended to be portrayed as glamorous or oversexualized whilst men were more often portrayed (and reported on in editorial) for their activities rather than their appearance.

[Ad for steam cleaning product] It conforms to stereotype that mum = cleaner, although to be fair this is an improvement on most cleaning ads, would like to see more role reversal, without the need to make it tongue in cheek

Parent and pre-schooler group, Glasgow

[Ad for toothbrush demonstration) These types of adverts are almost always women, there isn't normally a male demonstrating. Female also looks young, model-esque

Parent and pre-schooler group, Glasgow

'Features on men tend to focus on things they have done, not what they look like.'

Older family, Glasgow

'The use of attractive women in adverts is a tool to attract the opposite sex"

Young family, London

[Women's clothing retailer] 'This aims to break boundaries as we see a contrast from the normally sexualised and glamorous models'

Young family, London

[Ad for food product] I disliked the way the mother was glamorous and acted in a seductive way about the product'

Young family group, York

Nursing seems to be advertised more for women than men

Young family, London

[Jewellery advert] 'Nice to see young girls portrayed sweetly and carefree. This society has a tendency to over sexualise children / young girls'

Young family, London

[Shampoo advert] 'Not really sure this advert is too bad I do feel though in adverts like this the women always have perfect hair perfect bodies and always very good looking'

Parent and pre-schooler group, Norwich

Social influences

The majority of participants tended to discuss gender portrayals as a topic with friends and family. However, some individuals noted that if their personal beliefs differed from family members they tended to avoid the subject. Parents also reported that once their children started school their children's attitudes towards gender were often influenced by peers.

Some teens reported that they had learned something about advertising at school and this raised their awareness of the general purpose of advertising. Teen girls also reported receiving continual

messages at school about self-confidence which they felt attempted to positively influence their attitude towards body image. Some further noted that some adverts (such as the This Girl Can campaign from Sport England) also attempted to provide more positive body image messages.

A couple of adult participants with strong feelings about gender equality as a topic had been active in terms of voicing their concerns, for instance by blogging on the issue.

Environmental influences

The retail environment was mentioned by some participants, with parents noting that retailers usually separated children's toys by gender. Some felt this practice reinforced outdated attitudes towards gender.

It was clear across the research that participants came across advertising in their environment every day across different media platforms. Across all age groups, spontaneous attitudes towards advertising commonly referenced the proliferation of adverts within and across platforms and the frequency with which adverts were seen, especially where participants were using a variety of different platforms on a regular basis.

[The homework pre-task]...it makes you see that they're [adverts] everywhere really

Male, 18-24, Belfast

On the phone, Everything Everywhere has got adverts. Shows you watch on your phone they [adverts] will pop up, even music.

Female, 18-24, London

We're surrounded by them [adverts] aren't we?

Male, 60+, York

This was frustrating for many because they were unable to control the number of adverts seen and were not able to skip adverts if viewed online. Viewing behaviours often resulted in increasingly negative reactions towards adverts generally, and stronger reactions towards adverts that were disliked.

Repetitive, if you keep seeing it you are like, right, I've had enough of this.

Female, 18-24, London

They get in the way of what you are trying to watch. I get annoyed but there is nothing you can do about it. You just have to suck it up. If ads are on TV there is nowhere to hide. I've never thought deeply about ads. You just watch them and forget them.

Boy, 14, London

Thinking about the proliferation of adverts led some participants to suspect that they may have been influenced by advertising at a subconscious level, but lacked detailed insight into this or were unable to articulate what the effect of this might be.

You probably subconsciously...so many more you see that you don't even pay attention to as you're going about your life but they're [adverts] everywhere

Female, 25-44, London

Participants felt that the advertising shown in the research was often less problematic than content they encountered elsewhere such as on social media sites including Facebook, or across other media platforms such as TV or films.

It was also interesting to note that some participants submitted homework pre-tasks containing photos of gender portrayals in editorial content rather than, or in addition to, advertising. These examples included portrayals of men, women and children.

3.1.2 Identification with the role or person depicted

Where participants identified with the role or person being depicted, they tended to be more engaged with the advert itself. For example, women with children (especially those with younger children/ babies) identified with adverts depicting new mums.

Participants typically felt most strongly about adverts that were targeted at people like them, or groups in society that they related to.

It should be noted that participants often claimed not to feel personally affected by an advert, but did express concern on behalf of other groups in society. This could be due to the focus group methodology employed for some of the research sessions; it may be that participants were reluctant to express personal concerns in a focus group of peers.

Overall participants felt that an advert could be offensive if an individual personally related to the role or person and it challenged their personal beliefs and views. Participants felt that an advert could be harmful if an individual or group in society could relate to the advert, and the advert promoted a negative message or behaviour.

A few participants reflected that adverts targeting a particular type of person could be less problematic if it formed part of a set of adverts that showed different gender portrayals.

Maybe if they had a series of them you know...so that if they had a male equivalent of the advert.

Female, 60+, York

These participants felt that this would provide a more balanced representation of genders in advertising. However, there was agreement that in reality people were unlikely to see a set of adverts together, and therefore in isolation an advert (even if part of a set) could be offensive or harmful.

3.1.3 Resonance of the scenario depicted

Participants noted that some adverts aimed to reflect real life scenarios. There was some positivity towards this, with participants feeling that they could better relate to adverts set in real life settings.

I think they have got a little bit better, realistic on it, because it used to be someone in like some amazing tropical island and now it is in the shower, yes, so that is good.

Female, 18-24, London

Participants felt more negatively towards adverts that purported to depict 'real life' scenarios but were felt to be overly idealised or perfect as they felt that these were more difficult to relate to.

Participants noted that more fantastical scenarios tended to be used for luxury products whilst everyday products often adopted more 'normal' settings and scenarios. Views regarding adverts that showed clearly unrealistic or fantastical scenarios were more mixed with some reflecting that the more unrealistic a scenario, the less likely they would be to take the gender portrayals at 'face value'. However, others expressed negative views regarding fantastical scenarios where they promoted an unacceptable behaviour that could be imitated in real life.

3.2 Secondary factors

The three secondary factors to emerge from the research are:

Understanding of the message

Relationship with the brand or product

Components of the advert production

These factors did not emerge as strongly as primary factors across the research but could distract participants from the advert's message or reinforce emotional responses to adverts. They emerged less frequently than primary factors across a mix of different types of adverts and therefore are discussed in detail in this chapter (rather than referenced throughout the remainder of the report).

3.2.1 Understanding of the message

Participants were not able to fully interpret adverts where the message was unclear. In some instances participants were unsure who the advert was targeted at meaning that they did not fully relate to or engage with it. For example, some participants were unsure whether male perfume adverts were aimed at men or aimed at women (who would buy the perfume for men). This confusion could often distract participants from the message.

Children in particular often expressed confusion over messages within the adverts and reactions were influenced by their level of cognitive and emotional development.

3.2.2 Relationship with the brand or product

Existing relationships with the brand or product being advertised impacted on attitudes towards the advert. Strong positive or negative reactions to the brand or product tended to over-shadow other aspects of the advert (e.g. gender portrayal). For example, some participants became distracted by an e-cigarette product in one advert shown, responding negatively to the advertising and glamorizing of this product rather than commenting on other aspects of the advert.

Lack of identification with the brand could also distract participants from engaging with the advert. For example, one advert shown across the research was for a pram brand. Some younger females with young children described their relationship with the brand, noting that it was 'high-end' and not personally affordable. Because they did not consider themselves to be the target of the advert or the brand the advert held limited resonance.

3.2.3 Components of the advert production

Overall production of the advert also impacted participants' views. Components such as the person delivering the message, tone, visual imagery, language, humour, music and other production values (e.g. quality of the advert) often generated emotional reactions from participants. In these instances, the advert production could over-shadow other aspects of the advert (e.g. gender portrayal).

It was clear across the research that adverts with higher production values could distract participants from the message in the advert. For example one television advert felt like a 'film' to some participants who focused on the look and feel of the advert rather than the content. One print advert was also noted by participants to have an 'arty' feel which made the advert look modern. These participants often focused on the aesthetic of the image, rather than the content.

It is a nice picture by itself of like [in] an art gallery.

Female, 18-24, London

Participants also commented on a difference in style and tone for luxury product adverts compared with more everyday type products. With luxury products the genders adopted more serious expressions and adverts were more stylized, whilst everyday products often adopted more 'normal' situations and interactions, often using fun or happy people. Luxury product adverts that used a more serious and stylized tone sometimes introduced a conflict for participants as they evoked both an aspiration and a realization of unattainable perfection which was demoralizing for some.

With a perfume ad you get the beautiful women and you know, the luxury that is associated with things like that.

Female, 18-24, London

Where they are advertising something expensive they are like so serious and in these ones, like a cheaper product they are always smiling. Like all the magazines I look at they were, it was always the same, like a cheaper product like they are so happy and then these ones they were like serious, don't touch us.

Female, 18-24, London

Use of celebrity was an advert component that could distract from or reinforce emotional responses to the advert. For example, use of celebrities from reality television programmes for some participants reinforced the 'cheap' feel of an advert. These participants typically tended to have limited resonance with these celebrities and therefore distanced themselves from the advert, or did not take it seriously or at face value.

The use of celebrities that had a child fan-base was considered controversial where the celebrity was shown in a sexualised way. This was the case for two celebrity adverts shown across the

research that showed former stars of popular children's television in sexualised poses. Parents in particular, felt strongly that these celebrities (whilst now older and no longer featuring in children's television) were likely to still be role models for young children and therefore set a negative example of acceptable behaviour.

Children still remember her so they definitely will follow her...

...for that very reason they should make more effort to have her come into a positive light.

Females, 25-44, London

This is horrid, and that thing is it doesn't matter how much you try to hide these pictures they find them. They see them. And a ten year, almost eleven, because she, my daughter actually thinks this is normal.

Female, 25-44, London

However, both of these celebrities were also in the music industry, and participants reflected that the images shown in the adverts were no worse than the types of images that would be seen at pop concerts or in music videos. One of these celebrities was well known for risqué behaviour. This led to some debate amongst participants regarding the role of the celebrity in adverts. Those familiar with the celebrity were more likely to dismiss the advert as 'predictable'.

If it was just a generic woman then it might have negative connotations, but it isn't, it's somebody who used to go out deliberately to shock. It's reached the point now where she's trying so hard it's not shocking anymore.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

There will always be women who want to look a certain way. She's wearing a costume so it's not degrading. It doesn't bother me but it might bother someone who is more conservative.

Female, younger family, Birmingham

For some this predictability was problematic, in further promoting what they felt to be negative behaviours (and therefore opposing their personal beliefs regarding acceptable behaviour). However, others felt that this predictability simply showed that for this celebrity, sexualised content was the norm and within this context they personally did not find the behaviour portrayed offensive.

Like on her Instagram this is what she is like all the time, she is a person who, she is normally like empowering women quite a lot.

Female, 18-24, London

Whilst not a celebrity, one advert looked at by teens across the research used a blogger describing her experience of cosmetic surgery. The use of a blogger in the advert generated debate among teen girls who were conflicted by their identification with the young woman, her natural style and confidence and some of the content of her message which provided a reason to believe in the product.

It's good because she's a blogger for younger people and the ad looks a bit like a film set but not so formal, so like she's blogging it, but it might be sending out the wrong message, like it's good to have that done, but sometimes it's not the right thing to do, a girl can be too fake. It's saying some girls aren't confident with their body and that makes me sad.

Girl, 13, Hall test Manchester

Here, the blogger as the person delivering the message and her real life story-telling approach often over-shadowed the advert content.

I quite liked it. For plastic surgery I thought it was quite professional. It was just this girl telling her story; it was more realistic because it was her speaking.

Girl, 15, York

3.3 Demographic factors

Whilst these factors influenced views regarding gender portrayal in advertising, some demographic differences were noted and are described below. These demographic differences are referenced within this report where relevant.

Gender: across the research women often more quickly (compared to men) expressed concern about gender portrayal in adverts with a particular focus on body image and sexualisation in advertising. This suggests that these types of issues were more top of mind for women and this was reinforced by similar comments being given in the homework pre-tasks written by women. Whilst men also expressed similar concerns about gender portrayals these views often only emerged after some debate and discussion around this issue.

Men often went on more of a 'journey' during the research process, with some initially not commenting on gender portrayal, but as they saw more adverts and debated the content of these they developed their views and thinking. They largely ended up expressing similar views to women, but it simply took them longer to reach these conclusions. There was indication across research sessions that for some men there was a tension regarding the attractive appeal of women in advertising and acknowledging that this type of portrayal could be problematic. This may also explain why men took longer to formulate their views about gender portrayal.

Ethnicity: female ethnic minority participants were also quick to deconstruct messages in adverts, again suggesting that the issues under discussion were more top of mind for this audience. These participants often conflated the issue of gender and ethnicity portrayals in advertising, showing an understanding of the inter-relationships of certain stereotypes.

When conducting homework pre-tasks some BME participants had also noted the lack of diversity in terms of ethnic representation in adverts.

Age: where views differed amongst adults this difference in opinion tended to be based on either presence of children in the household (discussed below), or personal beliefs. For example, those with a more liberal outlook in life tended to feel that certain behaviours presented in adverts were problematic compared to those who were more conservative in their views and opinions. However, there were some differences in opinion and views amongst younger participants.

When completing the homework pre-task, younger teens age 13-14s comments demonstrated an awareness of the impact of gender stereotypical portrayals of children in adverts in terms of roles and characteristics and the limitations these might impose.

[spot cream advert] 'Only young girls are using the cream which makes people think only women would get spots. They should make all ages and genders use the cream'

Girl, 13-14, Bristol

[toy advert] There are only boys in the advert, makes girls feel they can't buy it'

Girl, 13-14, Bristol

[sportswear advert] 'I'm angry because I guarantee people aren't going to be the same as the people on that poster and I'm upset because I feel that I should look like that but I don't, and it's making me feel wrong'

Girl, 13-14, Bristol

[shampoo advert] 'I don't like the way the model's hair looks, it's not realistic or everyday'

Girl, 13-14, Bristol

Overall, younger participants (teens and 18-24 year olds) commented that they saw images of gender portrayals similar to those in advertising in a range of platforms used daily. They were more likely than older counterparts to note that they saw these types of images frequently on social media and their media habits were focused more heavily towards online platforms. Whilst expressed across participants in general, younger participants were most likely to openly express that they often felt desensitized to gender portrayals. For example, they noted that they came across images featuring more explicit nudity and sexualisation across other platforms. This meant that it sometimes took longer for younger participants to take a step back, and formulate their views regarding how men and women are depicted in adverts. Younger women (including those aged in their late twenties and early thirties) were also more likely to comment that they would 'brush off' female stereotypes used in advertising.

Whilst expressed by participants across the sample, it was evident that younger participants (teens and 18-24 year olds) felt discomfort when viewing and discussing nudity and sexualisation within advertising. These participants often struggled to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Our analysis of the views of younger participants (particularly tweens and teens) suggests that understanding key developmental considerations for this age group may help interpret their responses.

Of the men who completed a pre-task, only one younger pre-family male made any reference to body image in an advert, whilst the majority of older males with families spontaneously raised gender stereotyping issues in their pre-task.

[male clothing retailer advert] 'All the guys wearing clothes are thin, models, not real people'

Male, 18-24, Belfast

[expensive watches advert] It's being passed father to son, why not mother to daughter, it's not just men who are interested in expensive watches'

Male, older family, Birmingham

[Floor cleaner product] 'The woman does all the cleaning= stereotypical and sexist'

Male, older family, Birmingham

[yoghurt advert] 'I am angered that it is a family product but being shown by ladies'

Male, older family, Birmingham

Presence of/ interaction with children/ young people: those with children, grandchildren or younger siblings often expressed stronger views regarding the impact that some advertising messages could have on children/ young people. Parents of pre-schoolers in particular expressed concern that advertising may override their efforts to combat gender stereotypical behaviour in their own children.

Socio-economic grade/ educational status: whilst no clear differences emerged across the research based on socio-economic grade or educational status, it should be noted that these factors are likely to strongly shape personal beliefs and views and therefore influence a person's interpretation of adverts.

3.3.1 Child Development Psychologist

The research consulted a Child Development Psychologist to add insight to analysis and interpretation when considering marketing aimed at children. The input of the Psychologist included commenting on the cognitive vulnerabilities of children participants and any age-specific developmental characteristics likely to influence attitudes towards advertising and gender portrayals. In consultation with the research team, and through analysis of interview transcripts and observation of research sessions, the psychologist noted that:

- tweens adopted a considerate and thoughtful approach when considering adverts and issues regarding roles and characteristics, but when adverts challenged their understanding of gender portrayals it was evident that their interpretations were influenced by a 'right/wrong' perspective in line with their cognitive development and broader social and environmental influences including peers, family and social norms
- the teens life stage tends to be characterized by socialization and emotional development and key drivers include independence of thought and behaviour. However, teens still want to 'fit in' to an extent and be liked by others and are not always willing to 'own' their views or share them openly in a group environment because their view may still be 'under development' or they do not want to be rejected by others if their views are different to peers. These were evident in responses to advertising, with varying degrees of confidence, self-consciousness, tension and discomfort evident when teens were watching adverts. For example, some teen male participants felt confident to use the term 'sexualised' when referring to females in adverts whilst

others adopted alternative descriptions such as 'fit' or 'confident' or avoided answering the moderator's questions or demonstrated embarrassment through nervous laughter.⁹

- whilst the teen age group possessed an insight into the aims of advertising and were able to identify a variety of ways in which they felt that advertising lacked diversity and often used stereotypical portrayals of roles and characteristics, it was also evident that there were some differences among boys and girls in the research, with the majority of boys less able or willing to articulate their views compared with the girls. Responses to an advert for a mobile phone game portraying a woman in a revealing outfit demonstrated this difference:

'She's fit isn't she!' Most men go for women that are pretty. No one likes ugly girls, so they put a good looking girl in the ad so you keep watching to the end.'

'It's a mobile phone game but it starts with her in the bath, that's a bit over the top'

Boy, 14, London

'I thought she was sexualised and defenceless with this massive army behind her, she looks vulnerable, it makes me feel uncomfortable, that she has to be rescued, there was no respect there, it's depressing, I think they might have chose her because she's got an eye catching figure but I'm guessing men are their main target audience so that would be attractive to men and eye catching'

Girl, 14, York

The above observations of the Child Development Psychologist are evident throughout sections of the report where children's views are included. In particular teen participants and boys most notably, demonstrated that peer friendship groups provide a certain amount of confidence and reassurance when discussing certain aspects of the gender stereotyping topic. However, individual differences also meant that some did not share their thoughts as openly as others and expressed a reticence towards addressing personal feelings about the issues of body image and sexualisation in particular.

⁹ These themes were explored with teenagers where appropriate, according to age.

4 Attitudes towards gender roles and characteristics in advertising

Chapter summary:

- Views regarding gender roles and stereotypes in advertising tended to focus on three broad themes: relationships; roles and aspirations; and the portrayal of the perfect person or scenario.
- Both children and parents of pre-schoolers perceived the depictions of families in advertising to be generally clichéd.
- Specifically focusing on the depiction of boys and girls in advertising, children and parents felt that this depiction was often stereotyped, noting: how boys and girls were dressed; activities carried out by boys and girls; and characteristics possessed by boys and girls.
- These adverts were not felt to reflect modern-day society. In contrast, participants often responded positively to adverts that they felt showed greater realism in terms of family make-up and interactions.
- Focusing on the depiction of adults in advertising, adult participants felt that many of the adverts viewed showed old-fashioned roles and characteristics of men and women.
- They largely did not feel that these stereotypes were offensive or harmful, but did feel that they were uninspiring, lacking diversity and 'behind the times'.
- Participants agreed that the perfection in adverts was not 'real life' and was therefore unrealistic and not something that they would take at face value, although it would be nice to see more realistic adverts.
- However, where participants strongly identified (themselves or on behalf of other groups in society) with the people or scenarios they began to feel that this type of portrayal could promote an unrealistic and unattainable lifestyle or image that could make more vulnerable groups in society feel negative about themselves.

This chapter explores reactions to gender roles and characteristics in advertising amongst:

- Adults
- Children (including teens, tweens and parents of pre-schoolers)

An example of a stereotypical gender role might be women shown carrying out domestic chores or men shown leading business meetings

An example of stereotypical gender characteristics could be girls shown as passive or caring and boys shown as active or disruptive.

The use of gender stereotyping in adverts was spontaneously¹⁰ mentioned across participants. Those that completed a homework pre-task often commented that they had come across adverts that showed men, women or children in what was felt to be a 'dated' way (e.g. children playing with gender stereotypical toys, or women and men carrying out gender stereotypical roles). Across the research sessions, views regarding gender roles and stereotypes in advertising tended to focus on three broad themes:



Relationships

Views regarding the portrayal of relationships were influenced by two **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: where participants recognised the relationships in adverts, and could personally identify with these they tended to feel more strongly about the gender portrayal in the advert. Views tended to be more negative where participants identified with the role or person and felt that the relationship shown did not reflect the diversity of real life experiences.
- Personal beliefs and views: where relationships presented in adverts suggested an unacceptable behaviour to participants, they tended to feel negatively about the portrayal. This was particularly the case for where they felt that the advocated behaviour could influence the way in which children behave.

Roles and aspirations

Views regarding the portrayal of roles and aspirations were influenced by two **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: where participants recognised the roles in adverts, and could personally identify with these, they tended to feel more strongly about the gender portrayal in the advert. Views tended to be more negative where participants identified with the role and felt that this did not reflect real life experiences, portraying genders in a limited or stereotypical way. Participants felt that these portrayals often showed a lack of diversity and a limited portrayal of real life gender roles. Parents specifically felt that constrained and stereotypical gender roles in adverts could limit aspirations of children.
- Personal beliefs and views: as above, where roles presented in adverts suggested an unacceptable behaviour to participants, they tended to feel negatively about the portrayal. This was particularly the case for where they felt that the depicted behaviour could influence the way in which children behave.

¹⁰ Participants were not prompted that the research was about gender stereotyping in advertising, even those that completed a pre-task were asked to record general views regarding advertising and the portrayal of men and women. It did not specifically mention stereotypes.

Portrayal of the perfect person or scenario

Views regarding the portrayal of the perfect person or scenario were influenced by three **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: views tended to be more negative where participants identified with the role or person depicted in the advert and felt that it showed an idealised and unattainable version of real life.
- Personal beliefs and views: participants tended to be more negative where suggested ‘perfect’ or idealised gender based behaviour portrayed in an advert promoted unacceptable aspirations or norms. This was particularly the case for where they felt that these aspirations or norms could influence the way in which children behave.
- Resonance of the scenario depicted: participants tended to feel more negatively towards gender portrayal where they recognized and identified with the scenario or setting of an advert and felt that this presented an unrealistic and idealised version of real life that could promote either unattainable aspirations.

Detailed findings regarding reactions to gender roles and characteristics in advertising are discussed below. This is split into reactions from children, and reactions from adults.

4.1 Attitudes towards gender roles and characteristics in advertising: children

This section includes the views of children from age 5-16 and parents of pre-schoolers age 2-4 and includes relevant comments from the homework pre and post tasks and adverts shown to demonstrate the development of views over the course of the research. The children’s research primarily focused on tweens and teens and the majority of this section contains the views of these two age groups, as well as parents who contributed views of the advertising of pre-schooler products (most notably toys).

4.1.1 Relationships

Two main types of relationships were shown in advertising to children. This section explores views regarding the portrayal of family and peer relationships.

Parents

Both teens and parents of pre-schoolers perceived the depictions of families in advertising to be generally clichéd. The majority of adverts showed two-parent relationships with opposite gender parents as the norm which was not perceived to reflect modern-day society. This was reinforced in the homework pre and post task comments where both teens and parents commented on a Christmas advert for a supermarket which included a more realistic portrayal of families because it showed a range of ethnicities, people who were not typically attractive and a same-sex family. The portrayal of these diverse characteristics meant that participants perceived it as modern.

They are portrayed as normal people, some tall, small and all different shapes and sizes. Some wear glasses, some have no hair. Don’t fall into the typical stereotypes.

Parent/ pre-schooler, Glasgow

Some of the ads rub me up the wrong way; it's always two parents, and a Mum and a Dad, what about single parent families, or same sex families. That's not how society is; I have friends who are single parents so it's unrealistic.

Parent/ pre-schooler group, Norwich

From homework pre-tasks it was also evident that some adverts reinforced clichéd divisions of parental household responsibilities with participants noting an example in a retailer's Christmas advert which showed a father building a trampoline while the mother was portrayed conducting the caring and nurturing role of tucking the child into bed. Examples were given from other adverts which included a mother holding a baby, a woman using a sewing machine, and many examples of women doing the cleaning.

Teen girls also noticed the depiction of a mother in a supermarket advert. Although this advert was acknowledged as reflecting real life because it suggested mothers shouldered the majority of household tasks or were undervalued by other family members, some also disliked the lack of respect shown to the role of mother in the advert.

It's a normal person, mums are like that and rushing round. I didn't think it was fair, the dad should have done a bit more. I know mums are always busy but I didn't like the end when she finally sat down and he said what's for tea, it seemed selfish. In ways, it's not giving respect.

Girl, 13, Bristol

It showed an everyday person and it was realistic. Sometimes it can be like that.

Girl, 13, Bristol

Where role reversals were shown in adverts, participants noted that these were sometimes portrayed using tongue in cheek humour which they felt diminished the depiction of the role reversal.

Parents of pre-schoolers noted in their homework pre-tasks adverts where mothers were shown wearing skirts and blouses, whilst fathers often appeared in suits. This suggested to parents that depictions of mothers and fathers in advertising lacked diversity, and that fathers were portrayed as having greater value in the relationship, denoted by the different ways parents were dressed. This was also demonstrated in a toy advert shown in the research, where a mother and father were both shown bathing their child, with the father wearing a business shirt, in contrast to the mother's more casual attire, suggesting to the parents that men were the breadwinners in a household.

Siblings

Teens believed that gender roles and characteristics used in adverts to portray sibling relationships were somewhat clichéd. This was demonstrated by an advert for a cereal brand where they observed gender-specific colours were used to denote boys and girls. The advert also showed some stereotypical behaviour for the boy and girl, and depicted tension between the siblings. However, the end of the advert showed the older female sibling winning a disagreement with the younger male sibling. As some identified with certain aspects of the sibling relationship and the scenario, this advert was not deemed to be offensive.

I've got two cousins who are brother and sister and it's just them. She dresses up as Elsa and now she's got a crush on a boy in nursery and her brother dresses up as Teenage Ninja Turtles.

Girl, 14, York

It's enforcing gender roles quite forcefully because the girl's room is pink and there's Barbies while the boy is running round causing trouble and he's dressed in blue as a superhero. I don't think that should be done in adverts, people should be able to look and act and own stuff as they want to. I thought the last line was quite funny, I do that to my brother.

Girl, 14, York

Peer relationships

When tweens were shown examples of opposite gender peers playing together in an advert for a girl's toy, some initially resorted to fixed ideas of gender roles in line with the 'right/wrong' perspective stage of their cognitive development, with girls finding it more difficult to identify with girls who would play with boys and boys finding it difficult to identify with boys who would run away from girls as depicted in the advert. However, a strong relationship with the brand provided acted as a distraction to these perceptions and provided a reason to overcome their initial rejection of the advert.

A difference emerged between teen boys and girls considering peer relationships as depicted in advertising. Teen boys identified strongly with the male peer relationship in an advert for a game which portrayed a bored male character playing with a toy and another arriving in a 'spaceship' to rescue him from his boredom. The brotherly dynamic and the realistic portrayal of males resonated strongly with teen boys.

It shows what a normal kid does

Boy, 13, Brighton

A different male characteristic of 'banter' in another advert for a fast food brand also resonated with teen boys who felt this type of behaviour was realistic and reflected real life. This was in contrast to teen girls who believed that the male banter depicted was synonymous with bullying and was potentially harmful because it did not allow men to show weakness or difference.

They are kind of acting like children because they are arguing about the size of a TV

Boy, 14, Brighton

Parents of pre-schoolers noted that where children were shown playing together in adverts, these scenarios did not reflect real life because depictions generally showed same-gender children playing together. In real life, their own children were more likely to be playing with opposite gender siblings and friends and if children attended nurseries they also played in mixed genders.

Romantic relationships

It was evident that it was difficult for teen boys to fully grasp or articulate the complexity of the relationship being depicted or the male character depicted in an advert for a man's perfume. They

claimed not to identify strongly with the male role who was perceived as stereotypical and dominant within the relationship; nor did they identify with the scenario, which they saw as unrealistic. Their comments also demonstrated a lack of willingness to discuss in a group of peers potential aspects of romantic relationships with which they agreed but which fell outside of socially 'approved' behaviour for their age group.

All perfume ads are like this, you always see two people jumping into water

Boy, 14, Brighton

4.1.2 Roles and aspirations

Girls comments in the homework pre-tasks indicated their awareness of how advertising might place limits on their personal aspirations.

Both children and parents of pre-schoolers (and other parents across the research) believed that the depiction of boys and girls in advertising was stereotypical and that mixed gender portrayals in adverts were rare. Parents cited several ways in which advertising did not reflect reality:

- Boys and girls were shown wearing gender-specific colours which were felt to be stereotypical and these colours followed through into the settings used in adverts
- Adverts depicted children in gender-stereotypical roles with girls, but not boys, generally shown playing with dolls or performing more passive activities
- Generally boys and not girls were shown playing with toys such as cars / robots and were depicted as being active and energetic
- Girls were portrayed showing caring aspects of their personalities whilst boys were usually depicted as being more energetic and disruptive

[Homework pre-task]: [In this ad, the children] have been portrayed to be stereotypical boys and girls, the boys have blue and green toys and girls have pink.

Parent/pre-schooler, Glasgow

[Looking at collage] You can see that girls are just being stereotyped – be a mummy, play with a doll, take a selfie whereas the boys can be superheroes or a policeman. Girls have to be pretty but boys can be cool.

Parent/ pre-schooler group, Norwich

[Referencing an ad-break in a pre-task] All adverts featured boys playing with specific toys and girls playing with specific toys. If a boy and girl were in the ad, the boy was mostly seen playing and the girl observing. It does sadden me slightly that things are aimed so much at boys or girls and this is reinforced in ads. It's not harmful or offensive but I would change the stereotyping

Parent/pre-schooler, Glasgow

Parents of pre-schoolers also reflected that these depictions discouraged some children from expressing their personal preferences when playing with toys, citing examples where their children had been criticized by adult relatives or older siblings when expressing a wish to play with an opposite-gender toy.

Tweens were comfortable commenting on how certain depictions did not always reflect real life within advertising, for example when children were shown wearing gender-specific colours or clothing. This was demonstrated by comments given about a doll advert in which they noted that girls did not only play with dolls in real life and did not always dress the way they were depicted in the advert.

Some tweens wanted to demonstrate to the moderator helping to conduct the research that they had 'outgrown' the activities shown in an advert. However, their responses indicated a less nuanced 'right/ wrong' perspective in line with the cognitive and emotional development for their age group. The following quote on the presence of same-gender children in adverts demonstrates this and is a response to an advert portraying girls playing with dolls..

Girls in my class are more mature, they're more into running about and stuff and playing tag and football. I would get confused right away if there was a boy in the advert, it's all pink dresses, if there is a boy in it I would imagine he would be 5 or 6 or 7.

Boy, 11, Belfast

In addition, when asked about the potential careers of two girls playing with dolls in an advert, the participants suggested careers which were primarily associated with females and which could be interpreted as being limited in terms of their future career options or aspirations.

It's very girly! It's OK but we have a friend, Holly and she doesn't wear what you'd expect a girl to wear, she would wear jeans and a T Shirt and a hoody. I feel there should be a girl and a boys doll because a girl might want a boy as well and boys might want to play with them. It's saying girls are very girly, they just like pink and make up and dresses and sparkly things and only want to play with dolls. Their voices are very high and annoying and 'look at me I'm so amazing'. I was never really that into dolls, I did have them but rarely used them because I felt there wasn't much to do with them.

Girl, 11, Bristol

When they grow up they will be kind and love children. Their dream job is make-up artist or a teacher.

Girl, 10, Brighton

They'd probably have a job like a hairdresser or in a shop.

Girl, 11, Bristol

This lack of maturity was also demonstrated when shown advertising which challenged gender stereotypes- with an advert showing a girl looking admiringly at a toy generally associated with boys. Whilst strongly identifying with the brand of toy it was more difficult for some tweens to identify with the role of the girl. The debate focused on the suitability of the girl to advertise the toy and this created a tension challenging their personal beliefs about how boys and girls play. For some, this tension was resolved by projecting masculine qualities on to the girl in order to accept her presence in the advert.

The Lego ad is for boys and girls – because it makes you think of adventure and learning to do things. And girls can do that stuff too.

Boy, 9, London

It's got a girl in the advert again, but she is different. She's more interested in boys' stuff. She's not a tomboy though. A tomboy is when a girl acts too much like a boy.

Boy, 9, London

This point was also demonstrated in another advert challenging stereotypes about the gender-specificity of toys and girls abilities, which depicted girls playing with crossbows and chasing boys. In this example, it was difficult for some girls to identify with the role and scenario being depicted which did not reflect their personal beliefs.

Girls are more like pinky and girly. Girls could play with that if they were tomboyish. I think that girls and boys could play with girl things and boy things but this is quite boyish, I don't think many girls would play with it. Mostly boys would buy it.

Girl, 10, Brighton

They should have had a girl in a hoody, not dressed pretty but in more casual clothes. I'm thinking that there should be a boy and a girl because it's a boys toy and now it's saying it's a girls toy and that's both, it [the advert] does say that girls can play with boys toys as well and I think that's good because I play with boys toys.

Girl, 12, Bristol

In addition, tween boys identified less with the characteristics of boys shown in an advert for the same toy brand, advertising the boy's toy. They felt that the boys did not display appropriate characteristics as they played less and posed more than expected. Whilst not articulated by tweens it was evident that the actors in the advert were teens rather than tweens.

Some adverts depicted a message suggesting that children should aspire to be like their parents when they grow up. Generally this message resonated with tweens; indeed, tweens did not have an issue with the depiction of a 'strong like dad' message in an advert for a children's yoghurt and this was therefore not felt to be stereotypical, although some were aware that mothers and fathers could be more diverse. It was evident that for some tweens, certain aspects of the advert production distracted from the message in this advert.

Strong like Daddy might be true. I felt a bit confused by it, normally I wouldn't be thinking about it when I watch the ad. I don't know what he's doing, and wearing her mummy's coat and acting like a grown up.

Girl, 9, Brighton

Adults wear high heels and make up but not all the time, my Dad is a builder and he is quite strong because he has to pick up rocks. To be honest it's [the advert] not very interesting.

Girl 10, Brighton

I think when they're little they think they really want to be an adult so that I can wear high heels and make up...like adults can wear more stuff, more prettier stuff like high heels and kids wear like trainers. Maybe the girls want to be like mum...not all the time though

Girl, 10, Brighton

Some tweens did not identify with the more 'adult' roles and characteristics depicted in some adverts. This was evident in an advert for a group of dolls. Whilst tween girls were able to identify with the roles of some of the dolls presented, those with more 'adult' characteristics such as high heels, dyed hair and make-up jarred with the majority.

I like the geeky girls but the others might boss us around because they think they look really cool and smart

Girl, 10, Brighton

Teens noted that depictions of their age group in advertising used stereotyped characteristics such as the 'moody teenager' and this was considered to be a generalization.

They always make us look really moody or make us look like really cringe-y annoying kids.

Boy, 14, London

I don't like the ones where they show teens as being rude to parents or nasty and disrespecting older people, and grumpy...it's not really like that at all, nobody I've met would treat adults in that way. It's a stereotype based on assumptions.

Girl, 15, York

Whilst teens generally claimed that the roles and characteristics of male characters in adverts were stereotypical, reactions to adverts tended to introduce a more complex view as some initially identified with some of the male characteristics depicted. An example of this was an advert for a mobile phone game depicting a boxer who displayed physical aggression. Spontaneous comments suggested that some boys found his behaviour attractive and engaging. A more considered response from these same boys indicated that adverts promoting these types of characteristics were potentially harmful in terms of encouraging others to feel the need to show aggression, or that being weak was not acceptable.

It says that men are fighters and the physically dominant gender. This ad is all about his muscles and tattoos. But not all men are aggressive and neither are all leaders that way either. He's so aggressive and barbaric, way too confident.

Boy, 14, London

It looks quite attractive, he's quite entertaining, he shouldn't really say those things but he does

Boy, 14, London

I don't particularly like the ad because it's saying a man has to be a certain way, like intense and masculine, very traditional, stereotypical, it's implying men have to be strong and brave and can't really back down from anything.

Girl, 14, York

The majority of teen boys could not decide or articulate whether some male characteristics as portrayed in adverts were stereotypical and potentially harmful or offensive. This was demonstrated in an advert for a men's grooming product which portrayed a range of male characteristics. On a spontaneous level the majority of teen boys were initially drawn to the style of the advert and the rebellious nature of the characters but their considered view concluded that whilst the product was intended to make males feel confident, they found the roles to be stereotypical and could promote bad behaviour. Although they identified the message as promoting confidence and being more outgoing, the scenarios and character depictions did not resonate. Overall, the conclusion for the majority was that the advert was not harmful because it promoted positive aspirations, and although a small minority detected something slightly more sinister with the advert they were not able to fully understand the message.

The advert included a wide range of types of men and an ambiguous stereotype-challenging scenario but these nuances were not picked up on.

They are the sort of people who have lots of money and like to show off.

I'm bothered by the fact that the ad is trying to say you need to do all these things to be a good person.

Boy, 14, Norwich

Whilst teen boys felt that portrayals of girls and women in advertising seemed to be somewhat stereotypical in terms of roles and characteristics, teen girls felt that portrayals were sometimes more nuanced and included aspirational qualities which made them feel confident and empowered.

Stereotypical representations were often denoted by physical appearance, with girls often shown in gender-stereotypical colours or outfits. Similar to parents of pre-schoolers' views of the portrayals of younger children in advertising, teen girls also felt they were stereotyped in terms of characteristics and activities performed. This was evident for some teens in a perfume advert depicting a group of young women in floaty, pastel dresses playing with daisy chains. However, other teen girls identified with the roles depicted in this advert and were willing to acknowledge their own child-like qualities.

My friend does all of those things, every summer she makes me go and find some daisies so she can make a daisy chain and then she'll run round in a white dress

Girl, 14, York

Some adverts aimed at young women were believed to challenge stereotypes to an extent. Whilst teen girls generally did not identify readily with elements of stereotyping such as physical appearance contained in adverts they did identify with other aspects such as scenarios, the message or overall tone of an advert. This was evident in a perfume advert showing a young

woman wearing a pale pink ballet tutu-style dress but who was portrayed by a celebrity singer and actress indicating a sense of agency and exuding a positive and confident air.

The whole advert relies on you liking Ariana Grande, girl power, fun, and she's pretty innocent, toned down and a nice role model to young girls.

Girl, 15, York

Traditional girl, fluffy and giggly, pink, dainty, soft

Girl, 15, York

Another advert for a mobile phone game brand conveyed a different message to teen girls, where a woman was shown to be a sexualised leader of an army with a retinue of followers. Teen girls did not identify with the role in this advert and perceived a conflict between the intended message of female power and the woman's appearance which focused on a sexualised depiction. Teen girls reflected that this portrayal was stereotypical in that a woman was not allowed to portray her own power without it being linked to her appearance. Whilst the majority of teen boys identified with the female role in the advert it was evident, on reflection, that this was because of her sexualised appearance rather than her leadership characteristics. In discussing her role as leader, boys also demonstrated that they did not yet identify that a woman could be powerful on her own terms.

Makes me really uncomfortable, yes she can lead an army but she'll have to be rescued by a man in the end. She doesn't look like she's fighting a war, more like she's going on a photo shoot.

Girl, 14, York

It shows that women can do men's jobs as well.

Boy, 14, London

4.1.3 Portrayal of the perfect person or scenario

Portrayals of perfection were noted by participants (especially parents of pre-schoolers) with regards to the depiction of families. The way in which parents and children were shown and the way parents were portrayed when interacting with children was perceived as unrealistic and this was evident in a number of toy adverts where parents and /or children were typically depicted as happy and relaxed and 'perfect'.

They're all just so cheesy and boring and unrealistic.

Parent/ pre-schooler, Norwich

You see all this perfect family stuff and in reality hardly anyone is a perfect family really. It makes you feel depressed, some families don't like each other and stuff and it's not really like that.

Female, 20-34, York

Parents noted that in real life these scenarios would typically be more emphasized or frenetic, with both children and the home environment looking very different to the adverts. It was evident from

some parents' comments about the perfection demonstrated in adverts that this 'perfect' portrayal made them feel negatively about themselves.

It's all so boring and cheesy, Mum and Dad joining the kids at the bath tub is not realistic.

Parent/ Pre-schooler, Glasgow

If more than one child is shown playing with a toy they look relaxed, the kids look perfect, clean and tidy, well it's not like that in my house. You're so used to it so you're OK with it but you know that you won't achieve it the way they show things in the ads, and how kids actually play. It's like watching models, like you can't quite get there. They need to show the rough and tumble of kids playing with the toys, be more relaxed like real life, have a balance, make the kids look less perfect so you can relate to it more, I'm not talking about having scruffy kids. [In the ads] they only play with one toy at a time, it's like they have no other toys.

Parent/ Pre-schooler, Norwich

With this in mind, participants often responded positively to adverts that they felt showed greater realism in terms of family make-up and interactions.

[Homework pre-task] I liked that the children are shown to be a normal family with kids fighting... but they ultimately love each other.

Parent/pre-schooler, Glasgow

[Homework pre-task] The thing I like the best is that there was no 'father figure' in the advert .Shows that there is such a thing as a perfect family as a single parent

Female, young family, York

4.2 Attitudes towards gender roles and characteristics in advertising: adults

Overall adult participants felt that many of the adverts viewed showed old-fashioned roles and characteristics of men and women that either did not reflect society nowadays or simply showed a clichéd view of men and women. They largely did not feel that these stereotypes were offensive or harmful, but did feel that they were uninspiring, lacking diversity and suggested that the advertising industry is 'behind the times'

4.2.1 Relationships

Participants commented on ways in which family and romantic relationships were shown in adverts.

Family relationships

Whilst all participants identified with the role of mums and dads in adverts, this was strongest amongst those who were parents with children living at home. Overall, participants felt that mums and dads were often shown in stereotypical ways. For example, participants felt that it was stereotypical to show the female or 'mum' in a cleaning, tidying or cooking role. Whilst this was considered a 'typical' and 'old-fashioned' stereotype, it was also considered by many to be reflective of real life roles in many families.

It is the women that do the cleaning isn't it.

Female, 20-34, York

Some participants were shown television adverts for vacuum cleaners. One of these adverts showed the mum cleaning inside the home and the Dad cleaning the car. Whilst these roles were considered to be stereotypical, they were not considered to portray harmful or offensive stereotypes as they reflected many participants' experiences in real life.

I'm not bothered [by the advert] because that's what life is these days.

Female, 60+, York

It's not the most offensive stereotype I've seen. Okay, men take pride in their car more than a woman...it's not offensive. That one is realistic.

Female, 25-44, London

Participants also noted that there are often stereotypes with regards to the division of childcare in families. A few male participants noticed that one advert shown in the research advertising a pram, only showed the mum and baby, which to them felt excluding to the role of dads, who were also likely to push prams. This advert felt less reflective of real life roles to these participants. Whilst they did not consider this stereotype problematic, they did feel that it lacked the inclusivity of different family roles.

Another advert shown in the research, advertising a vacuum cleaner, showed a dad holding a baby and a mum dressed in a suit cleaning the kitchen. Participants felt that this advert demonstrated shared responsibilities in the household and was therefore reflective of real life families.

It's realistic isn't it? You both have to get on and do it and muddle along together.

Female, 60+, York

Participants were positive towards the portrayal of the dad as looking after the baby and the fact that the mum looked like she was going to work; some felt that this went some way to address old-fashioned stereotypes.

I like the way that they made her do the hoovering but she looks like she is going to work.

Female, 20-34, York

However, some felt that the advert had the potential to go further in challenging traditional stereotypes. For example, by having the male do the cleaning in the house.

Discussion of stereotypical family roles led participants to think more broadly about the diversity of families shown in adverts. The research suggests that for most participants these stereotypes opposed personal beliefs and views because they showed limited diversity in family roles. Some felt that the advertising industry could do more to reflect real life diversity of family make-up.

Nowadays it could be two Dads, couldn't there, in a family. There could be like children in that situation watching TV and they might be able to think there are other people like me...

...it would be nice for children to see different family types and things.

Female, 20-34, York

Romantic relationships

Participants often struggled to identify with roles and people portrayed in adverts where the people in the advert seemed too 'unrealistic' based on how they looked or how they behaved. Extreme or unlikely behaviours (such as the extreme 'bad boy' behaviour shown in one perfume advert looked at during the research) made characters in adverts feel unrealistic and therefore difficult to relate to. This meant that the relevant character was often not taken seriously.

Where participants behaved or looked more realistic, participants found it easier to relate to the character. Participants tended to feel more strongly about the way a gender was portrayed where one aspect of the portrayal was easy to relate to (e.g. the person looked realistic) but another aspect of the portrayal challenged their personal beliefs and views (e.g. the person was carrying out an inappropriate behaviour).

Where people shown in adverts exhibited behaviours that participants personally disagreed with they tended to feel less comfortable about the stereotype being portrayed. Participants noted that in perfume adverts, women were often shown in a submissive role and males in an assertive role.

The man is playing the active role isn't he...you know he's the hunter sort of thing...and the women are kind of passively...it gives quite a passive version of women I think.

Male, 60+, York

[Men are portrayed] better...women are shown as second class citizens.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

Every time you see a man it is quite stereotyped, they are in a manly advert. Or...he is buying her a present.

Female, 20-34, York

The behaviour that accompanied this relationship often determined whether participants felt positively or negatively towards it. This differed across participants depending on whether the behaviour displayed by the person in the advert was felt to oppose personal beliefs and behaviours.

For example one perfume advert – showing a man giving lifts to different women on his bike – was perceived by female participants to portray a positive desirable, chivalrous behavior, whilst male participants felt that this displayed a negative promiscuous behaviour. Male participants expressed concern that this negative behaviour could be sending out a negative message about how men behave to children.

All the perfume ads show gallant men and young beautiful women in rich surroundings, I don't think this one is out of the ordinary, they aren't the usual couple, it's a bit like a chick flick, you know it's not realistic but it's OK. I can imagine my 21 year old son doing something like that and I would hope my daughter if someone did that to her wouldn't be offended, he isn't abusing her in any way.

Female, Hall test Manchester

Men can just walk up to women and tell them 'get on my...bike' – and that's not okay – and I wouldn't want my kids to think that you can do that – plus he doesn't even speak to her!

Male, 18-24, Belfast

4.2.2 Roles and aspirations

Broadly speaking, some participants felt that the advertising industry had moved on from stereotypical roles. For example, male participants noted that men now advertised male personal care products showing more diverse male characteristics.

There's not enough diversity, not enough variety of how men and women are portrayed...but it's a lot better than it used to be.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

Things have changed massively in my lifetime – there's nothing you couldn't put a man on the telly doing...men can't be just seen as the caveman thing.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

However, this was not the case for all advertising, and male participants also commented that some adverts continued to use gender stereotypes which they felt were old-fashioned and dated.

I feel like I'm watching something from 10 years ago, this is what adverts used to be like back then.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

In terms of roles and characteristics, participants felt that women were stereotyped by being depicted in caring or service roles in the household.

Female participants in particular noted where adverts showed women in stereotypical roles, often commenting that women were shown in the kitchen, or carrying out related domestic tasks. Participants struggled to identify with this message because they felt that this type of portrayal was limited and lacked diversity of the roles that women carry out in real life. For example, one advert for an online estate agent told the story of a male soldier selling his property and using the money he made to buy a new kitchen for his wife. These participants were frustrated that the male was buying a kitchen for the female, noting that it was very stereotypical and did not reflect modern life where women can be soldiers, men often do the cooking, and many chefs are male.

In this day and age there is no excuse for not having a female soldier on there.

Female, 25-44, London

Why has he got to buy her a new kitchen? Why not a new car?

Female, 25-44, London

It's like how stereotypical can you get? Like how, you know, buying her a kitchen I mean, come on. It is pathetic to be honest with you, but it's not shocking is it.

Female, 25-44, London

Participants also noticed some adverts adopted a judgmental tone when depicting some types of females characteristics e.g. only interested in cleaning or items such as handbags.

There is a stereotypical image of a woman in ads, she's always cleaning.

Boy, 14, London

[It's] almost as if it's the woman's job to clean, as opposed to domestic chores that anyone in the house can do.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Nursing seems to be advertised more for women than men.

Female, Young family, London

Despite frustration regarding the way in which women are portrayed, most did not find this stereotype offensive but did feel that it lacked imagination and missed an opportunity to show something different.

Participants were also aware that men may be portrayed using a narrow range of characteristics. For example, a husband was often shown as lazy, stupid or not taking responsibility for household tasks.

Roles and aspirations for children were also discussed by participants who felt that some adverts suggested that children should have stereotypical gender-based aspirations. Whilst parents found inclusion of children in the advert personally relevant, they often struggled to identify with the roles and suggested aspirations for children as this challenged their personal beliefs and views.

Across the research some parents felt strongly about adverts that showed gender-based aspirations for children. For example, an advert for infant formula shown in the research depicted a girl growing up to be a ballerina, and two boys growing up to be a scientist and an explorer. Participants queried why these roles needed to be stereotyped.

I got the memo, boys do computers and science.

Now I notice that, that it's different between the girls and the boys...just a ballerina and the boy is like the conqueror...

...the girl could become a doctor...why don't we do that instead of just a ballerina.

Female, 25-44, London

This type of stereotyping was considered old-fashioned but also a limited representation of the diverse careers that men and women have. This opposed beliefs amongst parents who thought that children could aspire to any career regardless of gender. Whilst most participants did not feel that this type of stereotyping was offensive or harmful, they did feel that there was a missed opportunity to show greater diversity of gender roles and aspirations.

Ethnic minority mums in London identified with the ethnic diversity of children shown in adverts, but felt that these often showed both gender and ethnicity stereotypes. The combination of these stereotypes was difficult to untangle. They felt that the infant formula advert unnecessarily labelled children as having specific characteristics. Whilst participants felt positively towards defining a girl as an adventurer they queried why a girl, for example needed to be defined as a social butterfly, and why a boy was not given this 'label'.

I like that they put the adventurer next to this girl but I don't like the social butterfly...

Female, 25-44, London

Equally they queried why it was the white boy who out of all of the children was labelled as the scholar. Overall these mums felt that it was inappropriate to label children in this way.

If they wanted titles they could do something like, you know outfits for the little social butterflies, just put it across the top...not put them by specific children looking a specific way, specific gender, specific race...really inappropriate.

Female, 25-44, London

Whilst they were not certain that their own children would pick up on this type of labelling they felt that, more broadly, it was problematic to suggest that certain children belonged in certain boxes as it could suggest limitations on roles for genders and ethnicities.

Sometimes they'll [children] just internalize these things and it's not good putting them into boxes.

Female, 25-44, London

4.2.3 Portrayal of the perfect person or scenario

Participants reflected that many adverts showed men and women as 'perfect', in idealised scenarios. Most participants noted that this type of portrayal was not problematic and there was an expectation that adverts would show perfection and idealised situations. Participants agreed that this perfection was not 'real life' and was therefore unrealistic and not something that they would take at face value. However, they did feel that it would be nice to see more realistic adverts.

Participants agreed that it was appealing to see attractive 'perfect' people and situations in adverts. However, where participants strongly identified (themselves or on behalf of other groups in society) with the people or scenarios they began to feel that this type of portrayal could promote an unrealistic and unattainable lifestyle or image that could make more vulnerable groups in society feel negative about themselves. This was particularly the case where participants felt that an advert was targeting a specific group in society that was known to be vulnerable. For example, one advert for a pram identified a new mum as a style icon for her child. Those who identified with the person and

scenario (parents and those who were close to people with young children) felt that this was an unrealistic image of a new mum and suggested that new mums should look a certain ‘perfect’ way. With this in mind, participants felt that this advert could be pressurizing new mums to conform to this ideal.

Is that a real advert? I think that's pathetic. I looked like a sack of spuds when my babies were small, I dread to think what they would have said about me. I had terrible postnatal depression, you're in a very vulnerable place when you have a baby and I would hate to think people are having that added pressure when there are so many more important things going on.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

I'm not bothered by it because I'm older now and I don't take life so seriously, but I could imagine a couple of young girls I work with, and I know when I had my first one you feel pressured to look nice and get the best pram and there is so much pressure nowadays.

Female, older family, Hall test, Manchester

It is pressure on women – have got to look amazing six weeks after birth or whatever.

Female, 20-34, York

Mums and Dads for that matter are under enough pressure as it is without having an advert in Facebook telling them they have to dress in [a certain way].

Male, 18-24, Belfast

The portrayal of the perfect home was also noted by participants. Especially when shown in the context of having a baby/ young family, participants felt that the portrayal of the perfect home was unrealistic.

I feel that all this perfection is pushed at you. So when our youngsters do actually get married they expect their first house is going to be exactly like that.

Male, 60+, York

My house was never like that, I was pleased if we were all washed and dressed by midday.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

There was some discussion regarding whether this perfect portrayal was promoting a problematic message. Participants agreed that they expected adverts to show perfect and aspirational images and whilst they knew that these were not realistic, they were not considered to be problematic.

5 Attitudes towards objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising

Chapter summary:

These themes were explored with adults and teens (where appropriate to age, teenagers were also shown adverts with different portrayals of the male and female body).

- The use of objectification, sexualisation and portrayal of body image in advertising was a topic of much debate across the research, with three broad areas generating discussion.
- **Attractiveness:** Adults felt that adverts promoted a problematic message to society where they ridiculed those not considered to be stereotypically attractive. This was often conflated with views that there was lack of diversity in the types of people shown in adverts. Whilst teen boys were reticent to comment on attractiveness of people portrayed in adverts, teen girls noted that the way that females looked in adverts were often aspirational and could make people feel negatively about the way they personally look.
- **Portrayal of the perfect body:** Adults felt that adverts often portrayed a perfect, idealised body or way to look and were cynical that techniques were often used (e.g. photo-shopping) which resulted in the portrayal of something that was unattainable.
- Participants agreed that care needed to be exercised when promoting a body image that could be seen by vulnerable groups including children. Teen girls recognised that many adverts portrayed the perfect body. The more 'perfect' the body shown in an advert, the more participants felt that the advert could pressurise people to feel negatively about themselves, and want to change their own appearance.
- **Objectification and sexualisation:** Adults felt that the objectification of men and women was old-fashioned, particularly where these adverts overtly used objectification to appeal to a member of the opposite sex.
- Participants generally felt more negatively about adverts that were considered to objectify or sexualise where the person depicted wore few clothes, were shown in a sexual pose and were shown in a situation that suggested problematic behaviour (that challenged participants' personal beliefs and views) in a realistic setting.
- Whilst teen boys expressed some discomfort in discussing adverts showing men wearing few clothes in sexualised poses, teen girls were more overtly critical towards adverts that used nudity and sexualised poses, believing that they could create unrealistic expectations and could encourage young women to emulate this behaviour.

This chapter explores reactions to objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising amongst:

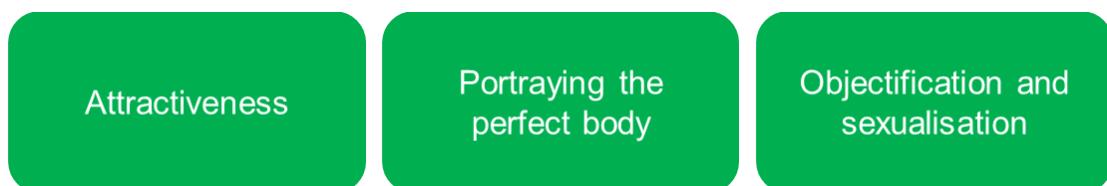
- Adults
- Teens (where appropriate to age, teenagers were also shown adverts with different portrayals of the male and female body)

ASA's definitions of objectification and sexualisation are as follows:

- Objectification is when the viewer is invited to view women or men as sex objects. This may involve depicting individuals as sexual objects in a way that could be seen as demeaning, subservient, exploitative, degrading or humiliating ways, or portraying them as controlled by others. Examples may include focusing on a person's body while obscuring their faces or if a woman is included in an ad in a way that is unrelated to the advertised product in order to draw attention to an ad. Such portrayals are often, but not always, presented in a sexual manner.
- Sexualisation is when women or men are presented in an overly sexualised manner, typically through imagery that depicts or is highly suggestive of sexual acts, sexual pleasure or being sexually available. Concerns with sexualisation are much more likely to arise when ads depict young people in a sexualised manner.
- Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self. It encompasses how they see themselves and how they believe others see them, as well as the thoughts, emotions and behaviours that accompany those perceptions.

The use of objectification, sexualisation and portrayal of body image in advertising was a topic of much debate across the research. Participants agreed that adverts did not always need to be realistic and could be aspirational but felt that care needed to be exercised when promoting messages that could be seen by vulnerable groups including children.

Participant responses are broken down into three broad categories:



Attractiveness

Views regarding attractiveness were influenced by two **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: where participants identified personally, or on behalf of other groups in society, they tended to feel more strongly about the gender portrayal. Views tended to be more negative towards adverts where participants noted that the types of people defined as attractive in adverts lacked diversity, and where adverts ridiculed those who did not conform to certain norms.
- Personal beliefs and views: where participants felt that the gender portrayals suggested an unrealistic version of the male or female 'norm' and therefore advocated something that was unattainable they tended to feel negatively about the portrayal.

Portraying the perfect body

Views regarding the portrayal of the perfect body were influenced by three **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: views tended to be more negative where participants identified with the role or person depicted in the advert and felt that it showed an idealised and unattainable body image.
- Personal beliefs and views: where adverts portrayed perfect and unrealistic body images participants expressed concern that these could promote distorted ‘norms’ to children, and promote unattainable aspirations.
- Resonance of the scenario depicted: a few participants cited unrealistic settings in adverts as a reason to distance themselves from the idealised body images being portrayed.

Objectification and sexualisation

Views regarding the use of objectification and sexualisation of men and women in adverts were influenced by three **primary** factors:

- Identification with the role or person depicted: views tended to be more negative where participants identified with the role or person depicted in the advert and felt that it showed an unacceptable behaviour e.g. overtly sexualised behaviour.
- Personal beliefs and views: whilst often considered an old-fashioned approach to advertising, participants felt that the sexualisation and objectification of men or women could promote inappropriate behaviours where participants deemed the portrayal to use gratuitous nudity and sexualised poses. This was particularly the case where this was not considered to be relevant to the product being advertised.
- Resonance of the scenario depicted: participants felt more negatively towards gender portrayals where they recognized and identified with a setting of an advert but felt that the advert promoted unacceptable behaviours for that setting e.g. overtly sexualised behaviours in a public place.

Detailed findings regarding objectification, sexualisation and body image are discussed below. This is split into reactions from adults and teens.

5.1 Attitudes towards objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising: adults

This section of the chapter details adult views regarding objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising.

5.1.1 Attractiveness

Participants noted that adverts typically included ‘young, good looking’ people. This was particularly the case for adverts promoting luxury products.

.....

“I think adverts for like perfume, clothing, you can accept that it’s going to be attractive people, it goes with it, you want to feel nice and it is luxury. Whereas household things, like washing up liquid, that can be different families and things, so it depends on the product doesn’t it.”

.....

Female, 20-34, York

.....

Many felt that adverts show stereotypical and unrealistic body images.

.....

“In these adverts they’re always impossibly good looking aren’t they, the men and women. That’s unrealistic isn’t it?”

Male, 60+, York

Participants noted that some adverts showed and ridiculed people who were not stereotypically attractive. For example, one advert used the image of an older female with a fuller figure suggesting that if men began to find her attractive, they had drunk too much alcohol and should call a taxi to go home. Whilst some participants initially found this type of advert funny, they also felt uncomfortable about the way in which those who do not conform to stereotypes are portrayed.

"It is very insulting actually since it's a lady with a fuller figure."

Male, 60+, York

Ridiculing those not considered to be stereotypically attractive challenged participants' personal beliefs and views and therefore was considered to be problematic in the message they presented to society. This was often conflated with views that there was lack of diversity in the types of people shown in adverts

5.1.2 Portraying the perfect body

Across the research participants frequently observed that adverts portrayed a perfect, idealised body or way to look.

Women...underwear adverts and stuff like that.....they always look perfect don't they?

Females, 20-34, York

I don't think women are portrayed as we are in everyday life, expectations are too high.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

Whilst participants noted that they expected to see attractive people in adverts, they queried the message these types of adverts presented to society. Participants tended to feel most strongly about the portrayal of the perfect body when they identified with the person shown in the advert personally, or on behalf of other groups in society. For example, women identified with the portrayal of women of a similar age, and some men felt more strongly about these images if they had a daughter of a similar age.

They try to reel you in, like you think that is what I would look like when I buy it and you are definitely not going to look like that.

Female, 20-34, York

Many participants were cynical of the techniques adopted by advertisers and felt that depictions of gender frequently introduced an 'unattainable perfection' for both genders in terms of appearance. Participants were often aware that adverts were photo-shopped which was felt to increase societal expectations of perfection.

Everyone looks too perfect...it is like Photoshop and stuff...it is like a fake image. They don't even actually look like that.

Females, 18-24, London

Whilst aware that celebrities were used to increase the appeal of products, participants were not clear about the role of the celebrity other than to contribute to these unrealistic expectations.

The type of product being advertised impacted how participants felt about the portrayal of the perfect body in adverts. For example, adverts for cosmetic procedures were considered to be potentially harmful because they could pressurize women into thinking negatively about themselves, and that they needed these procedures to conform to the 'perfect body'.

"It is a bit stereotypical because it is you know, it is a gorgeous woman and doesn't need any sort of fillers."

Female, 20-34, York

Where the perfect body was shown to advertise a health product views across participants were more mixed. Some felt that it was more appropriate to show this type of body image because it was shown alongside people exercising and putting effort into achieving their body whilst others felt that the advert negatively conflated health and beauty.

I got really angry about it and wrote a blog post, beauty and fitness/ health are not associated, you can be strong and happy without it. It says women have to be attractive to men in a certain way.

Female, age 18-24, Hall test, Cardiff

Some participants tended to identify with these types of adverts because they reinforced personal beliefs and ambitions of working out to achieve the perfect body; this message was considered to be aspirational.

However, others expressed skepticism and queried whether it was realistic that somebody could achieve that type of body. For example, some noted that if a man was in an advert performing physical or sporting activities they were usually shown in peak physical shape.

These participants felt that the health product advert was too unrealistic, and coupled with an unrealistic scenario that held limited resonance (exercising on a sunny beach obviously not in the UK); they distanced themselves from the advert. These participants further suspected that images were photo-shopped or air-brushed to give an unrealistic body image in adverts. Because of this they felt that they would personally take the advert 'with a pinch of salt' but expressed concern for younger boys and girls or those with body image anxieties who could take these adverts at face value.

Some participants described real life experiences of friends and family feeling pressurized to make changes to their body based on societal pressure to conform to the perfect body depicted in advertising and across other platforms.

"People are having that done more and more. I've got a friend in her 20s and she is already having lip fillers because of the pressure on social media."

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

“My brother started working out a couple of years ago and went really far, taking tablets and shakes and was at the gym twice a day and it all worked for him but I thought it was excessive.”

Female, 18-29, Bristol

Participants further expressed concerns about adverts portraying the perfect body, particularly if they were clearly seen to be aimed at a potentially vulnerable group in society. For example, one advert looked at during the research was for a cosmetic procedure and aimed at mums. Participants expressed concern regarding this, noting that new mums in particular were often vulnerable, and this advert could pressurize them to think negatively about themselves and the way they look.

“I had a baby and I couldn’t care less about things like that, but you get all these people saying you do what you want and don’t put pressure on yourself, but in a sense that is what this whole thing is, if you were kind of in that state of mind...”

...yeah, you are feeling a bit down anyway and think you need fillers.”

Females, 20-34, York

Reacting to these types of adverts, some participants simply noted that they did not feel that the advert was aimed at them, and therefore distanced themselves from these types of adverts. In some cases, participants noted that the product being advertised was unaffordable and therefore must be aimed at someone else. Others distanced themselves from these types of adverts by noting that they were ‘unrealistic’ and did not reflect real life.

Participants tended to react positively to adverts that used more ‘normal’ looking people as this provided greater diversity of the types of bodies shown in adverts.

“He wasn’t ripped, and he wasn’t smoothly waxed like some people are now, so he did look a bit like the average Joe...they didn’t pick...someone who was overly tall, overly muscly.”

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

5.1.3 Objectification and sexualisation

Across the research participants noted adverts that used sexualisation and objectification of men and women. In some cases – particularly where the female body was considered to be sexualised and / or objectified – the use of this approach in advertising was considered to be old-fashioned and out of date. Some noted that it was less usual to see men portrayed in this way.

“Makes a change to see men objectified, you see it all the time for women.”

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

It’s about time men were objectified isn’t it?

Female, 18-24, Hall test, Cardiff

Adverts were considered to be old-fashioned and dated where participants felt they used the male or female body to appeal to the opposite sex. Some felt that this approach gave adverts a 'cheap' and 'tacky' feel making the advert less relatable and not something that would be taken seriously.

"Doesn't even mean anything to me, I probably wouldn't even read it. I would look at it and then not think of it

Female, 20-34 York

"It's obvious that he's a good looking man and she fancies him. It may be a bit dated and behind the times. But I don't see how anyone could be bothered by it."

Male, 37, Brighton

This was particularly the case for adverts that had lower production values, and used humour, further endorsing the idea that the advert was not something to be taken seriously. Some younger females noted that they would just 'dismiss' this type of advert when they came across it.

"It is just a silly advertisement."

Female, 18-24, London

With this in mind, at a spontaneous level some participants felt that the objectification of the body as a way to appeal to the opposite sex was not offensive, but was old-fashioned and 'uninspiring'.

However, once participants had reflected on the content of these types of adverts, some expressed concerns. A couple of participants noted they would feel embarrassed coming across these types of adverts with their children.

"If I was with my mates I'd probably laugh at it, but if it was on at a certain time and the kids were in the car...it would probably make me feel a little embarrassed."

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Females might be uncomfortable about the joke he used...If they played the ad while my children were in the car I wouldn't want them to hear it.

Female, 30-44, Birmingham

A few others began to question whether adverts of this type could prey on insecurities of some women.

"I think because we hear things like that all the time. So we just kind of brush it off sometimes."

Female, 18-24, London

"I don't really mind but there could be like girls who do think oh, I don't have big boobs, you know, it could be sad for somebody."

Female, 18-24, London

“Women are just objectified, it says women are cheap, it might make some feel they need to look like that...it wouldn’t pressure me to look like that, as you get older you know your own mind, but on younger women it might.”

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

Overall, across the research participants agreed that the way in which the body was shown (e.g. amount of clothing and pose) and the advert scenario impacted their views. Participants generally felt more negatively about adverts, and the extent to which these could be offensive or harmful where the person depicted wore few clothes, were shown in a sexual pose and were shown in a situation that suggested problematic behaviour (that challenged participants' personal beliefs and views) in a realistic setting. These factors are discussed below.

Nudity

The majority of participants noted that in portrayals of women there was an expectation of glamour. Women in particular felt their representations often contained nudity even where it was not required and portrayals adopted physical perfection, were often oversexualised, and sometimes also objectified women. Whilst men echoed this view, they often formulated this conclusion after some debate and discussion suggesting that this issue was more top of mind for women.

Women...I think they can be oversexualised or they have to be like half naked for you to pay attention to them, or you know, there is always a woman with a bra on or something. It is never about women empowerment. It is always about being sexy.

Female, 18-24, London

It's no longer okay for women to be shown as sex symbol but they are often shown in a glamorous way which is not reflective of the real world.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Everything is perfection and if you're a woman you need to be polished and if you haven't got your full slap on you're not worth breathing air, and you have to have perfect children.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

[In an advert for cream cheese] I disliked the way the mother was glamorous and acted in a seductive way about the product.

Female, 20-34, , York

Participants felt that gratuitous nudity emphasized the sexualisation and objectification of the body in adverts. This was particularly noted where nudity was not considered to have any relevance to the advertised product.

“The naked woman advertising e-cigarettes, what's it got to do with that?”

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

“It is kind of like, what has being naked got to do with it?”

Female, 18-24, London

"It didn't bother me because if you think about that there wasn't a lot of full body shots...those people genuinely working out with bottoms on and things like that."

Female, 20-34, York

Whilst a few participants felt that nudity could be used in advertising conceptually to convey a deeper message, or in an artistic way, most felt that gratuitous unrelated nudity was unnecessary. For example, one advert showed a muscly naked man on a train. A couple of participants expressed concern around the decency of this advert noting that they would not be comfortable if their child saw it.

"I wouldn't want my daughter to see it. I wouldn't want a young child to see it really, he is almost naked."

Female, 20-34, York

Some also queried whether showing a naked man on a train set a positive example to younger people both in terms of behaviour in a realistic and recognisable setting, and a 'perfect' body image.

"I think it would have an effect on young lads, I think they are more conscious of how they look nowadays aren't they?"

Female, 20-34, York

Whilst it was clear that participants expected adverts (particularly within the perfume category) to use the female body to convey femininity, it was clear that for some, the extent of nudity in some adverts challenged views on the acceptable portrayal of the female body.

"It's way too much – I can't believe that someone's said that that's okay – it's so not okay."

Male, 18-24, Belfast

"It's a bog standard advert for a perfume but they've pushed it further by showing more flesh."

Male, 37, Brighton

Pose

Participants often had a negative reaction to adverts that showed a sexualised pose of the body which they felt was overly suggestive. Active poses which were considered to be telling a story or demonstrating a behaviour that participants disliked or challenged their personal beliefs often generated the most concern across the research. For example, one advert showed a woman in a sexually provocative pose in a setting that some associated with a 'strip club'.

"That's a bit extreme...can I say pornographic...just the way her legs are splayed, unnecessary."

Male, 60+, York

.....

"It is definitely making women look like ...there is no standards. Well just for sex and for looking pretty. She is even looking quite suggestively at the camera."

Female, 18-24, London

"I think it's modern but suggestive. I think it's just a bit too far really."

Female, 60+, York

"It's make-up so why she's got to have her legs akimbo...it looks like a crotch shot...it's almost as if it's in a brothel."

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

.....

Another advert showed a woman in a sexually provocative pose dressed in a style associated with young children, and in a room with children's toys. The use of childhood images also led to personal discomfort amongst participants. The pose of the female body was considered to be overly suggestive, and when coupled with childhood images some participants felt that this advert was inappropriate.

"I'm very uncomfortable, having a teenage daughter myself, with the image and the way that it is portrayed."

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

"It's bringing out a sexual aspect of something that doesn't have to be sexual...it's making it appear like it is appropriate for a young girl to [act like] a young woman."

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

"Why's her leg up like that? It's sexual and inappropriate."

Female, 25-44, London

"She's infantilised in this picture. She's in a dolls house wearing frilly little girls socks and she does have a childish face anyway. So it's like they've kind of sexualised...child's things."

Female, 25-44, London

Scenario and behaviour

Resonance with the scenario depicted in an advert and personal acceptability of the behaviour portrayed, impacted participant views. For example, one advert showed a man dancing alone in his home behind closed doors in his underwear and another advert showed a female standing in front of an over-looked window naked.

Participants felt that the former advert featuring the man was reflective of something that could happen in real life and dancing in underwear behind closed doors was considered to be an acceptable behaviour. Whilst some were unconvinced that there was relevance between the level of nudity and the product (an item of furniture), they did not feel that the advert promoted a negative message.

The advert featuring the woman caused more debate across the research. Some participants queried why the female was standing naked in front of a window where others could see. Some felt that this could suggest to younger people that this kind of behaviour was acceptable. A few participants queried that broader narrative of the advert, suggesting it could be viewed in different ways.

"I think children tend to copy what they see and I will be damned if I walk in on my sister, there in front of the window and the curtains open naked."

Female, 18-24, London

"Maybe it could be trying to say, show women as sexually empowered."

Female, 18-24, London

"This one has thrown me a bit, maybe she has had a one night stand and is prancing about, this is provocative."

Female, 18-29, Bristol

This particular advert showed a black woman. Whilst some were positive about the inclusion of a black woman in the advert as an example of greater diversity in advertising, a couple questioned why a black woman had been chosen.

"It is objectifying her because you can see all the butt and her expression suggests the behaviour is cool. Why a black woman? Are they suggesting she is a prostitute? Why not a man?"

Female, 30-44, Birmingham

5.2 Attitudes towards objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising: teens

This section of chapter 6 details teen views towards objectification, sexualisation and body image in advertising. Where appropriate to age, teenagers were also shown adverts with different portrayals of the male and female body.

Generally both boys and girls were aware of objectification, body image and sexualisation in advertising and found this to be stereotypical and unrealistic. Girls commented more readily than boys but both had noticed that females in adverts tended to be represented using a very limited body type.

[Collage of ads showing teens]...they're not really showing our age-they aim at people our age but they use models who look older – 16 or 17.

Girl, 14, York

[Discussing homework pre-task] The one at the bottom I didn't like because it sounds like you have to have beauty wishes and you can't be happy with how you actually look. The adverts have to give you something that will make you feel better. It really mucks your confidence and I don't like it.

Girl, 15, York

[They use] stereotypical things like pretty, skinny girls with big boobs and a big bum, and really fit men. There are other ads that are different because they're not using models so it doesn't make you feel as if you need to be skinny, so you feel a bit more comfortable.

Girl, 13, Bristol

Both boys and girls also noticed that men were generally represented in a limited way.

Sporty, muscly, and with tattoos

Boy, 14, London

It makes us more insecure about ourselves...like girls have to be so skinny and that it's easy to use and show off your body. They don't respect us for our personality, they respect us for our bodies.

Girl, 13, Bristol

Both boys and girls also spontaneously commented that women may be objectified in adverts as they seemed to be represented more often wearing fewer clothes, especially when portrayed with a man, who would more often be wearing clothes. Girls also noticed that their face may be obscured in adverts. This suggested to both boys and girls that women were respected more for their bodies than men. Girls also reflected that this suggested that women needed to look a certain way in order to be desirable to others, and this included being highly sexual, exposed or 'perfect' and that these body images were what men wanted from women, and were easy to achieve.

Both boys and girls felt these representations were unrealistic and did not reflect people in their own life but had noticed they were also used within other media such as films and TV.

Whilst girls were able to admit to and 'own' their feelings about these representations of females, boys were initially more reticent and claimed that they were desensitized towards adverts. However, it was evident that they were less willing or able to articulate their personal views in a group of peers and were embarrassed by the moderator's questions. Instead, they tended to 'project' their feelings by expressing concern on behalf of others including girls and those who may feel vulnerable.

5.2.1 Attractiveness

Overall teens spontaneously noted that advertising used attractive people. Some noted that this was the case where an attractive person was not perceived necessary to advertise the product.

Some of the adverts viewed by teens in the research focused on the suggestion that improving physical appearance was necessary to become more attractive to others.

Whilst boys were generally aware that adverts used mainly attractive people, they focused more on male body image and/ or characteristics than male attractiveness per se. They claimed that 'attractiveness' was not important to them but as they were reticent at discussing male body image this may also indicate that discussing male attractiveness in a group environment is difficult for this age group.

In a men's grooming product advert depicting young male characters, boys considered the scenarios to be unrealistic and did not identify strongly with the roles portrayed. However as these scenarios included males with females, the presence of females may have introduced a reticence to discuss the scenarios.

'They are the sort of people who have lots of money and like to show off.'

Boy, 14, London

Similarly, boys found the scenario in an advert for a snack product to be unrealistic as they were not able to identify with boys at an 'LA pool party'. Again, this advert included boys partly undressed which may account for their reluctance to discuss it in detail and they perceived this advert lacked credibility and it was not seen as offensive or harmful.

Girls were aware that body images of females in adverts also focused on being attractive. This was reinforced by a number of adverts shown in the research advertising clothing and perfume. Whilst girls were aware that the body images portrayed were unrealistic, possibly fake if photoshopped, and may make some (including themselves) feel negative about the way they looked when they compared themselves to the models, the girls also acknowledged a certain aspiration to be more like the models. This introduced a tension for some girls but also reinforced that these types of attractive images were potentially harmful for 'vulnerable' people who may be insecure about their appearance.

Adverts that were shown to depict people that looked 'normal' and in an 'everyday' setting were considered to be more realistic and girls readily identified with the role and scenario in an advert for a clothing brand where a girl was portrayed wearing glasses, without make up, and wearing clothes that made her appear she was on holiday. Potential sexualisation in this advert was evidenced by the strap of the girl's top which had fallen down but her sexualisation was deemed to be minimal and not harmful.

There's a lot less make up, it's very natural and makes you think she's contented with herself, and those are clothes you'd wear, they've not gone for the stereotypical model.

Girl, 15, York

5.2.2 Portraying the perfect body

As outlined in the introduction to this section, teen girls in particular were aware that females in adverts may also conform to a stereotype of 'perfection'.

[In ads]...girls always wear make-up, are always skinny, perfect, no flaws, toned, the girls always have to show off their boobs, the men always have to show off their muscles, girls are sitting in awkward positions as if they've been told to, they don't look comfortable. You don't see the nerdy girls reading with glasses, it's always the popular girls like at school.

Girl, 13, Bristol

The more 'perfect' the body shown in an advert, the more participants felt that the advert could pressurize people to feel negatively about themselves, and want to change their own appearance.

It's a picture of someone sun bathing, it's normal, I like that it's on social media. Girls might want to be like her, pretty and skinny so they'll try their best to look like her and it could lead to harmful things like trying to lose weight."

Girl, 13, Hall test, Manchester

Perfection seemed to be more of an issue for teen girls and this was particularly the case where adverts used celebrities. They perceived that advertisers used celebrities to increase the appeal of an advert and rationally were aware that physical perfection was unattainable but also felt tension and discomfort where they identified with the celebrity used in the advert. This was noted in an advert for a clothing brand where teen girls admired the female celebrity posing in a bikini.

Even though it's swimwear you don't see much of it, it's all her. If I look on it loads I feel uncomfortable, she looks vulnerable. Most clothing brands are like that, they're all the same body type, it's very shallow, we're just here for you to look at.

Girl, 15, York

It was clear that girls recognized that these images of perfection promoted a negative message that the perfect body was attractive to boys.

I'm a very body-oriented person and as soon as I see that I'm like OMG I just want to be her but then again that's good in a way. I just think I'd like to be like that but I can't, and I know in the back of my mind it's not real. It didn't offend me or anything, but doesn't seem realistic. It's sexy, I don't think it's trying to be sexually provocative on purpose, I think it's trying to appeal to men but girls would look at it and think if I looked like that maybe that boy would like me, and girls would want that.

Girl, 15, York

Girls felt that an extreme promotion of perfection was demonstrated by an advert promoting a breast enlargement via plastic surgery and were disturbed by the suggestion of changing someone's' body as this may introduce pressure to conform or even introduce a new norm for body shape. Girls found this advert uncomfortable and believed it could potentially harm vulnerable young people who disliked their appearance.

It's quite drastic, promoting plastic surgery doesn't seem like the best idea, especially for younger audiences. Changing yourself that much isn't the only answer, you should love your body and not want to be perfect.

Girl, 15, York

Although boys did not comment spontaneously on perfection, they acknowledged that the effect of seeing such images may encourage negative feelings.

In the end you may end up feeling quite down because when you look around you everyone seems perfect.

Boy, 16, Norwich

5.2.3 Objectification and sexualisation

Across the research, there was a feeling that women in adverts were often sexualised to attract men.

[Homework pre-task] There is a woman and a man in the ad and the man is fully clothed but the woman is in a check shirt and some slippers, it's like look at the model not the clothing. It's objectifying the woman, it's saying women are more sexual than men.

Girl, 14, York

Boys and girls noted when looking at collages that some degree of nudity was present in a lot of the adverts included, especially in collages of adverts showing females. Boys noticed that females were shown adopting sexualised poses and often showed flesh when this was not related to the product. This was perceived to demonstrate objectification of women as they seemed to perform no function in an advert.

It looks like they [women] are only there to sell products.

Boy, 14, London

The sexualisation of men in adverts was not commented on as often by boys but was explored more closely in an advert for a brand which showed a male celebrity wearing underwear. The celebrity did not seem aspirational and boys did not identify strongly with him in the advert. However, it was clear that boys found this advert uncomfortable to discuss as the majority of comments avoided his body pose where his hand was shown close to his crotch and they tended to focus on his six pack or body shape or celebrity status. When shown a collage of adverts depicting males, whilst boys recognized that some images depicted male sexualisation they tended to comment more on six packs, 'sporty' characteristics or muscles rather than nudity.

Whilst saying that the advert was not offensive to them, boys admitted that it could be harmful if shown on a platform where it may be seen by younger children.

In some situations it is not appropriate to show a man holding his crotch.

Boy, 16, Norwich

It might make some people feel inadequate

Boy, 14, London

I've seen this one before a few times on Instagram and Snapchat. I don't like that it's a boy in boxers, that's not something I like looking at. I'd prefer seeing a girl. Some of my mates might be bothered and look away because they're jealous of the shape. It's saying that all good looking boys

should have a six pack and muscles. Girls would love it because it's Justin Bieber. It doesn't offend me, it's not offensive to take your top off.

Boy, 13, Hall test Manchester

Girls were more overtly critical towards adverts that used nudity. For example, girls looked at a perfume advert showing a naked woman lying on her side. Some found this portrayal aspirational whilst others (who also believed the advert was photo-shopped) felt it portrayed an unrealistic female body shape and sexualised behaviour.

There should be no photos like that- disrespectful with the full body naked.

Girl, 13, Bristol

You don't even look at what it's advertising you just look at a naked lady. If you look at how much her head's twisted, it doesn't even look like she's a human any more, she looks like a Barbie doll.

Girl 13, York

If they (boys) saw that they'd be fixated on the body and nothing else, they'd judge anyone who doesn't look like that.

Girl, 14, Bristol

Girls believed that adverts using this 'perfect' sexualised body pose were unrealistic and an extreme that could promote harm to young women and suggest to men that this was the way all women should and could look. Furthermore, girls felt it may also promote a negative cultural expectation where boys expected girls to behave in this way. Some participants felt this may have potentially dangerous implications by forcing girls to emulate the sexualisation, to cause themselves physical and / or mental harm and potentially limit their future aspirations.

Boys love things like that but sometimes they get the wrong impression and think they can do what they want and then it'll be their [the girl's] fault they get touched up or sexually touched and they'll start moaning.

Girl 13, Bristol

Men are seeing this and thinking well if she can put her body out there why can't other girls.

Girl 13, Bristol

It makes me feel like I need to lose loads of weight just to look like her. For my build, I'd love to look like that but it makes girls feel they should become bulimic and anorexic because they feel ashamed of who they are.

Girl 13, Bristol

Girls felt that unnecessary sexualisation was present in a number of adverts. This was demonstrated by an advert for a mobile phone game where girls noted that whilst the female character in the advert was conveyed as powerful and confident, the advert also included unnecessary sexualisation as conveyed by the character's lack of clothing and sexual poses. They

did not identify with the role because of this and felt the sexualisation disempowered her and contradicted the messages of power and confidence. As a result, girls found the advert offensive as it suggested that in order to be attractive a female needed to be exposed and vulnerable. Only a minority of boys acknowledged the unnecessary sexualisation and believed this was in order to attract men to the product.

She was completely pointless in the actual game. There was nothing to do with her, so why was she in the advert. I think they might have chosen that person because she's got quite an eye catching figure...a bit of a generalization but I'm guessing their main target audience is going to be men and that kind of figure would be quite attractive to men and eye catching.

Girl, 14, York

She was doing nothing, the fact that at first you see she's powerful but to be that she has to act, look and sound a certain way, she still has to look really feminine and wear tight and revealing stuff. People who are strong in real life don't necessarily wear that sort of thing.

Girl, 14, York

It's a mobile phone game and it starts with Kate Upton in the bath. Now I don't have a problem with that, but it's a bit over the top. Most men go for women that are pretty. No one likes ugly girls, so they put a good looking girl in the ad to keep you watching to the end.

Boy, 14, London

6 Impact of gender stereotyping in advertising: harm and offence

Chapter summary:

- Adverts that were considered harmful and/ or offensive were those that participants felt strongly challenged their personal beliefs and views.
- This was particularly the case where participants felt that the gender portrayals promoted what they felt to be unacceptable behaviours or unrealistic and unattainable aspirations in terms of appearance and behaviour.
- Overall, four broad areas of potential **harm** emerged across the research:
 - Portraying the perfect person, scenario or body.
 - Gratuitous and unnecessary sexualisation and objectification of the body.
 - The use of stereotypical gender roles and characteristics.
 - Perpetuation of these messages and stereotypes over time.
- Related to these areas of potential harm was the placement of adverts (whether vulnerable groups would be exposed to the advert).
- Across the research it was clear that an advert could be **offensive** when:
 - Participants related to the role/ people/ scenario depicted and it strongly challenged their personal beliefs and opinions.
 - The advert ridiculed individuals or groups in society who do not conform to ‘norms’.

Participants were used to seeing advertising in daily life. They recognized that adverts would not always be personally appealing and different personal views meant that it was not easy to guarantee that nobody would be offended by adverts.

If you're going to be offended by every advert then you wouldn't watch TV

Male, 18-24, Belfast

However, across the research some participants spontaneously noted that they found some adverts offensive. When this was explored in detail, it was clear that participants often conflated the concepts of harm and offence (as defined by the ASA). Some spoke about being offended because they personally felt a strong reaction to an advert, and others talked about being offended because an advert could have a negative impact on other individuals or groups in society.

After spontaneous views had been captured in the research sessions, participants were provided with simple definitions of harm and offence to further explore whether there was any concern about the way in which men, women, boys and girls are portrayed in advertising.

Overall, adverts that were considered harmful and/ or offensive were those that participants felt strongly challenged their personal beliefs and views. This was particularly the case where participants felt that the gender portrayals promoted what they felt to be unacceptable behaviours or unrealistic and unattainable aspirations in terms of appearance and behaviour.

Where personal beliefs and views were strongly challenged, an advert was felt to be potentially harmful, with participants expressing concern that other people or groups in society could be negatively impacted.

Reflecting personal beliefs and views

Where personal beliefs and views were strongly challenged and participants personally identified with the role and people and/ or the scenario an advert was felt to be offensive. Participants described feeling personally offended or offended on behalf of someone else/ a group in society.

Identification with the role or person depicted

Resonance of the scenario depicted

Detailed views regarding harm and offence are detailed in this chapter. Both adults and teens were asked for their views regarding harm and offence. Teens often struggled with these concepts – their comments are included where relevant within this chapter.

6.1 Harm

Overall, four broad areas of potential harm emerged across the research:

5. Portraying the perfect person, scenario or body.
6. Gratuitous and unnecessary sexualisation and objectification of the body.
7. The use of stereotypical gender roles and characteristics.
8. Perpetuation of these messages and stereotypes over time.

The placement of adverts also relates to these four areas of harm. Each of these areas are discussed below.

6.1.1 Portraying the perfect person, scenario or body

The portrayal of the perfect body was also considered to be a potential area for harm. Whilst participants often talked about the impact that these images could have on young people who were forming their own identities and how they should look, it was agreed that the 'idealised body' could impact anybody who did not feel entirely happy with their own body.

Generally speaking, women tend to be more insecure because of the images of women that are put on TV...quite a lot of the time men take the attitude that they don't really care, whereas women...[can be more insecure].

Male, 18-24, Belfast

It's going to make you feel inferior...it's going to make you feel second class.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

Not everyone can have the same body as the [people in the ads].

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Evoking bad feeling. Evoking some sort of effect on self-esteem or confidence.

Female, 25-44, London

When you start to question what can change your body, or be negative about yourself.

Female, 20-34, York

There was some discussion that amongst more vulnerable groups, the image of the perfect person, scenario or body could have more extreme impacts.

I think mum adverts need to be careful for women who have just had babies because they could have post-natal depression and all sorts of thoughts going through their minds...I think they have to be quite carefully really. So that is like a certain group isn't it, it could have an impact on that certain group of women.

Female, 20-34, York

When they are targeting your personal appearance then it is more, yeah, vulnerable people.

Female, 20-34, York

"I think something like that can be a trigger to set off mental health issues, you know, depression if going through insecurities and stuff it can easily be triggered by it.

Female, 20-34, York

Participants reflected that adverts showing the perfect body could encourage people to take potentially unhealthy decisions and drastic steps to achieve the perfect body.

These are a bit more suggestive. These are set up to be the kind of ideal physiques aren't they? And you know that might encourage a sad young man to start taking steroids for example to build up his body which is unhealthy and dangerous you know...and similarly with young girls, this kind of slim look might encourage anorexia."

Male, 60+, York

[An advert becomes harmful when] it is going to make you feel inadequate; have that or be that.....trying to persuade you to be something you are not.

Females, 20-34, York

"I think young men can get obsessed by bulking up and I don't think these powders are very good for you.

Female, 20-34, York

It puts pressure on girls, young girls growing up to look absolutely perfect.

Female, 18-24, London

I think maybe an advert that is like encouraging people to aspire to something that is not really realistic, like young girls who think I want to be like that but it is impossible.

Female, 18-24, London

Some females across the research noted that the potential harm in the portrayal of the perfect body was mitigated by an acceptance and understanding that images used in advertising were photo-shopped or air-brushed and therefore should not be taken at face value. These participants felt that advertising would be more harmful for those who were less savvy in understanding the way in which the advertising industry works with images.

I don't really buy into advertising stuff, but I do have a friend that, you know, she genuinely didn't believe that people had been photo shopped and stuff...she started to lose the plot a bit... people believe it.

Female, 20-34, York

Comments regarding the potential harm in portraying the perfect person, scenario and body in advertising were often tempered by participants reflecting that the use of attractive people and situations in advertising is expected, normalized and appealing.

Would we want adverts with ordinary people?

Female, 60+, York

If they thought we all hate gender stereotypes they wouldn't make an advert about that.

Female, 25-44, London

Portraying the perfect person, scenario or body: teen comments

Teen girls in particular expressed mixed views regarding the portrayal of the female body in adverts. There was a clear tension for this participant group between seeing aspirational bodies in adverts (especially if these were aspirational celebrities), and resisting the aspiration for a number of reasons. Some reflected that they knew that this type of portrayal could make them feel inadequate but were also aware that it was superficial and fake. Teen girls noted that those who took these seriously could end up taking extreme steps to try and achieve the perfect body.

It makes us more insecure about ourselves...like girls have to be so skinny.

Girl, 13-14 years, Bristol

It could lead to insecurity which could be harmful about how you present yourself to other people. Or you could try to be like them getting plastic surgery and it could get worse and worse.

Girl, 14 years, York

I'd literally love to look like that but it makes girls feel like they should become bulimic and anorexic because they feel ashamed of who they are.

Girl, 13-14 years, Bristol

It could be that they'd try not to eat so that they'd look like the people in the adverts or it could be that they'd cut themselves in frustration. Either way it's not good.

Girl, 14 years, York

Some felt that this type of portrayal could encourage boys to treat girls as objects, not real people.

Boys...can sometimes get the wrong impression and think they can do whatever they want to them [girls] and then it'll be their [girls] fault if they get sexually touched or whatever, so they [adverts] shouldn't do nudity.

Girl, 13-14 years, Bristol

A few further noted that more broadly, if women were seen as sexualised objects it could hinder their careers.

It doesn't help with future jobs. Like if you wanted to be a lawyer you wouldn't be taken seriously.

Girl, 13-14 years, Bristol

Teen boys sometimes echoed these concerns, noting that adverts could promote behaviours that would not be acceptable in real life.

Revealing oneself in that way may not be good for a girl's reputation.

Boy, 13-14 years, Brighton

Some boys also noted that boys could also feel inadequate as a result of the portrayal of the perfect body.

In the end you may end up feeling quite down because when you look around you everyone seems perfect.

Boy, 15-16, Norwich

6.1.2 Gratuitous and unnecessary sexualisation and objectification of the body

Some participants felt that adverts could become harmful when they sexualised or objectified the male or female body in an extreme way. This was often associated with extreme levels of nudity that were not seen as necessary for the advert alongside behaviours that opposed personal beliefs and views (e.g. sexualisation of childhood images). Participants noted that this type of imagery could suggest that this adult behaviour was 'normal' to children.

It's particularly harmful for boys because it's like that image of pretending to want to hide her modesty while also tempting.

Female, 25-44, London

This led to some discussion regarding where adverts were placed and who would have access to them/ would see or hear them. Adults, particularly parents, suggested that adverts with gratuitous and unnecessary objectification of the body should not be shown in places where children could see them.

Some noted that the objectification / sexualisation of the body was harmful because it perpetuated these images in society – across both adults and children.

This image could definitely be harmful in public.....perpetuating the objectification of women.

Females, 25-44, London

However others struggled to verbalise why this would be harmful, suggesting that here in particular, harm is conflated with personal offence and dislike of gratuitous sexualisation and objectification.

I think when you're using graphic images of the human body, whether it's male or female, then it starts to get a bit too much. That's when it starts to get harmful.

Male, 60+, York

6.1.3 The use of stereotypical gender roles and characteristics

Parents noted that adverts shown during the research that were aimed at children were stereotypical in terms of gender characteristics and relationships within the family. They did not feel that these were reflective of real life and felt they lacked diversity. With this in mind, parents often talked about the harm of limiting a child or suggesting a certain 'normalised behaviour'.

Harmful is when a child is told they can't play with something and then they go home and see on the TV that only certain kids can play with certain toys or they get bullied because they want to play with a toy but aren't allowed.

Parent/pre-schooler group, Glasgow

More broadly, adults, particularly parents, noted that some adverts portrayed behaviours they personally did not agree with. They felt that adverts that promoted these behaviours could be harmful to children and young people, suggesting that these behaviours were acceptable. These comments specifically focused on the way in which men played an assertive role over women or advertising for women could encourage children to behave like adults without understanding the implications of this type of behaviour.

[If had kids] I'd feel obliged to say to my kids straight after that [advert], that's not how you behave...it's bad messaging for children.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

Adults across the research felt that the lack of diversity in gender roles and characteristics could be harmful to society in general by limiting the roles that people carry out and aspire to.

Limiting, it's the same old, it's stereotyping and it does, you know obviously that limits what people think they can or cannot do, especially kids.

Female, 25-44, London

Lowering someone's' self-esteem. Making their self-worth, they're not good enough to do it because I don't look like that or I'm...not the right gender, not the right colour.

Female, 25-44, London

Many participants felt that the lack of diversity in gender roles and characteristics was a missed opportunity for advertisers to be forward thinking, rather than something that could be harmful.

A couple of participants commented more broadly about diversity in adverts noting that, again, the lack of representation of different groups in society was noticeable in adverts. These participants generally felt that this again was a missed opportunity, rather than feeling that this had a harmful impact for individuals or society.

They're [collage of adverts shown in the research session] not representative in any way of society at large.

Male, 60+, York

This led to wider discussions about the proliferation of this type of body image across platforms. This is further discussed in the following section.

When I was at school I wanted to look and be like that, and now I think they have more pressure because they will see it in a lot more places because of mobile phones.

Female, 18-29, Bristol

6.1.4 Perpetuating these messages and stereotypes over time – a cumulative effect

Participants agreed that gender stereotypes existed and were perpetuated in advertising. This was evident in homework pre-tasks where participants identified similar issues related to gender stereotyping as those identified in the research.

Homework pre-tasks also indicated that participants identified stereotypes identified in other media. For example some participants included examples of editorial in their homework pre-task rather than adverts.

Participants also noted that these stereotypes were also found in wider life. Parents included editorial examples in their homework pre-tasks showing photos of sexualised young girls at beauty pageants and noted that this behaviour had been introduced in to real life, with young girls (pre-tweens) attending birthday parties wearing make-up.

My brother had kids before I did and I remember we bought his kids a dumper truck to play with because my brother is a truck driver and his wife wouldn't let the daughter play with it, yet the daughter was obsessed with trucks because that was what daddy did for a job, now to me that is conditioning the kids right from the beginning.

Different cultures see the role of the Dad in different ways.

Parent/ pre-schooler group, Glasgow

It's an everyday occurrence to see a woman semi-clad, whether it be on the telly or on an advertisement, it's an everyday thing now.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

People of 20 or 21 [years] who have had botox and lip fillers and stuff because that is what the Instagram people are doing.....yes, Instagram is advertising really.

Females, 20-34, York

I've noticed over the last 20-25 years that most of the people now who feature on soaps are what you might describe as good looking...The blokes are well ripped aren't they? The women are attractive and well-groomed.

Male, 60+, York

Many participants noted that using sex and the male and female body to sell products in advertising is a 'norm' which meant that in real life these types of portrayals went unnoticed.

If you are seeing it all the time, you just get used to it.....it becomes the norm doesn't it.

Females, 20-34, York

Every advert at the moment, I don't know what it is, but they are all just using sex to sell everything...

...you shouldn't feel like, oh it is okay because I heard that yesterday from another advert. It should be like nothing changes unless somebody makes, [or] starts to say well do you know what it isn't, just because I have been hearing it the last ten years it doesn't mean to say it is okay.

Females, 18-24, London

However, there were mixed views regarding the cumulative impact of these messages, and the role of advertising.

Some participants reflected that these types of messages were subconscious and therefore they would affect views, but that it would be difficult to detect how and when.

It's subliminal isn't it you know. It kind of just gets into you and you don't realise it's getting into you but it does.

Male, 60+, York

Seeing it again and again it would get in your head wouldn't it, it is pushing it into your mind.

Female, 20-34, York

Some felt that this repeated exposure meant that people would be desensitized from gender stereotypes and portrayals and these would not usually be noticed in day-to-day life.

There's a danger people become blasé because you see them all over the place and you just turn away

It doesn't register does it?

Female and Male, 60+, York

Only because we are looking at them in depth that you actually think about it; you kind of just disregard it usually.

Female, 20-34, York

This [e-cigarette advert] is such a typical picture that you see everywhere, I would just walk past that.

Female, 18-24, London

Comments from the homework post-tasks suggested that some participants were thinking more broadly about the issue of gender stereotyping in terms of its effect on others as well and how gender portrayals might limit personal aspirations or those of their children. Participants also included examples of where they found adverts which they perceived to represent more realistic or modern gender portrayals which empowered women and this indicates that participants are considering the issue in greater depth and can recognise different types of gender representations in advertising.

[floor cleaning product advert] It says women are just good for cleaning which isn't true, a stereotype because men clean as well, it implies that when I grow up I cannot do anything around the house.

Boy, 15, London

[advert for chocolate] 'Very stereotypical of men and women, that the woman is waiting to be provided for by the man. I was initially annoyed that old fashioned views still were being shown but enjoyed the romance. It could be harmful to young males who might feel they have to live up to society's expectations of being a strong man'

Female, 18-24, London

[food product] 'It shows the men as breadwinners and providers and the woman as homemaker, portrays stereotypical gender roles and lacks diversity, many women work and many men take on joint roles in the home. Continually pushing these stereotypes normalises gender roles which can have issues about lack of equality'

Female, 18-24, London

[children's medicine advert] 'I think it's mildly offensive and harmful as boys who are quiet and calm may feel they don't live up to typical boy behaviour expectations and similarly with boisterous girls. I was always told I was too aggressive when acting like one of the boys'

Female, 25-44, London

[trailer for family TV programme] 'Women have been sexualised in this way for years, it sends out the wrong message to impressionable young women like my daughters. On its own it is not offensive but as part of an overall message in society it could be harmful'

Female, 25-44, London

[perfume advert] 'It doesn't sexualise her, it feels liberating, there isn't a man in the ad and it focuses on how it makes her feel rather than how she looks'.

Girl, 14, York

Comments focusing on stereotyping children by gender roles were believed to promote harm over time by potentially encouraging negative characteristics or personality traits and limiting their aspirations or abilities, either in current life or later when careers were considered.

Whilst some comments were made in relation to the cumulative impact of advertising over time, participants tended to find it easier to think about: the impact of seeing the same advert repeatedly in a short space of time (e.g. frequently see the TV advert) or, for a lengthy single exposure (e.g. driving or queuing behind a bus with a poster for a length of time). There was a general agreement that this type of exposure would result in greater recall and, potentially, internalization of the advert's gender portrayals.

It's like when you walk in at Kings Cross and it's just one advert after another. But when you're going up the escalators they're really powerful because they have the same advert. That would make it even more intense.

Female, 60+, York

The more you see it, the more likely you are to remember it.

Female, 20-34, York

Parents of pre-schoolers considered the repetitive nature of children's advertising as a whole and the majority commented on the more immediate impact of this on their children's attitudes. However, parents of older children considered the long-term impact of advertising on their children's future aspirations in their post-task.

[Homework post task] The boy is aspiring to be adventurous, a typical male role and the girl is wearing make-up despite being 5 or 6. The depictions are unimaginative and don't challenge stereotypes. I have 2 daughters who are tough and adventurous, I do not want them to think it is normal for girls to wear glitter and make up. Most people will have absorbed these messages sub-consciously and it is harmful because it reinforces the message that boys aspire to great things and girls are there for decoration.

Young family group, London

Perpetuating these messages and stereotypes over time: teen comments

Teens noted that their age group was stereotyped by adults and the impact of this was to restrict their behaviour or movements in day to day life. After viewing adverts in the research girls in

particular reflected that the perpetuation of gender stereotyping messages over time could have a wide ranging negative impact, for instance on their personal safety and career potential. Boys also saw the potential harm to themselves and females from body image and sexualisation in advertising.

'People should be able to look and act and own stuff as they want to, and shouldn't have to feel that they have to conform to a gender role that they don't like'

Girl, 14, York

'What if you walk down the street and men are just looking you up and down because they've seen that perfume advert and they want you to be like that.'

Girl, 14, Bristol.

I feel like if I went in to the police force and men and women saw that [perfume] advert, I feel like I won't be taken seriously.'

Girl, 14, Bristol.

'It could damage someone's self-confidence and how they feel about themselves. It might make someone feel they had to be like that.'

Boy, 15, Norwich

Teen girls echoed adult views that gender portrayals – particularly the portrayal of the perfect body – were seen across different platforms (not just advertising) in day-to-day life.

And you see it everywhere, like with Victoria's Secret models they are ridiculously tall and thin and perfect and their poses are so sexualised, and the brand is so exclusive with the top models.

Girl, 15, York

Some felt that the cumulative impact of seeing the same images over time was a normalization of these images, resulting in a belief that it is normal to have the perfect body.

Singularly, no but put together and seen on a daily basis then yes. Let's say you follow Topshop on Instagram and you check it every day. You see that kind of picture every day. Then you get into that mindset that this is what you're meant to look like. Especially if you see it from a young age.

Girl, 15, York

I remember going into Topshop when I was younger and seeing the adverts and getting upset about them because you see these girls and they look so amazing. You think you don't really look good and you see these ads and you think oh I'm trying so hard to lose weight and these models look happy and put together and you think why can't I have that?

Girl, 15, York

6.1.5 Placement of adverts

Across the research when participants came across an advert that they felt could be potentially harmful they tended to think about where the advert would be placed and on what type of platform it would appear.

This was particularly in relation to adverts that promoted unacceptable behaviour to children, particularly those that sexualised and objectified men and women. Some suggested that they would not feel comfortable with children or grandchildren seeing these types of adverts, noting that they felt sexualised poses presented problematic behaviour to children.

"I'm offended by that...I don't like it. I wouldn't want to pull up behind a bus if I had any one of my grandsons in the car."

Male, 60+, York

"They could imitate poses couldn't they? You know young girls like strutting their stuff in front of mirrors."

Female, 60+, York

Whilst a few noted that these types of adverts were no worse than the types of images that would be found in other places (e.g. music videos), overall there was an agreement amongst participants that these types of adverts should not be in public places where someone of any age could see it.

This prompted some discussion around where adverts are shown. Participants reflected that some adverts were less suitable for advertising in public places where the observer had limited control over seeing the advert. Some noted that there was greater consumer control when adverts were, for example, in magazines as it was easy to turn the page and ignore the advert.

"It's quite insulting to people. You know you just flick straight over it. So you wouldn't even give it the attention that they want you to give it."

Female, 60+, York

This was compared to other platforms such as poster advertising in public places, where someone may be required to look at the poster/ be in visual proximity for a length of time.

"It has a place but not on television and not on the back of a bus and not in a bus stop."

Female, 60+, York

Overall participants felt that care should be taken when thinking about suitability of placing adverts in public places via platforms over which the consumer had no control.

6.2 Offence

Across the research it was clear that an advert could be offensive when:

- Participants related to the role/ people/ scenario depicted and it strongly challenged their personal beliefs and opinions.

- The advert ridiculed individuals or groups in society who do not conform to 'norms'.

It should be noted that participants often claimed not to feel personally offended by an advert, but did express offence on behalf of other groups in society. This could be due to the focus group methodology employed for some of the research sessions; it may be that some participants were reluctant to express personal offence in a focus group of peers

Views regarding offence are discussed below.

6.2.1 Challenging personal beliefs and opinions

Across the research, participants agreed that offence was something that would be highly individualized and dependent on an individual's beliefs, opinions, circumstances and mind-set.

People have different levels of offence haven't they? I mean I'm personally a bit over extreme about things. Some people a bit less, bit more moderate. So it's going to be hard what's appropriate and what isn't because what offends one person doesn't offend somebody else.

Male, 60+, York

For example, an advert featuring a mum and a pram, suggesting that the mum should be a style icon to their child was considered an example of an advert that could prove offensive to new mums.

If you are personally going through something like, just for example a really big lady or even being really slim and trying, finding it hard to put on weight rather than lose it, it is like then you could be, then you could take it like a different way because you are seeing yourself you know. You are having personally problems yourself so you could take it offensively.

Female, 18-24, London

Some felt that the level of nudity in some of the adverts shown, and noted in the homework pre-tasks, could be offensive, with a couple of participants noting that trading solely on sex in a one-dimensional way could also be offensive to some.

That ad could be offensive because it also treats people like idiots.

Male, 37, Brighton

One advert which depicted a woman in a provocative pose amongst childhood images was an example of an advert where participants were willing to be open and express personal offence. This was particularly amongst parents who felt that the advert 'crossed the line' in the use of a provocative and sexualised poses around childhood images.

She's upset me by having her leg up like that.....as a mother of girls, it's upsetting.

Females, 25-44, London

Challenging personal beliefs and opinions: teen comments

Teen boys and girls in the research struggled with the concepts of harm and offence. They broadly felt that it would be impossible for advertising to please all groups in society so there would always be some potential for offence in advertising. Whilst boys did not express personal offence regarding any of the adverts, girls reflected that sexualisation of women in adverts could cause offence to some women.

6.2.2 Ridiculing individuals or groups in society

Participants noted that adverts sometimes ridiculed people for not conforming to 'norms'. This could be based on age, attractiveness or personal interests/ traits. One advert shown suggested that men would only be interested in a romantic relationship with an older and less attractive woman if they were drunk. They felt that this ridiculed a woman that was not conventionally attractive.

"She's the only fat girl that we've seen, and apparently she's not sexy.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

So anyone who isn't the norm can become an objective of ridicule if you take that to its extreme.

Female, 60+, York

Participants felt that this advert would be offensive to people who similarly did not conform to stereotypical norms. Another advert, which was shown to teens, depicted a man being ridiculed for taking an interest in feminine products (scented candles). Boys tended to identify with the 'banter' element of this advert (perhaps because it is an acceptable male bonding ritual) and therefore did not find the ridicule offensive. However, girls felt that the behaviour was 'bullying' and therefore did find the advert offensive on behalf of others.

7 Roles and responsibilities

Chapter summary:

- Participants felt that brands and those who created adverts held the responsibility for ensuring that adverts are not offensive or harmful. Whilst a few adults were aware of a regulatory body for advertising, few spontaneously mentioned the ASA.
- Whilst some felt that not all brands used gender stereotypes, participants agreed that there was scope and opportunity for the industry to move away from stereotypes and represent a more diverse society.
- Participants agreed that advertising plays a role in societal norms and expectations for gender roles, characteristics, behaviours and appearance.
- Participants generated a number of suggestions for addressing potential harm and offence in adverts:
 - Consider where and when the advert is shown.
 - Avoid ridiculing those who do not conform to stereotypes or norms.
 - Advertise the product in an appropriate way.
 - Avoid promoting behaviour that is perceived to be inappropriate.
 - Avoid targeting vulnerable groups.
 - Increase diversity of people shown in adverts.
 - Safe-guard creativity within the advertising industry.

This chapter discusses participant views regarding responsibilities in ensuring that adverts are not offensive or harmful. Teen comments are included where relevant.

Across the research, participants were asked whose responsibility they felt this would be. Overall, participants felt that brands and those that created the adverts held this responsibility.

Someone's designed it [the advert] and they've gone to the...firm and said what do you think of that, and said oh great, yes, let's have that. So it's the people at the...firm we want to be criticizing.

Male, 60+, York

However, some adults were also aware that there was a regulatory body for advertising, with a few spontaneously noting the ASA. Most teens were not aware of any regulatory body, although a couple guessed that there may be some government-related regulation. Amongst those who spontaneously referenced the ASA there was a misperception that the ASA reviews and 'vets' all adverts before they are used.

Participants noted that not all advertising used gender stereotypes and felt that some brands were now consciously trying to break these and represent a more diverse society.

I think they [brands] are quite conscious now of making things equal and diverse.

Female, 20-34, York

However, participants strongly agreed that there was scope and opportunity for the advertising industry to move away from stereotypes, and show greater diversity in how men and women were portrayed.

Not every woman in an advert has to be very good looking, skinny...and not every bloke has to be 6 foot 4 and tanked out.

Male, 18-24, Belfast

I think we should try and break the stereotypes. I mean I know it is all fine and dandy that men are all funny and jokey but I know a lot of strong men and strong women.

Female, 18-24, London

There was some debate across research sessions regarding the role of the advertising industry in shaping societal views. Some felt that the advertising industry mirrored existing, deep rooted and familiar stereotypes, exploiting these to encourage resonance and buy-in to the message of the advert.

Advertising and the media take advantage of the prevailing views to play on people's minds and sell products.

Male, 37, Brighton

If you were to put on an ad with a boy pushing a pram you would get complaints because the vast majority of society are backwards in their thinking.

Parent/ pre-schooler group, Glasgow

Others felt that the advertising industry could set trends in the use of gender roles and characteristics, either reinforcing stereotypes, or setting the trend to break these and show something different.

Participants did not reach a conclusive view on whether advertising mirrors or shapes societal views but did agree that advertising plays a role in societal norms and expectations for gender roles, characteristics, behaviours and appearance.

Are we all striving for something that exists or are we striving for something the advertising industry has created that we all want because you see it all the time?

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

7.1 Industry responsibilities: teen comments

The debate about whether advertising mirrored or shaped society continued across research sessions with teens. Again, no clear conclusions were reached.

Overall, girls were more likely than boys to feel that the advertising industry could shape views and expectations in society by showing people in sexualised ways, particularly through the use of gratuitous nudity, particularly when discussing how women were shown in adverts.

.....
They didn't have to dress her as they did; they were just doing it to get men to watch the ad.

.....
Girl, 14, York

Some boys (and men) across the research felt some discomfort in revealing that they found the portrayal of women in adverts appealing. Although they commented that they did not feel that adverts were harmful or offensive because they felt 'desensitized' to these types of images, there were some comments that suggested that the adverts were potentially harmful in setting the tone for acceptable gender appearances and behaviours.

.....
The ads can condition you into seeing women as objects.

.....
Boy, 14, London

They put him [strong and aggressive male] in the ad because they think you will see him as a role model; think you want to be like him.

.....
Boy, 14, London

7.2 Suggested industry guidelines: adult comments

Participants spontaneously noted aspects of adverts that they thought could impact on individuals or groups in society throughout discussions, and were asked to consider what type of guidelines could be put in place that would address issues regarding harm and offence related to gender portrayals in advertising. The suggested guidelines generated across the research included:

7.2.1 Consideration of where and when the advert is shown

Suggestions regarding where and when adverts were shown were often made in relation to the potential for children or vulnerable groups to see adverts that:

- Promoted the 'perfect body.'
- Suggested that an inappropriate behaviour (e.g. being sexually provocative or showing male dominance over women) was acceptable.

Across the research, although participants lacked detailed knowledge of advertising rules and guidelines, they felt that the content of some advertising shown on TV seemed unsuitable for children for the time of day at which it was shown.

.....
For children watching TV you know, they would get an idea of what is real life as well. I think a lot of it, if they are looking at things, they are just going to get unrealistic view of, you know, how things are.

.....
Female, 20-34, York

I was putting on a video on YouTube for my daughter and noticed there was an advert for a pregnancy test before it.

.....
Parent/pre-schooler, Glasgow

This led participants to think carefully about adverts that could be potentially harmful to children and they concluded that these adverts should not be displayed in public places where they could be seen by anybody. Participants suggested that these types of adverts should be restricted to adult-only platforms and channels or at least places where a parent would have control over what children were able to see.

More control of where certain pictures are advertised.

Male, 60+, York

Depending on what you are advertising. If it is a big naked woman on the bus then young people are going to see it.

Female, 18-24, London

They can't have naked bodies and stuff on buses because it's just not appropriate is it...

...I think it is inappropriate if you were to have a young child with you or someone that is going to look at it and question it.

Females, 20-34, York

The idea of greater control over who sees adverts was popular across participants. A few noted that if an advert was put in a place where an individual had control over who saw the advert, then it would be the individuals' responsibility to ensure that children did not see it (rather than the responsibility of the brand or advertiser).

I compare it to like a musician. So some content might be really inappropriate or really offensive but if a venue puts that person on or a record label wants to sign them, like I think, I don't know, it's about censorship. Like I think people should be able to do what they want in a way but then it's not kind of really a musician's responsibility to make sure no children or teenagers are affected.

Female, 25-44, London

Some further reflected that if placed, for example, in magazines, the individual coming across the advert would have greater control over limiting the length of time that the advert was seen (e.g. would be able to immediately turn the page).

You expect to flick through [newspaper]. On the bus, you happen to see that bus all the time, when you are stuck in traffic and then you are just staring.

Female, 18-24, London

Participants felt that this type of control would help minimize exposure to these types of messages and images and give choice to the individual.

Participants were often familiar with the existence of the broadcasting ‘watershed’ at 9pm, which led some to suggest that a similar approach be employed for adverts¹¹.

Maybe rate them as they would a [film], PG, that type of thing, so for 14 it can't be on until 7 o'clock or whatever.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Certain adverts should be like certain television programmes. They shouldn't be allowed until after the [watershed].

Female, 60+, York

Again, the key driver for this suggestion was the idea of having greater control over the adverts that could be seen by children. In a similar vein, a few participants suggested that some kind of warning mechanism could be used (e.g. on television or radio) to identify to parents if a potentially inappropriate advert was about to be aired.

7.2.2 Avoid ridiculing those who do not conform to stereotypes or norms

During the research sessions, participants felt uncomfortable about adverts that mocked people for not conforming to stereotypes or norms and that these could be offensive, suggesting that those who do not conform are unattractive or should change their appearance or behaviour. With this in mind, participants suggested that those creating adverts should carefully consider how those who do not conform to stereotypes are treated and presented in adverts.

7.2.3 Advertising the product in an appropriate way

Most participants expressed dislike of sexualisation in adverts – particularly extreme nudity and sexually suggestive poses. This was particularly the case where this type of gender portrayal was not seen as relevant to the product being advertised. They felt that this portrayal of the male or female body was unnecessary and gratuitous both promoting an unrealistic view of a ‘perfect body’ and suggesting that overtly sexualised behaviours were acceptable. Participants suggested that care be taken to advertise products appropriately, and limit overtly sexualised images where not relevant to the product or where adverts were targeted to or could be seen by vulnerable groups in society (e.g. children or those with insecurities about their own body).

7.2.4 Avoid promoting behaviours that are perceived to be inappropriate

Overall participants expressed some discomfort regarding adverts that they felt promoted inappropriate behaviours, and suggested (especially to children) that these were acceptable. Again, participants suggested that care be taken to ensure that inappropriate behaviours (e.g. overtly

¹¹ Currently, the Broadcast Code requires that relevant timing restrictions must be applied to advertisements that, through their content, might harm children of particular ages or that are otherwise unsuitable for them. This can be in the form of timing restrictions that range from post 19:30 to post 23:00, or an “ex-kids” restriction, whereby an ad cannot be advertised in or adjacent to programmes commissioned for, principally directed at or likely to appeal particularly to children below the age of 16.

sexualised behaviours or men exerting dominant behaviours over women) as these could be found offensive, or could more broadly suggest that these behaviours were accepted in society.

7.2.5 Avoid targeting vulnerable groups

Across the research there was specific concern that adverts could have a negative impact on vulnerable groups in society. Participants considered vulnerable groups to include children, young people, those with insecurities about their bodies, or those forming their understanding of acceptable behaviours and interactions between men and women.

Participants felt that gender portrayals could suggest to individuals that they should look a certain way or behave a certain way in order to conform to stereotypical gender roles or definitions of what is attractive. Across the research, participants noted that these types of messages could pressurize vulnerable people to think or behave differently, or more broadly, set an unrealistic or inappropriate 'norm' in society.

With this in mind, participants felt that care should be taken regarding the types of images and messages in adverts that were aimed at/ could influence vulnerable groups.

There is so much pressure on young people that we don't want to put any more pressure on them.

Female, 20-34, York

Participants also noted that some adverts specifically targeted groups in society that were known to be vulnerable for example, specific targeting at new mums or targeting at teen girls. It was agreed that where a group in society was known to be vulnerable based on a clear set of circumstances, advertisers should think carefully about the impact that any promotion of the 'ideal' as a norm could have on this group.

If they [adverts] offend large groups like new mums then that's wrong because you could encourage mental health issues or are suggesting that you have to be perfect.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

7.2.6 Increased diversity

Diversity in adverts was discussed throughout research sessions with regards to:

- Diversity of the types of people (e.g. body types and characteristics) shown in adverts.
- Diversity of the demographics of people shown in adverts (e.g. family make-up, ethnicity).

Overall, participants agreed that there was scope to include more diverse people, body types and characteristics in adverts. It should be noted that Black and Minority Ethnic participants were more likely to comment that lack of ethnic diversity in advertising was a serious concern. However, most participants did not feel that lack of diversity in advertising was a serious concern although they agreed that it would simply be more reflective of society and inclusive to include a broader spread of people.

Not one of these adverts has featured anybody with a disability. So if you were a disabled person you don't even count in the advertising world.

Male, 60+, York

This was felt to be most important, when related to encouraging children and young people to understand that there are different types of people in the world and that stereotypes were not the 'norm'.

It's good for them to see we are all different, fat people, two men holding hands is the norm, people with spots are the norm.

Female, 45-59, Glasgow

However, it should be noted that these views were somewhat mitigated with the agreement that there is an expectation to see attractive people in adverts, and that indeed, many wanted to see attractive images and people.

7.2.7 Safe-guarding creativity

Whilst participants agreed that there should be some guidelines or regulation in place to ensure that adverts were not harmful or offensive they were keen to ensure that creativity in advertising was not stifled. This was strongly linked to the concept of freedom of expression and was typically voiced by participants with a more liberal mindset.

I don't think that there should be limits on how people express themselves in adverts, because if everyone...in adverts [is] the same way then everything is boring, everything is old hat, nothing is modern.

Male, 45-59, Birmingham

Creativity was also cited as important by those who felt that the advertising industry needed to move on from repeated use of predictable narratives and images. This chimed with views that gender portrayals in adverts were often considered to be old-fashioned, dated and unimaginative. With this in mind, participants were wary of overly prescriptive regulation.

There is a balance because we don't want boring adverts...I think you can do all of that innovative stuff without crushing or offending or harming.

Female, 25-44, London

7.3 Suggested industry guidelines: teen comments

When thinking about the role that the advertising industry could play in ensuring that adverts were not harmful or offensive, teens felt advertisers were unlikely to make changes and therefore voiced a sense of 'powerlessness' regarding gender portrayal in adverts. They felt that as long as adverts continued to be successful and make companies money, there would be little incentive for them to change.

At the end of the day you can't just go to a producer and say can you stop showing her body. They're not going to stop because they're getting money off it

Girl, 14, Bristol

But advertising is very subjective and so you can't please everyone. It is all about money, it is a business.

Boy, 14, London

Maybe the people shooting the advert think if there's loads of not skinny people in the ads, people won't like the advert

Girl, 13, Bristol

We can't really do much about it because they will keep on making ads

Boy, 16, Norwich

A few participants envisaged that gender stereotyping, particularly the way in which the female body is shown, would only get worse in the future.

It scares my future, if I ever had kids, what they're going to want to be like, but also how much worse the ads are going to get.

Girl, 14, Bristol

There was general agreement amongst girls that gratuitous nudity and sexualisation of women could be harmful and should therefore be carefully considered by the advertising industry. Boys tended to suggest that greater diversity of character portrayals for young men would be a positive improvement. However, there remained some reservations about whether these types of changes would come about and noted that consumers and advertisers would need to work together to achieve this.

There's not going to be one sole responsibility, it's going to have to be a thing like society and consumer working with the advertiser.

Girl, 15, York

8 Conclusions

Objective 1: Attitudes towards gender stereotyping in adverts

Attitudes towards gender portrayals in advertising were influenced by three key factors:

1. Personal beliefs: when participants viewed adverts they tended to feel more negatively towards adverts which did not fit with or challenged their personal beliefs and this was most often present in certain types of adverts such as

- where a stereotype was considered not to reflect current society or where an advert promoted a negative message such as depicting idealised people or roles;

- where adverts ridiculed individuals or groups;
- adverts which promoted behaviours that may be a problematic role model for children or young people;
- where roles lacked diversity or adverts offered depictions which limited aspirations

Where adverts challenged personal beliefs this influenced perceptions of offence or harm caused by an advert

2. Strength of identification with the role being depicted: participants felt more strongly about an advert if they identified with the role being depicted either personally or on behalf of someone else.

3. Resonance of the scenario depicted: participants attitudes towards the settings or scenarios used in adverts were mixed. Adverts which used real life settings were easier to relate to unless the role being depicted was felt to be idealised or 'perfect'. Adverts using 'fantastical' settings were generally not taken at face value but could become problematic when they contained some element of reality such as a real life setting or role that could be easily identified with.

Gender roles and characteristics portrayed in advertising were generally perceived to be dated and not reflective of modern society. Portrayals did not always reflect real life experiences or lacked diversity and because of this were perceived to potentially limit future aspirations. Advertising which depicted 'perfect' or idealised roles or gender-based behaviour was perceived to present an unrealistic version of real life which could promote unattainable aspirations. Gender portrayals were not offensive unless they included an unacceptable behaviour or a behaviour which could negatively influence children or young people.

Attitudes towards advertising which included objectification, sexualisation and body image were generally similar. Whilst glamour and the use of attractive people in advertising was expected, especially for luxury products, the use of gratuitous nudity or emphasized sexualisation by adults or children in adverts was not considered acceptable and offered the potential for harm. It was evident that some young people in the research were impacted negatively by viewing this type of advertising.

Objective 2: How ads impact on public attitudes and actions, considering the impact of individual ads and any cumulative impact in relation to different types of ads

Participants were aware that the amount of advertising and the frequency with which they were exposed to advertising across different platforms impacted their attitudes and / or behaviour. In addition, other platforms were often more problematic than advertising in terms of their content. Some participants, teens in particular, expressed discomfort at the lack of control they had over seeing this type of content.

Parents were concerned at the impact of stereotypical gender portrayals for their young children. Indeed, women more so than men, and teen girls in particular, expressed concern at the potential future impact of advertising in terms of perpetuating stereotypical messages over time and of potentially promoting unacceptable behaviour which could negatively influence how they were perceived by others.

Objective 3: How much of a role advertising may play in terms of harm and offence and compare to cultural and other factors

Whilst accepting that personal beliefs are an influence on overall attitudes, there was general agreement that advertising has the potential to harm if it uses 'perfect', idealised or unrealistic body images. It was agreed that these have the potential to set negative cultural expectations or promote unacceptable behaviour. This has dangerous implications for children and young people whose lack of cognitive and emotional development could lead to harm for this vulnerable audience.

There was also general agreement that advertising has the potential to offend by ridiculing or demeaning individuals or groups; or promote behaviours which may offer a problematic role model for children or young people; or where adverts portray roles lacking diversity or limit the aspirations of young people.

Participants felt that the advertising industry has a responsibility to the general public and a duty to ensure young people's anxieties are not exacerbated by advertising. However participants were aware that other social and environmental factors influenced public opinion and did not want the advertising industry to lose its creativity and disruptive character.