

# Depictions, Perceptions and Harm

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A report on gender stereotypes  
in advertising  
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Summary report



# Foreword

## Guy Parker

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**Chief Executive, ASA**

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At the Advertising Standards Authority, our ambition is to make every UK ad a responsible ad. As part of that, we're increasingly taking proactive action so we can have the biggest impact in sectors and on issues where there is consumer detriment, or the potential for real public harm.

We've always considered carefully complaints against specific ads that perpetuate gender stereotypes or encourage gender discrimination, but we felt the time was right to look again at this issue to establish whether our rulings and the standards against which we apply them are in the right place. This report is the result: the most substantial review of gender stereotyping the ASA has ever undertaken.

As well as reporting, it is vital that we take action. So the ASA system will act on the findings of this report to ensure that advertising regulation is playing its role in addressing the potential harms caused by gender stereotyping in advertising. Only by responding will we fulfil our regulatory responsibilities to protect consumers, for the benefit of people, businesses and society.



## Ella Smillie

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**Project Lead & Regulatory Policy Executive, CAP**

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As part of our wide-ranging evaluation and report, we covered everything from the reinforcement of stereotyped views of gender roles and characteristics, the mocking of women and men in non-stereotypical roles, objectification and sexualisation, and idealised and unrealistic body images. The review and our research covered adults and children of all ages and backgrounds.

We found that gender stereotypes emerge and can be reinforced in a wide range of ways, and although the vast majority of ads do not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, some do. Making assumptions about how people should look and behave might negatively restrict how they see themselves and how others see them, and limit choices they make in life. While we recognise that advertising is only one factor in the wider context of the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, we're keen that we play our role to address ads that have the potential to harm.



### Find out more

You can read a copy of the unabridged report at [asa.org.uk/gender](https://asa.org.uk/gender)

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The Advertising Standards Authority is the UK's independent regulator of advertising across all media.

[www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk)



The Committees of Advertising Practice are the industry bodies that write the Advertising Codes, providing authoritative advice on the rules.

[www.cap.org.uk](http://www.cap.org.uk)

Together, we work to make ads responsible. We do this by taking action against misleading, harmful or offensive advertising and ensuring compliance across all sectors. We believe responsible ads are good for people, society and advertisers.

# Background

In April 2016, the ASA launched a project into gender stereotyping in advertisements to test whether the UK Advertising Codes and the ASA's enforcement of them take proper account of the relevant evidence base, including the views of the general public.

In 2012, the ASA conducted research into harm and offence in ads, which identified gender stereotyping as an issue of concern for some participants. More recently, the public response to the 2015 'beach body ready' ad included 380 complaints to the ASA and extensive coverage in the press and on social media. The ASA upheld complaints about that ad on the basis of the health and nutrition claims it contained, but the strength of feeling about the image juxtaposed with the strapline further supported the need for a strong, well-evidenced ASA position in future similar cases. That case, along with other contextual factors, prompted us to look at this issue in depth.

## The project identified six categories of gender stereotypes:

### **Roles**

Occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender

### **Characteristics**

Attributes or behaviours associated with a specific gender

### **Mocking people for not conforming to stereotype**

Making fun of someone for behaving or looking in a non-stereotypical way

### **Sexualisation**

Portraying individuals in a highly sexualised manner

### **Objectification**

Depicting someone in a way that focuses on their body or body parts

### **Body image**

Depicting an unhealthy body image

The report considers the ASA and CAP position on these categories in relation to adults and children.

## The project comprised three main phases:



Analysis of existing literature about gender stereotyping in advertisements



Seminars with a range of expert stakeholders to explore their views



New and original research into public opinion



# Findings

This report considers whether, in line with their regulatory objectives, CAP and the ASA are doing enough to address the potential for harm or offence arising from the inclusion of gender stereotypes in ads.

The report takes into account a wide range of academic, regulatory and public policy information, and the views of interest groups, advertising industry representatives and the general public in support of its objectives and findings.

Gender stereotypes have the potential to cause harm by inviting assumptions about adults and children that might negatively restrict how they see themselves and how others see them.

These assumptions can lead to unequal gender outcomes in public and private aspects of people's lives; outcomes, which are increasingly acknowledged to be detrimental to individuals, the economy and society in general.

To this end, ads that feature gender stereotypes have the potential to cause harm by contributing to unequal gender outcomes, although advertising is understood to be only one of many different factors that contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to unequal gender outcomes.

## Key findings

Evidence presented in the report indicates support for the ASA's track record of banning ads that objectify or inappropriately sexualise women and girls, and ads that suggest it is acceptable for young women to be unhealthily thin.

However, the evidence suggests that a tougher line needs to be taken on ads that feature stereotypical gender roles or characteristics which, through their content and context, may be potentially harmful to people. This includes ads that mock people for not conforming to gender stereotypes.

It would be inappropriate and unrealistic to prevent ads from, for instance, depicting a woman cleaning, but new standards on gender stereotypes might elaborate on the types of treatments that might be problematic – for example:



An ad which depicts family members creating mess while a woman has sole responsibility for cleaning it up.



An ad that suggests an activity is inappropriate for a girl because it is stereotypically associated with boys or vice versa.



An ad that features a man trying and failing to undertake simple parental or household tasks.



## Next steps

CAP and the ASA consider the report provides an evidence-based case to strengthen their regulation on the use of gender stereotypes in ads which, through their content and context, might be potentially harmful to people.

In line with their objectives to deliver transparent and accountable regulation, this change is most effectively delivered through standards that are easy to understand and easy to implement.

Responding to evidence in this report, CAP will develop new standards on ads that feature stereotypical gender roles or characteristics which, through their content and context, might be potentially harmful to people. This includes ads that mock people for not conforming to gender stereotypes. CAP will also use the evidence in this report to clarify standards that reflect the ASA's existing regulatory position on ads that objectify or inappropriately sexualise women and girls, and ads that suggest it is acceptable for young women to be unhealthily thin.

CAP will report publicly on its progress before the end of 2017 and commits, as always, to delivering training and advice on the new standards in good time before they come into force.

# Setting the scene

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## Current rules

The UK Advertising Codes include rules that prevent ads from causing harm and serious or widespread offence and require them to be socially responsible. The CAP Code invites particular care to avoid causing offence on the grounds of gender. But the rules do not specifically address gender stereotypes.

The ASA has ruled against ads that objectify or inappropriately sexualise women and girls, and ads that suggest it is acceptable for young women to be unhealthy thin, usually using rules on offence and social responsibility.

The ASA has typically decided that depictions of stereotypical gender roles or characteristics or that mock people for not conforming to gender stereotype are unlikely to cause harm, serious or widespread offence, or be socially irresponsible.

This report indicates that ASA decisions relating to body image, sexualisation and objectification are broadly in the right place, and that it would be helpful for its existing position to be formalised to reflect the evidence base. But, the research and other factors presented in this report strongly indicate that it is necessary to introduce tougher standards to restrict some additional gender stereotypes depicting roles and characteristics or which mock people for not conforming to stereotype, because of their potential to cause harm.



### Key finding

The evidence gathered over the course of the project reminds us of the value of giving particular weight to the perspective of those depicted or represented in ads.



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## Legislative and public policy context

EU and UK laws actively support the pursuit of equality and prevent discrimination on account of gender. Developing international and UK policy on equality acknowledges the potential for gender stereotypes to lead to harmful outcomes and, in many cases, acknowledges the role of advertising alongside other factors in reinforcing these stereotypes.

The ASA and CAP are accustomed to balancing advertisers' right to commercial freedom of expression against evidence linking advertising with the potential for harm. The ASA and CAP may take into account relevant external factors in achieving this balance, including prevailing public policy and standards in society. This project has taken place against a backdrop of considerable political and public support for greater equality within UK society, and growing consensus to support positive action which identifies inequalities and addresses them.

In the UK, the ASA and CAP work against the backdrop of the UK Equality Act 2010 which prohibits discrimination of named protected characteristics.



### Key finding

There is significant evidence that gender inequality leads to real-world harms for adults and children. These unequal outcomes might affect different people in a variety of practical, social, emotional and economic ways.



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## Advertising industry initiatives

There are a significant number of initiatives within the advertising and communications industry to support greater gender equality at a corporate level.

There have also been a number of recent advertising campaigns which have sought to support gender equality and challenge stereotypes.

Standards intended to prevent unacceptable gender stereotypes in ads would complement such initiatives undertaken by the advertising and communications industry as well as ensuring that the ASA position is based on the best available evidence.

Initiatives from industry include:

- UN women has recently launched its 'Unstereotype Alliance', which will challenge gender stereotypes in advertising on a global scale. Supporters of this initiative include companies such as Unilever, P&G, WPP, Diageo, Google and Facebook
- Programmes to encourage greater diversity and gender balance within corporate structures
- Collaborations among advertisers to encourage responsible depictions of different body shapes and sizes



### Key finding

A number of advertisers have begun to identify the commercial advantages of rejecting gender stereotypes in favour of depictions that more accurately reflect their consumer base.

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## International advertising regulation

A number of advertising regulatory bodies, outside the UK, use standards to help prevent the depiction of potentially harmful gender stereotypes in advertising. Easy-to-understand, and easy-to-implement standards can help advertisers and the ASA identify and tackle those gender stereotypes that have the potential to cause harm.

The report considers the positions of 28 countries on the portrayal of gender in advertising. Out of those 28 countries, 24 restrict gender stereotypes in advertising through legislation or through a regulatory body.



### Key finding

Other advertising regulatory bodies have developed and enforced standards to prevent the depiction of harmful stereotypes.



## New findings



### Key finding

Evidence demonstrates that reinforcing and perpetuating traditional gender roles can lead to suboptimal outcomes for individuals and groups in terms of their professional attainment and personal development.



## Evidence from academics

The weight of evidence suggests that, wherever they appear or are reinforced, gender stereotypes can lead to mental, physical and social harm which can limit the potential of groups and individuals.

Research concludes that advertising can reinforce particular gender stereotypes which contribute to widespread assumptions and expectations about how people should look or behave according to their gender, and that these can become internalised.

Overall, young children appear to be in particular need of protection from harmful stereotypes as they are more likely to internalise the messages they see. However, there is also significant evidence of potential harm for adults in reinforcing already internalised messages about how they should behave and look on account of their gender.

Advertising is one of many factors that contribute to unequal gender outcomes, alongside the role played by some parents, schools and employers, and aspects of particular cultures, communities and demographics. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of ads do not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence.



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## Stakeholder input

In their submissions and at seminars, stakeholders consistently raised the potential cumulative effect of ads which are not individually problematic but add to an overall expectation of gender norms in terms of looks or behaviour.

Stakeholders in support of change spoke of real-world harms relating to the perpetuation of inequality. Those who were less supportive of change spoke of the philosophical 'right to offend' or their preference for less regulation and space for market forces to develop.

We also heard from a number of stakeholders that advertising plays a role in reinforcing stereotypes that are linked to unequal and harmful outcomes for everyone in society.

We heard a lot about the cumulative effect of ads that in isolation aren't necessarily a problem, but build up a strong message over time about how children and adults should look or behave because of their gender.

As with the academic evidence, there was an emphasis on the need to protect children from harm and prevent them from internalising messages about how they should look and behave that might ultimately limit their potential in life and lead to harmful inequalities.



### Key finding

A significant proportion of stakeholders have put forward strong, evidence-based views in submissions and at seminars about the potential for gender-stereotypical depictions in ads to be linked to real-world harms and inequalities.



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  
(consulted in public opinion research)



**Key finding**

Gender stereotyping in ads has the potential to harm and offend, which could have serious implications for children and young people in particular. The participants believed that the advertising industry has a responsibility to the general public, but should not lose its creativity.



Seeing [a gender stereotype in an ad] again and again it would get in your head wouldn't it, it is pushing it into your mind.



Female, 20-34, York



## Public opinion research

The ASA commissioned research agency GfK to conduct research to explore the public's attitudes towards gender stereotyping in ads. The research was conducted across the UK and included participants from a broad range of ages and backgrounds. The discussions considered the use of gender stereotyping in advertising, drawing from a wide number of ads across all media.

The research considered public attitudes towards gender stereotyping in ads. It found that attitudes were influenced by personal beliefs, strength of identification with the role being depicted and the resonance of the scenario depicted.

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 they lacked diversity, and because of this were perceived potentially to limit future aspirations. Women and teen girls in particular expressed concern at the potential future impact of advertising in terms of perpetuating stereotypical messages over time.

The use of gratuitous nudity or emphasised sexualisation in ads was not considered acceptable and offered the potential for harm. It was evident that some young people in the research believed they were impacted negatively by viewing this type of advertising.

Participants felt that the amount of advertising and the frequency with which they were exposed to advertising across different platforms impacted their attitudes and/or behaviour. However, they also believed other platforms such as social media were often more problematic in terms of their content.

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. There was a general agreement that advertising has the potential to harm, which could have serious implications for children and young people. However, they did not want the advertising industry to lose its creativity.

**Find out more**

To read the full report, get help on your advertising and sign up to receive updates, visit [asa.org.uk/gender](https://asa.org.uk/gender)



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