

Advertising guidance on depicting gender stereotypes likely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence



Foreword

The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) offers guidance on the interpretation of the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (the CAP Code) in relation to non-broadcast marketing communications.

The Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) offers guidance on the interpretation of the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the BCAP Code) in relation to broadcast advertisements.

Advertising Guidance is intended to guide advertisers, agencies and media owners on how to interpret the Codes but is not a substitute for those Codes. Advertising Guidance reflects CAP's and/or BCAP's intended effect of the Codes but neither constitutes new rules nor binds the ASA Councils in the event of a complaint about an advertisement that follows it.

For pre-publication advice on specific non-broadcast advertisements, consult the CAP Copy Advice team by telephone on 020 7492 2100, by fax on 020 7404 3404 or you can log a written enquiry via our [online request form](#).

For advice on specific TV advertisements, please contact [Clearcast](#).

For clearance advice on specific radio advertisements, please contact [Radiocentre](#).

For the full list of Advertising Guidance, please [visit our website](#).

Understanding this guidance

This guidance is intended to help advertisers comply with the requirements of CAP and BCAP rules in the way they depict gender stereotypes in advertisements.

A wide body of evidence including that summarised in the ASA report indicates that certain kinds of gender stereotypes can negatively reinforce how people think they should look and behave, and how others think they should look and behave, due to their gender. This can lower their self-esteem and limit their aspirations and ability to progress in key aspects of their personal and professional lives with harmful consequences for them and for society as a whole.

CAP and BCAP consider that, while harmful stereotypes are not endemic in advertising and advertising is not the only factor that reinforces these stereotypes, it is appropriate to restrict ads that include the kinds of stereotypical depictions highlighted in this guidance.

The guidance is intended to support the interpretation of CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

[Advertisements] must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence

See Advertising Guidance: “Depicting gender stereotypes likely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence”

Subject to the guiding principles set out in the scenario categories in this guidance, neither the rule nor the guidance are intended to prevent ads from featuring:

- glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people or lifestyles;
- one gender only, including in ads for products developed for and aimed at one gender;
- gender stereotypes as a means to challenge their negative effects.

Key factors guiding the ASA's assessment

In its consideration of complaints, the ASA will consider an ad's likely impact when taken as a whole and in context. That may depend on the medium in which the ad appeared, the audience and its likely response. The ASA is likely to consider stereotypes from the perspective of the group of individuals being stereotyped. Unacceptable depictions are unlikely to be mitigated by the use of humour or 'banter'.

The use of other stereotypes can compound the effect of gender stereotypes and increase the likelihood of harm and/or offence being caused by the depiction of gender stereotypes. Stereotypes associated with gender can include gender reassignment and sexual orientation; other stereotypes can include those relating to age, disability, race, religion, beliefs, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity.

The ASA will take into account this guidance when it assesses ads that depict a gender stereotype. The scenarios set out in this guidance are non-exhaustive and intended to help explain the sorts of ads that are likely to breach CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14.

Note

This guidance covers categories of gender stereotypes, which – at the time of publication – are not reflected, or not reflected adequately, in past ASA decisions. The ASA has, however, ruled against other categories of harmful and/or offensive stereotypes associated with gender; these rulings are reflected in the following notes of guidance:

Offence: sexualisation and objectification

Social responsibility: body image

Children: sexual imagery

GUIDANCE

Scenarios featuring gender-stereotypical roles and characteristics

Gender-stereotypical roles include occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender. Gender-stereotypical characteristics include attributes or behaviours usually associated with a specific gender.

Subject to the overall presentation of the ad the following examples depict scenarios involving gender stereotypes, which are likely to be unacceptable under CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

1. An ad that depicts a man with his feet up and family members creating mess around a home while a woman is solely responsible for cleaning up the mess.
2. Ads that directly contrast male and female stereotypical roles or characteristics need to be handled with care. An ad that depicts a man being adventurous juxtaposed with a woman being delicate or dainty is likely to be unacceptable.
3. An ad that depicts a man or a woman failing to achieve a task specifically because of their gender e.g. a man's inability to change nappies; a woman's inability to park a car. General treatments such as 'so easy, even a man can do it' are likely to be unacceptable.
4. An ad that depicts a woman prioritising the application of make-up over being on time for a work meeting and is late for the meeting as a result. This doesn't prevent the depiction of a woman applying make-up at work. Care should be taken not to suggest in an ad that women should prioritise their appearance over their professional conduct in the workplace.
5. An ad in which a man is belittled for displaying emotional vulnerability.

Guiding principles

Ads may feature people undertaking gender-stereotypical roles e.g. a woman cleaning the house or a man doing DIY, or displaying gender-stereotypical characteristics e.g. a man being assertive or a woman being sensitive to others' needs, but they should take care to avoid suggesting that stereotypical roles or characteristics are:

- always uniquely associated with one gender;
- the only options available to one gender;
- never carried out or displayed by another gender.

Scenarios featuring pressure to conform to an idealised gender-stereotypical body shape or physical features

Subject to the overall presentation of the ad, the following examples depict scenarios involving gender stereotypes, which are likely to be unacceptable under CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

6. An ad that depicts a person who was unhappy with multiple aspects of their life, then implies that all their problems were solved by changing their body shape alone to conform to gender-stereotypical norms, without addressing other aspects of their life. This does not prevent responsible ads for weight loss products or services¹.

7. Where an ad features a person with a physique that does not match an ideal stereotypically associated with their gender, the ad should not imply that their physique is a significant reason for them not being successful, for example in their romantic or social lives.

Guiding principles

Ads may feature idealised body shapes and physical features stereotypically associated with women (e.g. a small waist) and men (e.g. an abdominal ‘six pack’) but they should take care to avoid suggesting that an individual’s happiness or emotional wellbeing should depend on conforming to an idealised gender-stereotypical body shape or physical features.

¹ https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_section/13.html
https://www.asa.org.uk/type/broadcast/code_section/12.html

Scenarios aimed at or featuring children

Subject to the overall presentation of the ad the following examples depict scenarios involving gender stereotypes, which are likely to be unacceptable under CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

8. Ads shouldn't explicitly depict members of a specific gender being excluded from or dismissive of an activity. This doesn't prevent an ad from depicting children undertaking an activity stereotypically associated with their gender, using colours, language, music or settings which are also stereotypically associated with that gender.

9. An ad that seeks to emphasise the contrast between a boy's stereotypical personality (e.g. daring) with a girl's stereotypical personality (e.g. caring) needs to be handled with care. Explicit labelling of children that contrasts stereotypical characteristics in a way that reinforces perceptions of what children can or cannot be, because of their gender, is more likely to be problematic.

Guiding principles

Ads can be targeted at and feature a specific gender but should take care not to explicitly convey that a particular children's product, pursuit, activity, including choice of play or career, is inappropriate for one or another gender.

Scenarios aimed at or featuring potentially vulnerable groups

Subject to the overall presentation of the ad, the following examples depict scenarios involving gender stereotypes, which are likely to be unacceptable under CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

10. An ad aimed at new mums which suggests that looking attractive or keeping a home pristine is a priority over other factors such as their emotional wellbeing.

11. An ad aimed at young people which implies that an idealised, gender-stereotypical physical appearance or particular body shape is necessary for social or romantic success, or which suggests they should prioritise appearance at the expense of other qualities in order to gain the acceptance of their peers. This does not preclude advertisements from featuring healthy, attractive or successful individuals or from depicting glamorous or aspirational scenarios.

Guiding principles

Ads should be sensitive to the emotional and physical well-being of vulnerable groups of people who may be under pressure to conform to particular gender stereotypes.

Scenarios featuring people who don't conform to a gender stereotype

Subject to the overall presentation of the ad, the following examples depict scenarios involving gender stereotypes, which are likely to be unacceptable under CAP rule 4.9 and BCAP rule 4.14:

12. An ad that belittles a man for carrying out stereotypically 'female' roles or tasks.

13. An ad that mocks groups or individuals for not conforming to stereotypical expectations of their gender.

Guiding principles

Ads should avoid mocking people for not conforming to gender stereotypes, including in a context that is intended to be humorous.



Committee of Advertising Practice

Mid City Place, 71 High Holborn
London WC1V 6QT

Telephone: 020 7492 2200
Textphone: 020 7242 8159
Email: enquiries@cap.org.uk

🐦 Follow us: @CAP_UK

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