

ADVERTISING

## How should luxury brands navigate advertising controversies?

June 4, 2015



*Miu Miu's spring/summer 2015 campaign was banned by the ASA*

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By SARAH JONES

Fashion brands may skirt controversy in their advertisements as a way to catch consumers' attention and make an impact, but sometimes these efforts bring public scrutiny.

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Recently, ads from Saint Laurent Paris, Miu Miu and Tom Ford have come under fire from Britain's Advertising Standards Authority for ads that were deemed to depict unhealthy or indecent scenes. These controversies can help bring a brand into the public eye, but are they more helpful or hurtful?

"There are two things that happen, one positive and one negative," said Al Ries, founder and chairman of [Ries & Ries](#), a Roswell, GA-based marketing strategy consultancy. "The positive is that many consumers are exposed to the brand's advertising that might not have known about it before. The negative is that some consumers will lower their opinions about the brand itself.

"I don't have any proof, but I believe in most cases that the positives outweigh the negatives," he said. "Furthermore, the negative publicity probably doesn't last much longer

than a news cycle. Consumers generally are not that much interested in advertising."

### Drawing attention

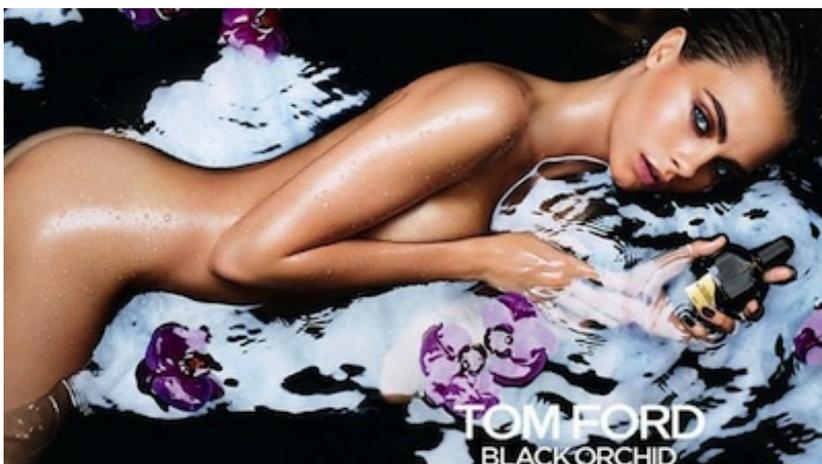
On June 3, the ASA filed a ruling against Saint Laurent Paris for an ad that ran in Elle UK following a complaint that the model appears unhealthily thin, with visible ribcage and thighs and knees the same size. According to the ASA, Saint Laurent said it did not agree with the view that the model is too thin, but the organization ruled that the ad must not appear again in its current form.



*Saint Laurent ad*

A fragrance effort by U.S. fashion label Tom Ford has received negative feedback due to accusations that the image is degrading to women.

Tom Ford is known for racy advertisements that often feature women in little to no clothing, often in a sexual manner, to sell the brand's fashion and personal care items. This specific ad, for the brand's Black Orchid fragrance, shows model Cara Delevingne nude in a pool of water cradling a bottle of the scent ([see story](#)).



*Billboard ad from Tom Ford*

The brand fought back, saying that rather than being "sexual," the ad was "artistic and stylized," and the ASA allowed the ad to continue to run on the London billboard in question.

"You can find some examples of negative publicity boosting the appeal of a brand," Mr. Ries said. "But most of the time, the negative publicity just helps to make the brand better known.

"Consumers tend to want to buy the better-known brands," he said, "They must be good, thinks the average consumer, because they are well known. That's especially true in luxury brands like Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, etc."

Miu Miu's spring/summer 2015 campaign, which features a trio of young actresses, was investigated by the ASA. The image that sparked debate was of 22-year-old Mia Goth, who sits reclining on a bed. The ASA said she looking like a child dressed as an adult, and she was placed in a sexually suggestive pose.

Before the ASA looked into complaints, Prada received negative comments via social media, with consumers bringing up the same concerns.

Vogue, which ran the ad, said it had not received any complaints, and Miu Miu argued the ad did not have a sexual tone. The ASA upheld its decision, and Prada, who owns Miu Miu, was warned against future ads featuring sexualized young women.

Similarly, a 2011 Miu Miu ad showing then 14-year-old actress Hailee Steinfeld sitting on railroad tracks visibly upset was deemed "irresponsible" by the ASA since it showed youth suicide and child endangerment. While photographer Bruce Weber said he meant to invoke a cinematic moment and the brand said she could have easily moved from the tracks since she was not restrained, the group banned the ad, and Tatler said it would not run the ad again.



*Miu Miu ad*

"A sincere apology by the chief executive of the company making the brand is usually a good thing, provided the apology is included in the initial story itself," Mr. Ries said.

"What a chief executive shouldn't do however, is to create a second story in the media with an apology," he said. "If he or she can't be part of the initial story, then the best strategy is to ignore the issue."

While a number of these regulator outcries elicit a lot of press, they rarely ignite a social media firestorm. They can, however ignite criticism from other organizations.

In 2007, Dolce & Gabbana's ad featuring knife-wielding models was banned by the ASA for glamorizing violence following 166 complaints, including one from Mothers Against Murder and Aggression, according to [The Guardian](#).

Dolce & Gabbana said the ads were based on paintings from Delacroix and David, and were meant to be theatrical. While the ASA did not take action on the complaints, The Times—the publication running the ads, said it would discuss it urgently with the brand.

Brands invest in their ads, so being forced to remove or rework an ad can have financial implications.

The same year, the brand again faced controversy for an ad showing a man pinning a woman down by her wrists while other men watched, which complainers said implied gang rape.



*Ad from Dolce & Gabbana*

This was particularly protested in Spain, where gender equality is a passion point for the government. The Spanish Association of Media Users called for its removal, while it had run in France with no problem, reported [The New York Times](#).

Ads that garner negative public opinion do not always go away after the conflict is resolved.

In 2015, the 2007 ad that some said romanticized violence against women resurfaced when Dolce & Gabbana fell under public scrutiny for a different issue.

Italian fashion label Dolce & Gabbana incurred the anger of a number of popular celebrities after its founders Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana got into an argument with British singer Sir Elton John about same-sex families. Sir Elton took offense when Mr. Dolce made an insensitive comment about in-vitro fertilization, and he immediately

launched a boycott of the brand ([see story](#)).

The ad image was then used in a number of tweets tagged #BoycottDolceGabbana, presented as another reason to avoid the brand.

"If brands notice a dip in sales or online traffic, or a heavy backlash from consumers, and not just press, then a calculated move needs to be implemented, from releasing a different ad for consequent publications or even releasing a brand statement that justifies yet understands the seeming concern of individuals," said Rony Zeidan, president and creative director of [RO NY](#), New York.

### Taking chances

When building a brand, some risk-taking is involved.

The creative director of Barneys New York said at the Luxury Summit 2014 that brands should not avoid taking risks since failure is an essential part of growth and a way to understand the tastes of target consumers.

The Barneys executive used the "Brothers, Sisters, Sons & Daughters" campaign as a reference for when the retailer made a risky and unexpected move in response to a social issue during the "Visualize this: Seducing the customer" session with founder/director of Leitzes & Co.'s Carey Leitzes. Although emotional and though-provoking, the campaign could have failed ([see story](#)).

Any attention is good attention for advertising, so controversial choices may be beneficial in the end.

"Controversial advertising is not a new thing," RO NY's Mr. Zeidan said. "It was much more prevalent in the '90s, and as the saying goes no press is bad press, every brand has bypassed negative impacts relatively quickly. People have short attention spans after all.

"The purpose of advertising is for people to talk about it, whether it's hilarious, witty, or sexual, the goal is the same. That's brand awareness."

### Final Take

*Sarah Jones, staff reporter on Luxury Daily, New York*

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