

MARKETING

Gender portrayal in advertising comes under the microscope

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While the ASA will still allow depictions of women cleaning, it will tackle ads that show cleaning as women's work. Image credit: Moschino

By SARAH JONES

An advertising watchdog and consumers alike are calling for increased attention to how the sexes are portrayed in marketing.

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Britain's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has released a report calling for stricter guidelines surrounding gender stereotypes, finding that there is a need for additional clarity to prevent harm or insult to consumers. This move comes as German automaker Audi finds itself under fire for an advertisement in China that consumers cried was offensive to women.

"Society at large, through increased activism and platforms like social media that provide a voice for all, has raised gender stereotyping as an important and prevalent issue that needs to be addressed," said Jim Gentleman, senior vice president of account management and strategy at **SK+G**, Las Vegas. "Historically, the ad industry has played into these stereotypes and bolstered them through antiquated depictions of both women and men in advertising."

"The current political environment coupled with the ASA's announcement and Audi's Chinese ad controversy have all contributed to the issue coming to the forefront this week."

Clamping down

The ASA is responsible for applying the codes written by the Committees of Advertising Practice, deciding whether or not flagged marketing violates the rules.

While these regulations include language banning ads that would cause widespread offense or harm, particularly on the grounds of gender, there have not been specific provisions against the portrayal of gender stereotypes. Typically, the ASA has ruled that ads depicting stereotyped gender roles or mocking those who do not conform are not harmful or likely to cause offense.

Even though the CAP guidelines did not specify gender stereotyping as a banned form of advertising, some other nations, including Spain and Norway, have already worked to ban ads on the basis of gender stereotypes.

In 2016, the ASA launched a project to determine whether its codes were adequately dealing with gender stereotyping. While it found that it was mostly on the right page, it found it needed to do more in some areas.

Almost 1,400 complaints lodged against advertisers in 2015 and 2016 dealing with the way in which men or women were portrayed. Some main issues surrounding gender depiction include objectification, showing stereotypical roles such as women as homemakers and creating an unhealthy body image.



Gucci's cruise 2016 ad was banned for featuring a too-thin model. Image credit: Gucci

Looking at research available, the ASA determined that there is harm done through advertising media representing stereotypical gender ideas, whether preventing children from exploring certain fields or interests or inspiring discrimination. Self esteem can also take a hit from the way individuals in advertising are shown, while presenting women as passive compared to dominating men perpetuates violence toward females.

In addition to looking at scholarly research, the ASA worked with GfK to survey consumers on their opinions of gender portrayal in ads.

While respondents did respond favorably to seemingly perfect individuals seen in ads, they were more apt to see the potential for creating unhealthy body images the more closely they identified with the person pictured. In terms of the depiction of families and household roles, consumers feel that ads are overly clichéd.

Consumers felt that ads may be offensive if they poked at those who do not follow gender norms or if a person identified with the model, but had their views challenged.

Overall, the consensus of participants was that marketers should avoid targeting vulnerable populations, be careful where their ads are placed, shy away from extreme sexualization and look to promote diversity in casting.

"Our review shows that specific forms of gender stereotypes in ads can contribute to harm for adults and children," said Ella Smillie, lead report author, in a statement. "Such portrayals can limit how people see themselves, how others see them, and limit the life decisions they take.

"Tougher standards in the areas we've identified will address harms and ensure that modern society is better represented," she said.

Advertising outrage

Audi recently faced scrutiny for an ad that compared a bride-to-be with a used car.

In the ad, which ran in China, the groom's mother interrupts the vows to inspect her potential daughter-in-law, tugging on her nose and ear and opening her mouth before deeming her satisfactory to marry her son. As she gives her okay and walks back to her seat, the couple's sigh of relief ends when the mother glances disapprovingly at the bride's chest.

This scene is followed by the line, "An important decision must be made carefully," referring to Audi's used vehicles being promoted with the spot.

Audi's controversial TV ad in mainland China

The ad drew backlash on social media, particularly on Weibo, where it was mentioned thousands of times, according to CNN. On the social media network, consumers called it sexist, with some calling for a boycott of the automaker.

In response to the controversy surrounding its ad, Audi released a statement reading, "Audi AG deeply regrets the aforementioned TV spot of the used car division of our joint venture in China. The ad's perception that has been created for many people does not correspond to the values of our company in any way.

"The spot was produced exclusively for the Chinese market and has already been withdrawn. The responsible department of the joint venture has arranged a thorough investigation of the internal control and coordination processes so that an incident like this can be excluded in the future."

Luxury brands in other sectors have also faced criticism for the portrayal of certain genders.

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 ([see story](#)).

For instance, Kering-owned fashion house Saint Laurent Paris found itself under fire from advertising watchdogs.

France's Autorite de Regulation Professionnelle de la Publicite (ARPP) received upwards of 70 complaints regarding advertisements for Saint Laurent's latest campaign. Critics of the ads felt that the imagery was "degrading" to the featured model and has undercurrents of sexism and overt sexualization ([see story](#)).

With this increased focus on gender portrayal in advertising, how should marketers adapt their strategies?

"It's easy to fall into the trap of stereotyping in advertising because it's been accepted and used far too long in almost every category from automotive to consumer packaged goods to technology to financial services," Mr. Gentleman said. "The best advice for marketers and their agencies is to be more reflective of the world we live in where women and men are increasingly breaking out of traditional roles and the narrow-minded expectations that once limited them.

"Don't be lazy and fall back on what's been done in the past. Now's the time to embrace diversity and equality," he said. "Gender should not define our roles, capabilities and future.

"Throw out the cliché portrayals of men and women and depict them as they live today, paving new paths and broadening boundaries. That's what consumers expect and are starting to demand from the brands they buy."