



Rediffusion
Consumer Lab



Women, Advertising & Stereotypes

A Red Lab Report on
the ASCI Guidelines on Harmful Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

Foreword

THE ASCI GENDER GUIDELINES, THE GENDERNEXT REPORT AND THE STORY OF A PLAIN-SPEAKING MINISTER



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Managing Director,
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Last week, **Smriti Irani, Minister of Women & Child Development** was in full-flow at the **India Habitat Centre**. The **Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)** had organized an event to release guidelines on harmful gender stereotypes in advertising and the Minister was the chief guest.

Before addressing the audience, Minister Irani apparently asked **ASCI Chairman Subhash Kamath** on how many members the ASCI had. Kamath replied **800**. **"And how many of those members are present here?"** she asked. Kamath apparently looked around the room, counted and, looking very embarrassed, replied, **"Three."**

"If your membership does not deem this guideline to be important enough to be present here in support of your organisation, it means that change has to begin from home," said the Minister. **"The fact that in 2022, we (have to) come up with these guidelines is an indication that we (women) are not valued truly within the industry."** The Minister could not have been more on target. Or done more plain-speak.

As per **ET BrandEquity**, nearly **80 per cent of FMCG** buying decisions in India are made by women. In urban India, **57 per cent of the internet users are women**. In rural India that number is **34 percent**. There are **294 million** users of the internet in urban India today and **356 million** users in rural India; which means that there is more consumption of the internet and services in rural landscapes. Women cannot be ignored. **"But when money takes centre stage, somehow gender is an issue nobody wants to address,"** thundered Smriti Irani. And she was absolutely bang-on. **Kudos! Madam Minister.**

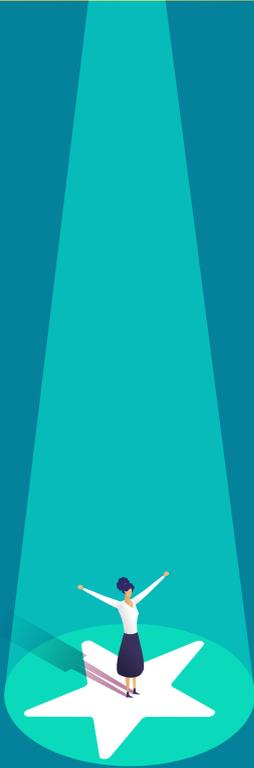
Gender Stereotypes *in* Advertising



Advertising, to sell products and services, often taps into the psyche of the society to appeal to potential consumers. It can sometimes pander to popular morality and majoritarian ideals because that is where the target groups are. In the process, it ends up normalising rigid, patriarchal norms and reaffirming problematic values. While most advertising reproduces the prevalent norms and beliefs, some advertisers do question them and try to offer a counter narrative.

Gender stereotypes are harmful because they lock individuals in certain roles and perpetuate certain dynamics that are harmful to society. Advertising, through subtle and implicit depictions, reinforces certain harmful stereotypes and overlooks the aspirations of individuals and groups. A recent study by **Kantar** shows that **64%** of consumers believe that advertising reinforces rather than helps eradicate harmful gender stereotypes.

Towards More Progressive Depictions of Women in Advertising



Gender portrayal is a complex and nuanced issue. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has followed up the launch of its GenderNext report in October 2021, a study mapping the journey of moving away from gender stereotypes in advertising to more positive depictions of women, with the release of guidelines that guard against harmful gender stereotypes. The guidelines were released at an event held at India Habitat Centre, presided over by Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smt. Smriti Irani, recently.



While there are women who are happy with the incremental change that has been made in the advertising industry, women of my generation are a bit more impatient. It is time not only for the men but also for the women in the advertising industry to step up. This is a very important move, and I believe that there is a long journey to be undertaken to turn the thinking but it's required now. Work in this area must move with more and more speed and organisations like ASCI should lead this, the action beginning with its member base.

SMT SMRITI ZUBIN IRANI

Union Minister for Women and Child Development





The guidelines, encourage advertisers and creators to deploy the **SEA (Self-esteemed – Empowered – Allied)** framework that guides stakeholders in imagining as well as evaluating portrayals of gender in their advertising by building empathy and aiding evaluation, as well as the **3S framework**, which provides a checklist to guard against tropes and implicit stereotypes that creep into advertising.

While the guidelines focus on women, they also provide guardrails for depiction of other genders. The guidelines also provide an interpretation of **ASCI's Chapter III** (related to harmful situations), which deals with ads that can cause harm to individuals or society.

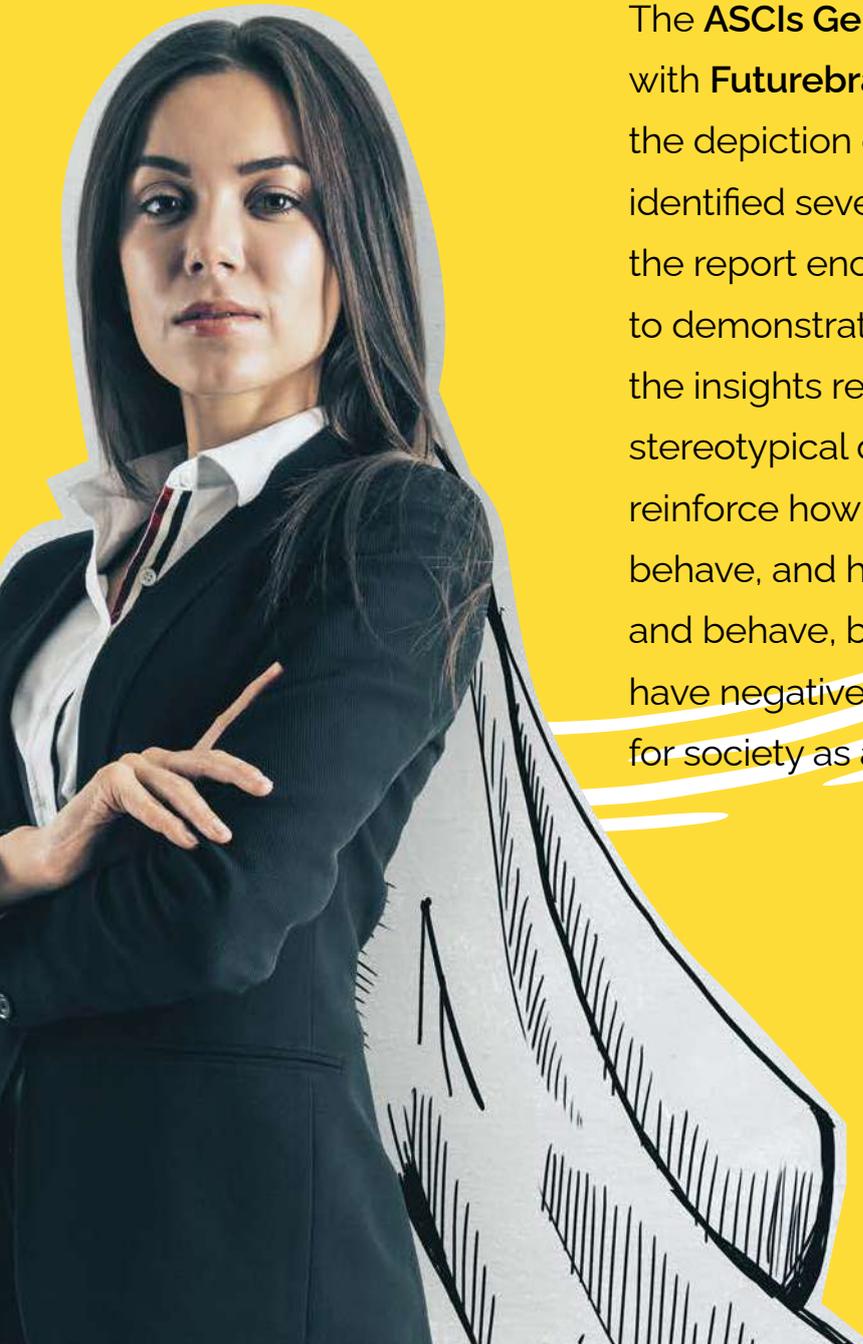


The new guidelines were created after extensive consultation with many partners - both from industry, as well as civil society organisations, including the **Unstereotype Alliance** and **UNICEF**. These guidelines are a big step forward in strengthening ASCI's agenda to shape a more responsible and progressive narrative.

SUBHASH KAMATH
Chairman, ASCI



Follow Her Lead: The GenderNext Report



The ASCIs GenderNext study, conducted along with Futurebrands in October 2021, examined the depiction of women in advertising and identified several **stereotypes and tropes**. While the report encourages advertisers and creators to demonstrate more progressive roles based on the insights revealed, it also identified some stereotypical depictions that could negatively reinforce how people think they should look and behave, and how others think they should look and behave, based on their gender. This can have negative consequences for individuals and for society as a whole, and over a period of time.

TO READ THE
GENDERNEXT REPORT
[CLICK HERE](#)

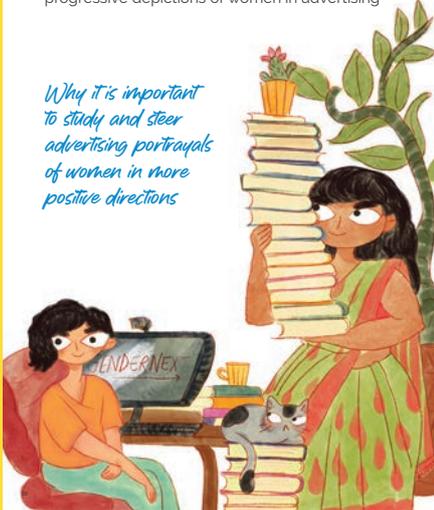


Excerpts from GenderNext Report

The Report

GenderNext - A journey towards more progressive depictions of women in advertising

Why it is important to study and steer advertising portrayals of women in more positive directions



tyres or the young woman making the first move or a mother giving her child some tough love. There are also instances of including unconventional choice of profession, appearance (specifically skin colour) and sexual orientation. Typically, these ads are released on digital media and not so much on mainstream media like television - and they are timed with women-themed days on the annual calendar - Women's Day or Mother's Day. The result is that even though they add to a new set of ideas on the portrayal of women in advertising, these ads end up doing so in a token way.

The Emergent Genre Of Woke Advertising

Whether it is the financial resources put behind broadcasting them, or the marketer's strategy to connect with a digital audience that is more likely to receive it positively, these ad campaigns create only a limited ripple and cannot be considered to signify a wave of progressiveness of women's portrayals in advertising. What they do however signify is the brand's desire to connect to, reflect and even be celebrated for a more un-stereotyped view of women. As a brand signifier, woke advertising does let brands score better on an overall scale of progressiveness but its limited reach and frequency does not embed new ideas and representations of women with the efficiency of high-frequency/high-reach, big budget campaigns on mainstream media.



merely through wardrobe and styling. There is little change in the tasks she is aligned to or the expectations others have of her. These don't seem to have undergone the make-over the woman has been given stylistically.

Categories seem to have their own sets of stereotyped depictions of women

A content analysis of advertising across categories reveals that categories share a set of commonly appearing tropes. Every category, e.g. food, beauty/personal care, automobiles etc. has its own bank of depiction stereotypes that reveal how the category sees its consumer. It is likely that some of these stereotypes are so deeply embedded in the imagination of brand marketers and advertising creators, that they do not actively perceive them. The following is a list of stereotypes that different category groups tend to feature.

1. Food and home (categories included: food, home cleaning, home appliances, detergents, service delivery apps)



2. Beauty, fashion and personal care (categories included: colour cosmetics, skin care, hair care, fashion, sanitary protection)



Mute muses: A common portrayal theme in jewelry retail, fashion and beauty advertising is the woman cast as a muse. The typical trope is where a male voice-over delivers an ode to her beauty or allure while the woman herself stays typically silent, wordlessly receiving the gaze as every little thing about her is sensualized.

Lost beauties: There is a common image in beauty advertising where the woman is lost in her thoughts, smiling to herself, gazing out of the window - she is depicted embodying a nothingness, hinting at an inner hollowness and which then gets equated with feminine allure.

Choice mediation: Very often in categories like jewelry, the young bride-to-be seems to be on the periphery of choice making. There is a collective force that supersedes her individual choice. Though this might be true of a larger cultural truth of marriages and jewelry buying in India, one must question if this depiction is missing new aspirations and realities of how a new generation of brides imagine themselves and their choices today.

Gaze acceptance: The woman is often portrayed as a willing and even welcoming receiver of a gaze - often that of a stranger. This depiction seems to give permission to the gaze and also build an expectation that it will be received positively. What might be uncomfortable and even unsafe situations in real life, get normalized as a legitimate social interaction.



suffering and self-sacrificing. Typically, these ads tend to mark Women's Day or Mother's Day and are perhaps a way to feature and celebrate women. Unfortunately, they seem to end up reinforcing archetypal stereotypes - rather than new behaviors and aspirations of women with respect to the category.

Obscuring of the financial burdens that women bear: The depiction norm in the category is of women being bestowed, being made secure, having their aspirations fulfilled by male figures such as the father of the husband. There is a striking lack of portrayals that is a resounding truth for many women - that they are co-bearers or even primary bearers of financial burdens of their households or their own lives.

4. Gadgets and wheels (categories included: automobiles, two wheelers, gadgets, apps)

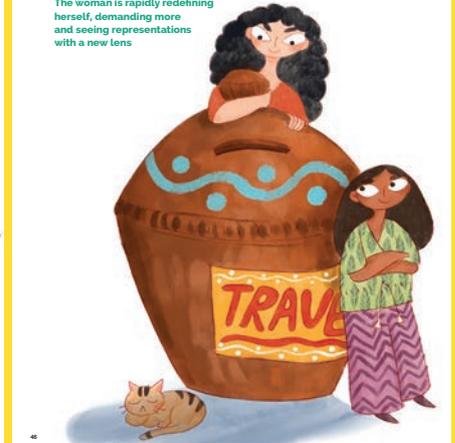


Objectified sizzle: Perhaps the oldest trope in automobile advertising is to 'place' a woman next to a car. A typical pattern that is prevalent in many instances of car advertising where the woman does not appear as a mere passenger - but actively as an object of desire. The purpose of the 'placement' of the woman in these contexts seems to be to add a sizzle or succumb to the desirability of the man in the car. This trope tends to equate the automobile and the woman, both being portrayed as attractive property to be acquired/owned, erasing the subjectivity of the woman as a person.

»»» A study by ASGI and Futurebrands 37

Part 0 Learnings from the immersive exercise with consumers from metro, tier 1 and tier 2 towns of India

The woman is rapidly redefining herself, demanding more and seeing representations with a new lens



Reactions to advertising portrayals of women

Depictions of collective big gains are more rewarding than smaller individual wins: Women find depictions where new ground is broken for a collective of women as elevating. This indicates a disenchantment with thematic tropes of depiction where outcomes are gaining approval, attention or compliments - which have been features in categories like personal care, beauty, skin care, fashion.

Depictions of carefree and 'bindas' mothers score on aspiration: Maternal toil is seen as a more conventional and tiresome framing of a mother. Maternal attitude, instead, is seen as a new edge for mothers. Women see the carefree attitude as a new kind of ability with respect to raising kids.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aaryama studied Communication Design at NID, Andhra Pradesh. A freelance illustrator and book cover designer, Aaryama has worked on books published by HarperCollins, Penguin Random House and Pratham Books among others. Her other projects include branding and packaging for food brands. She draws to survive, reads for herself, and eats to stay happy. More of her work can be seen on www.instagram.com/highmanganes.



Aaryama Somayaji

A Toolkit for Advertisers & Creators for Progressive Gender Depiction

The GenderNext report encourages advertisers and creators to create more progressive gender depictions when it comes to the depiction of women. In order to do this, it recommends two key tools to evaluate their communication: the SEA framework and the 3S checklist.

The SEA framework

The **SEA tool** helps content producers build empathy and evaluate the perspective of women in their narratives through the following aspects:

- **Self-esteemed:** How the woman feels about herself
- **Empowered:** How the woman relates to the situation she is cast in
- **Allied:** How others partner in her progress

The 3S checklist

The 3S screener, also uses three diagnostic measures to determine if a narrative may be supporting harmful stereotypes about women. The three measures are:

- **Subordination** – where the woman is placed lower on the hierarchy of decision making and awareness
- **Service** – where a woman is seen in service to others
- **Standardisation** – where a woman is moulded into mandated projections which blur individuality

The ASCI Guidelines *on* Harmful Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

As society progresses and evolves, norms on what is acceptable to consumers and other stakeholders also evolve. While **harmful stereotypes** are not only present in advertising and advertising is not the only factor that reinforces these stereotypes, it is important for advertising to play its rightful role and not contribute to the perpetuation of such stereotypes.

The guidelines lay down the boundaries of what is unacceptable. **Advertisements must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence.**

- While advertisements may feature people undertaking gender-stereotypical roles **e.g., a woman cleaning the house or a man going to an office, or displaying gender stereotypical characteristics, e.g., a man being assertive or a woman being sensitive to others' needs**, they must not suggest that stereotypical roles or characteristics are:
 - always uniquely associated with a particular gender;
 - the only options available to a particular gender; or
 - never carried out or displayed by another gender(s).



- Advertisements that are aimed at/depict children may target and feature a specific gender but **should not convey that a particular children's product, pursuit, behaviour, or activity**, including choice of play or career, is inappropriate for one or another gender(s).



For example, ads suggesting that a boy's stereotypical personality should be "**daring**" or that a girl's stereotypical personality should be "**caring**", or someone chiding a boy playing with dolls or girls from jumping around because **it is not the typical activity associated with the gender**, are likely to be problematic.

- While advertisements may feature **glamorous** and **attractive** people, they **must not suggest that an individual's happiness or emotional wellbeing** depends on conforming to these idealised gender-stereotypical body shapes or physical features.
- Advertisements should not mock people for not conforming to gender stereotypes, their sexual orientation or gender identity, including in a context that is intended to be **humorous, hyperbolic or exaggerated**.



For example, **an ad may not belittle a man for carrying out stereotypically female roles or tasks or make fun of a same-sex relationship.**

- Advertisements **should not reinforce unrealistic and undesirable gender** ideals or expectations.

For example, an advertisement must not depict a man with **his feet up** and family members creating



a mess around a home, while a **woman is solely responsible for cleaning up the mess, or a woman overly grateful for the man helping her in everyday chores.** Similarly, a woman returning from work may not be shown as solely responsible for doing household duties while others around her are at leisure.

- An advertisement may not suggest that a person fails to achieve a task specifically because of their gender: **e.g., a man's inability to change nappies; or a woman's inability to park a car.** In categories that usually target a particular gender, care must be taken to not depict condescension towards any other gender or show them as incapable of understanding the product or unable to make decisions. This does not prevent the advertisement from showing these stereotypes as a means to challenge them.



- Where an advertisement features a person with a physique or physical characteristics that do not match an ideal stereotype associated with their gender, **the advertisement should not imply that their physique or physical characteristics are a significant reason for them not being successful,** for example, in their romantic, social or professional lives.



For example, an ad may not suggest that a man who is **short**, a woman who is **dark**, or any individual who is **overweight** has difficulty finding a job or a partner due to this aspect of their physique.

- Advertisements **should not indulge in the sexual objectification of characters of any gender** or depict people in a sexualised and objectified way

for the purposes of titillating viewers. This would include the use of language or visual treatments in contexts wholly irrelevant to the product.

For example, an online takeaway service featuring **an image of a woman wearing lingerie lying back** in a provocative pose behind various fast-food items would be considered problematic. Even though the image may not be sexually explicit, by using a suggestive image of a woman that bears no relevance to the advertised product, the ad would be considered objectifying women by presenting them as sexual objects, and therefore is a gender stereotype that is likely to cause harm.

- **No gender should be encouraged to exert domination** or authority over the other(s) by means of overt or implied threats, actual force or through the use of demeaning language or tone. Advertisements cannot provoke or trivialise violence (physical or emotional), unlawful or anti-social behaviour based on gender.

Additionally, advertisements should not encourage or normalise voyeurism, **eve-teasing, stalking, emotional or physical harassment** or any similar **offences**. This does not prevent the advertisement from showing these depictions as a means to challenge them.



Will the guidelines hamper brands and creativity?



In one word, the answer is **No**. ASCI will consider an ad's likely impact when taken as a whole and in context. But ASCI will consider stereotypes from the perspective of the group of individuals being stereotyped. The use of humour or banter is not likely to overcome the underlying issue of such harmful stereotypes.

The guidelines do not intend to prevent ads from featuring: **glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people or lifestyles; one gender only**, including in advertisements for products developed for and aimed at a particular gender; and gender stereotypes as a means to challenge their harmful effects.

Looking at UK: How Do We Compare against International Guidelines of Depicting Women in Advertising?

In 2019, a ban on advertisements containing “**harmful**” gender stereotypes came into force in the U.K., in a move experts hope will reduce gender inequality.

This was a follow-up to the **Committees of Advertising Practice’s (CAP’s)** introduction of new rules on gender stereotyping in ads on **14 December 2018**. These rules stated that ads ‘**must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence**’.

A review of gender stereotyping in ads by the **Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)** indicated 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, which may have harmful consequences for individuals and for society.



Scenarios banned under the rules include:

- 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.
- 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 [diapers]; a woman's inability to park a car.
- 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.
- An ad that seeks to [emphasize] 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.
- An ad aimed at new [mothers] which suggests that looking attractive or keeping a home pristine is a priority over other factors such as their emotional wellbeing.
- An ad that belittles a man for carrying out stereotypically "female" roles or tasks.

The rule is supported by additional guidance.



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



The guidance clarifies that the rule is not intended to prevent ads from featuring: glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people or lifestyles; one gender only; or gender stereotypes when they are used as a means to challenge their negative effects. It addresses five different potentially harmful categories, and sets out examples of scenarios which are likely to be problematic for each.

1. Gender stereotypical roles and characteristics

The ASA has investigated and upheld complaints about multiple ads on the basis that those ads featured gender stereotypical roles or characteristics in a way which breached the rule.

Gender-stereotypical roles include occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender; for example, women being primarily responsible for childcare and men being responsible for financial security. Gender-stereotypical characteristics include attributes or behaviours usually associated with a specific gender, such as sensitivity and rationality. It is not inherently problematic for ads to feature people with stereotypical characteristics or undertaking stereotypical roles, but they are likely to be problematic if they suggest that these stereotypical roles or characteristics are:



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

2. Sexualisation and objectification

Often, ads which sexualise people do so in a way which includes a harmful or offensive gender stereotype. Ads which present women as sexual objects are likely to be considered problematic for featuring a harmful gender stereotype. The ASA has investigated and upheld complaints about multiple ads which sexualised or objectified women because they presented a harmful and offensive gender stereotype.

Ads should not stereotype women by presenting them as sexual objects, or depicting women in a sexual and objectified way for the purposes of titillating viewers.

The use of negative or derogatory gender stereotypes is likely to be considered problematic.

Ads which use model's physical features as a way of drawing viewers' attention to the ad may also be considered objectifying, particularly (but not only) where they are unrelated to the product. In 2021, the ASA investigated an ad for an online takeaway service which featured an image of a woman wearing lingerie lying back in a provocative pose behind various fast-food items.

Although the ad was not sexually explicit, by using a suggestive image of a woman that bore no relevance to the advertised product, the ad



objectified women by presenting them as sexual objects. The ASA considered that the ad was likely to cause serious offence, and included a gender stereotype in a way that was likely to cause harm.

3. Using humour

The ASA is likely to consider stereotypes from the perspective of the group of individuals being stereotyped, and the use of humour is unlikely to mitigate against the types of harm or serious or widespread offence identified in this guidance.

The ASA upheld complaints about an ad for a food product following complaints that it depicted fathers as being incapable of childcare, a role which is stereotypically attributed to women. The ad depicted two new dads distracted as their babies went round a food conveyer belt. In combination with the opening scene, in which one of the babies was handed over by the mother to the father, and the final scene, in which one of the fathers said “**Let’s not tell mum.**” The ASA considered the ad relied on the stereotype that men were unable to care for children as well as women, and implied that the fathers had failed to look after the children properly because of their gender. Whilst the ad depicted this in a humorous way, the ASA did not consider that the use of humour mitigated the effect of the harmful stereotype, but that it was central to it, because the humour derived from the audience’s familiarity with the gender stereotype being portrayed.



4. Take care with depicting contrasting stereotypes

The guidance also states that ads which directly contrast male and female stereotypical roles or characteristics should be handled with care.

Not all ads that depict stereotypical roles, or characteristics, will be considered problematic by the ASA, and the overall impression given by the ad will be considered.

5. Other stereotypical depictions

Whilst the complaints received and rulings about Code rules 4.9 (CAP Code) and 4.14 (BCAP Code) have so far been focused on the depiction of stereotypical roles and characteristics, the guidance also identifies other potentially harmful categories, and advertisers must ensure that ads do not portray harmful gender stereotypes which may fit into any of these categories:

- Pressure to conform to an idealised gender stereotypical body shape or physical features. Ads may feature glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people 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.



- Ads aimed at or featuring children. 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.
- Featuring potentially vulnerable people. 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. For example, 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 is likely to be problematic.
- Featuring people who don't conform to a gender stereotype. Ads should avoid mocking or belittling people for not conforming to gender stereotypes, including in a context that is intended to be humorous.



Last Word...

SHE'S COME A LONG WAY... BUT WE STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO

As a student of the **History of Literature**, I have noticed and observed the role of women evolving through centuries. The journey of women of yesterday has been, at most times, scornful – full of censures which they have handled with poise and patience. Women have endured all the criticism and persisted with their perilous journey. Today women have come a long way emerging as a strong fraternity. Unfortunately, advertising still seems to be living in a time-warp. I have been **38 years in advertising**. In my early days of handling **Horlicks**, we would debate for hours on whether the Mom in the ad would (or should) wear a saree. The answer in the 80s was always an emphatic 'yes'.

Today, interpretations would be vastly different. Should the Mom plait her hair? In the 80s, the answer was again an emphatic 'yes'. Today, the answer would be, perhaps, vastly different again. Should the Mom wear a 'bindi'? In the 80s, yes; today, most likely, no. So things have changed. But on gender portrayal there is still a long road ahead.

— Dr. Sandeep Goyal



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