



Are gender stereotypes in advertising harming girls and young women?

A review by Girlguiding youth panel members

September 2020

Background

In June 2019, the Committee of Advertising Practice and the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice introduced a new rule that adverts ‘must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence’. This followed a public consultation, which Girlguiding fed into.

This new rule aims to help advertising regulation keep up with changing social norms and legislation around gender equality. It applies to broadcast, print, online and social media advertising.

Members of our youth panels did an audit of adverts both before the gender stereotypes in advertising standards came into place, and six months after. They assessed and compared harmful gender stereotypes in advertising, evaluated whether the rule had made any improvements, and looked at the impact adverts featuring gender stereotypes had on young women.

Methodology

Twenty-one members of our youth panels carried out the review. Our youth panels are made up of our [Advocates](#) and [British Youth Council delegates](#), who are all young women aged 14-25 from across the UK. Our Advocates and British Youth Council delegates act as our spokespeople, using their voices to speak out on issues affecting girls and young women. They campaign for and create positive change at the highest levels.

We tasked the members of our youth panels who took part with reviewing current adverts in broadcast, print, online and social media over a month. Eleven of our youth panel members took part in the first review from May to June 2019, reviewing 120 adverts. The second review, after the rule came into force, happened from December 2019 to January 2020. It involved 12 of our youth panel members, reviewing 132 adverts.

We assigned each panel member one or two media sources to look at for adverts to ensure they were reviewing a wide range of adverts. For each advert, panel members filled in a questionnaire, including:

- Naming the brand and product being advertised
- Describing the advert and providing screenshots if possible
- Saying where they saw the advert
- Noting what time they saw the advert (morning, afternoon, evening or late night)
- Answering who they thought the advert was targeted to and why (men, women, age demographic etc.)
- Describing whether the advert showcased diversity
- Noting the gender stereotypes included, if any
- Describing how the advert made them feel

Results

The audit highlighted that, overall, adverts depicting harmful gender stereotypes decreased slightly, showing the rule is being enforced. In fact, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has now banned a few of the harmful adverts girls reviewed, including a poster for PeoplePerHour, and an advert for Philadelphia by Mondelēz UK.

However, this wasn't the case for online advertising. Here the number of adverts girls described as harmful increased (including those outside the standards' definition). Online advertising is not reflecting the rest of the industry, possibly because of the way the algorithm of targeted and personalised ads works. By using data such as one's age and gender, these ads can make assumptions about one's interests, which may rely on stereotypes and influence the content girls and young women see. And once an individual interacts with a particular topic or ad, similar ads will start to appear for that person across different online platforms. This is a particular problem for girls and young women who may be targeted with ads that show a narrow beauty ideal, a particular body type, or weight-loss products for example.

The audit showed there are still a number of adverts that young women feel portray harmful gender stereotypes. A large percentage of these focus on body image, objectification and sexualisation. Most wouldn't be considered 'harmful' under the current guidance. However, it's clear they still have a negative and harmful impact on girls and young women. Many said they felt sad, uncomfortable, self-conscious and inadequate when they saw these adverts.

Our youth panels also highlighted adverts they thought were positive. These showed diverse images of women and girls that challenged ideal body types or normalised ideas of beauty. Others spoke openly about taboos girls often encounter, like around periods. Our panels also welcomed adverts that showed women challenging gender stereotypes, such as taking an active role as a leader or working in a male-dominated sector.

1. Gender roles and characteristics

The audit showed the number of adverts featuring harmful gender-stereotypical roles and characteristics had decreased slightly since the standards were issued. However, our panel members did mention a few adverts they felt were gender-stereotypical. These made them feel annoyed that girls and women were still being portrayed in stereotypical ways or taking part in stereotypical activities, even if this was subtle. Many of our youth panel members said adverts targeted at girls and women often featured flowers and the colour pink, while adverts targeted at boys showed them being more active.

'Today, there are still a substantial number of ads that gently reinforce messages of gender stereotypes such as girls playing with dolls and boys playing with cars, or the way in which women are perceived to stay at home while men go out to work to support their family. This makes me feel disappointed that companies are not

actively looking to move forward to promote more positive and realistic messages, such as the increasing nature of dual-parenting, and are instead only going backwards.’ Phoebe, Advocate, 20

2. Objectification and sexualisation

Our research shows that the majority of girls say that the media, including in adverts, too often portrays women as sex objects and that this makes them feel disempowered¹. Our youth panel members say the abundance of sexualised images of women has a negative impact on their body confidence and contributes to a culture in which women are valued more for their appearance than ability, and in which sexism and harassment are often normalised.

3. Body image

The audit highlighted that girls and young women are repeatedly shown adverts that portray the same body type. This makes them feel they should aspire to look the same way. Consequently, they feel less happy about how they look. Our youth panel members pointed out many adverts aimed at women focused on ‘reducing the effects of aging’. They didn’t see this same pressure for men, creating a double standard and unnecessary pressure on women.

‘I think repeated images which demonstrate a specific body type are potentially damaging as this narrows a young person’s outlook as adverts lack a diverse selection of bodies. This alarms me as the messages portrayed by adverts impact people’s opinions of themselves and others. If there is a continuing lack of diversity in the media, then this can have a detrimental impact on how girls and women perceive themselves.’ Kirsty, British Youth Council delegate, 18

‘Many girls feel like if they don’t have the Love Island body, they aren’t worthy.’ Alice, Advocate, 15

4. Diversity in advertising

Not only do girls and young women want to see a range of body types in advertising, they also want diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

As mentioned above, adverts tend to show the same body type, which marginalises the experiences of and disproportionately harms girls with protected equality characteristics. These include girls from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, and girls with disabilities.

For example, Françoise, 20, reviewed an Apple advert on YouTube promoting the ‘slofie’ mode for the iPhone 11. While Françoise recognised that the woman in the advert was a ‘person of colour’, she mentioned that it would have been nice to see a dark-skinned black woman, given their lack of representation in the technology

¹ Girlguiding. Girls’ Attitudes Surveys

industry and the stereotype that Apple makes phones for people of White ethnic descent.

‘It’s an understatement to say that there are challenges around body anxiety faced by women of colour. Colourism (shadeism) is a serious issue within communities of colour. As a young black woman, I have experienced this first-hand. My darker complexion and African features, full lips, broad nose and afro hair are all clear indicators that I am on the far end of meeting the European set beauty standards of this country. I have been deemed unattractive, manly and ugly.

‘It’s no secret that Britain is a predominantly white country, therefore naturally the media would reflect the majority. So not only is there a lack of black people in the media but a lack of black women. I’d go further to say, a lack of dark-skinned black women. When the media does show black women, they, in some way, meet European beauty standards, lighter skin, looser curls, European facial features. When it’s a dark-skinned black woman, the portrayal is negative.’ Jemmar, British Youth Council delegate, 20

‘The media’s idea of a “perfect” body has never considered the daily struggles girls and young women face surrounding disability, race, sex and sexuality. No one girl is the same. For many years, those who consider themselves to be “different” have tried to alter their appearance to fit a particular image of what their body should look like.’ Phoebe, Advocate, 20

5. Online advertising

When it comes to online advertising, girls (and all children) are exposed to inappropriate adverts for their age group, as they often use platforms designed for older age groups. The way boys and girls access and use the internet could determine the type of online advertising they’re exposed to, and the harmful messages they’re sent. Boys are more likely to access the internet via a games console, and to play games online. Girls are more likely to access the internet via their phones and to use social networking sites.²

Girls and young women raised concerns about being targeted by online adverts that focus on their appearance during a consultation we ran to respond to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s online advertising call for evidence.

‘I think online ads are more invasive due to the nature of the relationship between young women and their phones. My social media is where I go for my role models, for inspiration and for empowerment so when it’s infiltrated by damaging stereotypes or products such as weight loss pills, it leads me to doubt myself and feel bad about my body. As a generation we use our phones all the time so are more likely to be exposed to these harmful ads.’ Grace, British Youth Council delegate, 16

² CHILDWISE. (2020). The Monitor Report 2020

Our recommendations

The ASA should review its standards around gender stereotypes to ensure the definitions of ‘gender stereotypes’ and ‘harm’ include the harm caused by images of women being objectified, passive or sexualised, or which use a narrow beauty ideal. We believe the current definition of ‘gender stereotypes that cause harm’ is inadequate. More could be done to address the harms caused by adverts that use stereotypical depictions of women that focus on their appearance as their value and use limited ideals of beauty.

More should be done to hold online adverts to account so they follow the ASA standards around gender stereotypes. Our audit of adverts showed girls were viewing more harmful adverts online than in other media, suggesting more action is needed to ensure online advertisers follow ASA rules.

Annex 1: Summary of the gender stereotypes in advertising audit

	Review 1 (May-June 2019)	Review 2 (December 2019-January 2020)
No. of ads reviewed	120	132
No. of ads portraying gender stereotypes	87	83
No. of ads portraying harmful gender stereotypes	58 (67% of gender stereotypical ads; 48% of total ads)	50 (60% of gender stereotypical ads; 38% of total ads)
Ads featuring harmful gender stereotypes per channel	Magazines - 29/52 TV - 15/28 Social media/online - 13/33 Newspapers - 1/3 Billboards - 0/3 Posters - 0/1	Social media/online - 19/54 Billboards - 4/13 Magazines - 14/31 TV - 10/28 Newspapers - 1/2 Other (game app) - 2/2 Posters - 0/2
No. of ads tagged as body image	41 (35 harmful - 85%)	35 (25 harmful - 71%)
No. of ads tagged as objectification and sexualisation	12 (10 harmful - 83%)	10 (9 harmful - 90%)
No. of ads tagged as gender role and characteristics	48 (28 harmful - 58%)	53 (27 harmful - 51%)
No. of ads tagged as other	9 (2 harmful - 22%)	10 (2 harmful - 20%)

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with almost 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run *Rainbows* (4-7 years), *Brownies* (7-10 years), *Guides* (10-14 years) and *Rangers* (14-18 years).



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