[GB] Harmful gender stereotyping in advertising - proposals for reform

IRIS 2017-8:1/23

David Goldberg
deeJgee Research/Consultancy

At the present time, there are no direct rules preventing gender stereotyping in advertising. The nearest thing is if under the Committee of Advertising Practice Code (CAP Code) the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is of the opinion that an advertisement is likely to cause "serious or widespread offence". Thus, the ASA has banned advertisements that objectify or inappropriately sexualise women and girls or suggest it is acceptable for young women to be unhealthily thin. However, the ASA has generally taken the view that depictions of stereotypical gender roles or ads that mock people for not conforming to a gender stereotype do not breach the CAP Code because it is of the view that such ads are unlikely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence.

On 18 July 2017, the ASA published a report which concluded that further amendments to the CAP Code may be required to address the issue of harmful gender stereotyping in advertising. The Report is the culmination of a year-long investigation which consulted academics and specialists, reviewed relevant literature, held seminars with expert stakeholders and conducted research into public opinion. The ASA found that there was evidence to support stronger rules on the basis that harmful stereotypes "can restrict the choices, aspirations and opportunities of children, young people and adults".

Six harmful categories of gender stereotypes were identified: (1) roles (occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender); (2) characteristics (attributes or behaviours associated with a specific gender); (3) mocking people for not conforming to stereotype; (4) sexualisation (portraying individuals in a high sexualised manner); (5) objectification (depicting someone in a way that focuses on their body); and (6) body image (depicting an unhealthy body image).

The CAP now has the job of developing new standards for advertisers and marketers; they shall come into force in 2018 and be administered and enforced by the ASA . Annex A of the Report contains a comparative survey of “International and European legislation and rules”.

Advertising Standards Authority, Depictions, Perceptions and Harm, 18 July 2017

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/depictions-perceptions-and-harm.html

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026