**Gender stereotypes have been banned from British ads. What does that mean?**

The UK’s advertising regulator gave agencies six months to eliminate stereotypes “likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offense.”

By [Kaitlyn Tiffany](https://www.vox.com/authors/kaitlyn-tiffany), vox, Jun 18, 2019

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Playing off gender stereotypes to sell stuff is now explicitly against the law for advertisers in the UK.

Britain’s Advertising Standards Authority announced[**the ban**](https://www.asa.org.uk/news/ban-on-harmful-gender-stereotypes-in-ads-comes-into-force.html)in December, with a six-month buffer period before it went into effect. And that announcement came shortly after the ASA published [**a 64-page report**](https://www.asa.org.uk/asset/2DF6E028-9C47-4944-850D00DAC5ECB45B.C3A4D948-B739-4AE4-9F17CA2110264347/) on how gender stereotypes in ads “can lead to unequal gender outcomes in public and private aspects of people’s lives,” citing public opinion and various experts.

The report was prompted by [**a series of widely reviled ads**](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/world/europe/britain-ads-gender-stereotypes.html?searchResultPosition=1&module=inline) in the UK, including those for a Protein World weight loss drink [**marketed with the tagline**](https://image.cnbcfm.com/api/v1/image/102629646-ad_2.jpg.png?v=1430287902&w=630&h=420) “Are you beach body ready?” and a [**baby formula commercial**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLfH70nm9VM) that showed a girl growing up to be a ballerina and a boy growing up to be a mathematician. (Also Kate Upton’s [**Game of War commercial**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHskC7JRL9M).) It also comes after the ASA stepped in to [**penalize Gucci**](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/apr/06/gucci-ad-banned-unhealthily-thin-model-asa?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other) for “unhealthily thin” models in a 2016 ad campaign, and a more general public feeling of unease about the pernicious effects of advertising, [**particularly on children**](https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed).

The new rule says that “advertisements must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offense,” and provides several examples. Ads can’t show men or women “failing to achieve a task specifically because of their gender” (“e.g. a man’s inability to change nappies; a woman’s inability to park a car”), depict “stereotypical personality traits” for boys and girls, or suggest that new mothers “should prioritize their looks or home cleanliness over their emotional health.”

ADS CAN STILL PORTRAY “GLAMOROUS, ATTRACTIVE, SUCCESSFUL, ASPIRATIONAL, OR HEALTHY PEOPLE OR LIFESTYLES”

Somewhat unrelated to gender stereotypes, this new rule also bans ads that “connect physical features with success in the romantic or social spheres.”

And notably, it does *not* ban showing women or men performing stereotypical tasks (e.g., women shopping or men doing at-home construction projects). Ads can still be targeted based on gender as well. The clarification of the rule also helpfully explains that ads can still portray “glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational, or healthy people or lifestyles.”

While the step seems well-intentioned, there are a lot of obvious questions, such as: Beyond this handful of fairly obvious examples, what counts as a gender stereotype? And how might they intersect with other stereotypes along racial or class lines? Is there really that great of a reason to disrupt representation in advertising, so that everyone can be equally manipulated into buying stuff they don’t need?

I spoke to Brooke Erin Duffy, an assistant professor of communication at Cornell University who [**published a paper**](https://academic.oup.com/ccc/article-abstract/3/1/26/4067400?redirectedFrom=fulltext) on the famous Dove “Real Beauty” campaign in 2010, to get some answers.

Our conversation is below, edited for length and clarity.

**As a topline reaction to this measure, is it useful? Is it important? Why is it happening now?**

It’s interesting. I used to teach an “advertising and society” class, and one of the key themes of the course is that advertising helps us as consumers and citizens understand the social world and our place within it. Advertising shapes our culture, but it also reflects our culture. And we’re at a cultural moment where there is increasing recognition that the traditional ways of representing gender don’t make sense anymore.

“ADVERTISING HELPS US AS CONSUMERS AND CITIZENS UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL WORLD AND OUR PLACE WITHIN IT”

The very limiting portrayals of gender which have sustained the advertising industry for well over a century no longer resonate with our social world. And so I think that’s kind of the reason we’re seeing this now. I also think there is something to be said for the role digital media play in this — both in circulating a wider pool of images of ordinary people and people who challenge conventional definitions of beauty and stereotypical gender roles. Digital media also gives audiences a chance to “talk back” to advertisers. We’ve seen so many ads over the past few years that have generated significant backlash on social media in part because of the limited ways in which gender is circulated.