

# Background Briefing

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) works to maintain the highest standards in advertising by taking action to prevent ads from being misleading, harmful or offensive. Visit [www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk) for more information about our activities, to view the Advertising Codes or to access our database of adjudications.

## Taste and decency: depiction of women

As the sexes become more equal, advertisements are increasingly depicting women in stronger and more positive roles.

The ASA continues, nonetheless, to receive many more complaints about the way women are shown in ads than it does men. The most common complaints object to the gratuitous use of the female image (e.g. nudity or women in sexually suggestive poses), or ads seen to reinforce negative gender stereotypes.

The UK Advertising Codes contain specific rules about offensiveness and discrimination, which endeavour to strike the right balance between what is and is not acceptable. Given the subjective nature of issues of taste and decency, finding this balance isn't always easy. It is, however, safe to say that the ASA takes complaints about the depiction of women in ads very seriously.

### The rules

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**Ads should contain nothing that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care should be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability. Compliance is judged on the context, medium, audience, product and prevailing standards of decency.**

- ads may be distasteful without necessarily breaching the rules
  - ads must not condone or encourage harmful discriminatory behaviour or treatment
  - ads must not encourage or condone violence or cruelty
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### Complaints

The number of complaints received by the ASA about the depiction of women has remained constant over the past five years. In 2009, the ASA received approximately 1400 complaints about 400 ads where the portrayal of women was the main issue. This is out of nearly 29,000 complaints about 14,000 ads received by the ASA in total over the same period.

## **What is acceptable?**

When assessing complaints, both the content and the context in which a woman is shown are important to determining whether or not an ad is acceptable. For example, ads for lingerie or swimwear may draw complaints that they are unsuitable to be seen by children or are degrading to women. However, such ads are rarely sexually explicit and, placed in context, are not usually problematic. By contrast, ads which might show similar levels of nudity but portray women in an out-of-context, sexualised manner are likely to come under greater scrutiny should they be seen to demean or objectify.

## **ASA action**

Here are some of the ads the ASA has considered which have set benchmarks for the industry to follow.

### **Club Spice Ltd t/a Club Oops - August 2010**

A poster for a lap dancing club showed an image of a naked woman from the waist down with underwear pulled down around her thighs. The ASA noted that the woman was pictured naked and considered her pose and the removal of her underwear were likely to be seen as sexually suggestive. The ASA agreed that the ad was likely to be seen as unduly explicit and degrading to women, and upheld the complaint.

### **UlsterTrader.com - October 2009**

A poster featured the cleavage of a woman wearing a white bra. Text stated "Nice Headlamps. What do you look for in a car?...". The ASA considered that the image of the woman's cleavage coupled with the strapline was likely to be seen to objectify and degrade women, and upheld the complaints.

### **Marks and Spencer plc - June 2007**

A poster featured a close-up of a woman wearing a bra. Text stated "Quality worth every penny ... MARKS & SPENCER CELEBRATING 125 YEARS." Complainants objected that the ad was offensive, sexist and demeaning to women and unsuitable to be seen by children. The ad was not investigated after the ASA Council decided that the ad was not overly explicit or sexual in nature, and was unlikely to be seen as sexist, **or to cause serious or widespread offence.**

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## **Further reading**

**The Advertising Codes.**

**The European Advertising Standards Alliance report on the how advertising regulators across the EU tackle the issue of gender portrayal in advertising.**

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