# ADVERTISING (IN)EQUALITY

## THE IMPACTS OF SEXIST ADVERTISING ON WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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A Women's Health Victoria Issues Paper

Women's Health VICTORIA

# Abstract

The aim of this issues paper is to provide an overview of significant literature currently published on the nature of gender portrayals in advertising, and the impacts of these representations on women's health and wellbeing, gender inequality and attitudes and behaviours that support violence against women.

This issues paper found that the continued use of gender stereotypes and increasing reliance on images that sexualise and objectify women in advertisements undermines efforts to promote gender equality in Australia. Gender-stereotyped portrayals limit the aspirations, expectations, interests and participation of women and men in our society. These portrayals are associated with a range of negative health and wellbeing outcomes and are highly problematic for the prevention of family violence and other forms of violence against women.

The studies cited in this paper demonstrate that there is a clear business case for change. Brands, businesses and creative agencies can benefit from portraying both women and men proportionately, respectfully and realistically.

## ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH VICTORIA

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is a statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service. We work collaboratively with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence systems, policies and services to be more gender equitable to support better outcomes for women.

As a statewide body, WHV works with the nine regional and two statewide services that make up the Victorian Women's Health Program. WHV is also a member of Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women's health and the prevention of violence against women.

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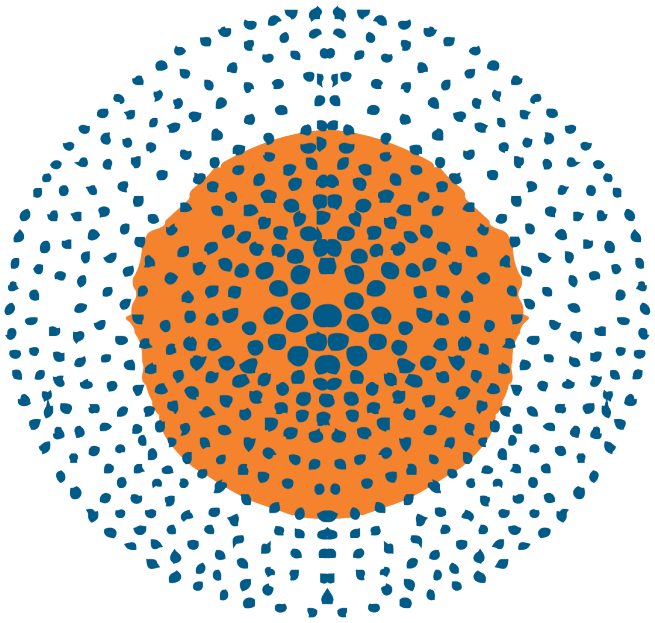
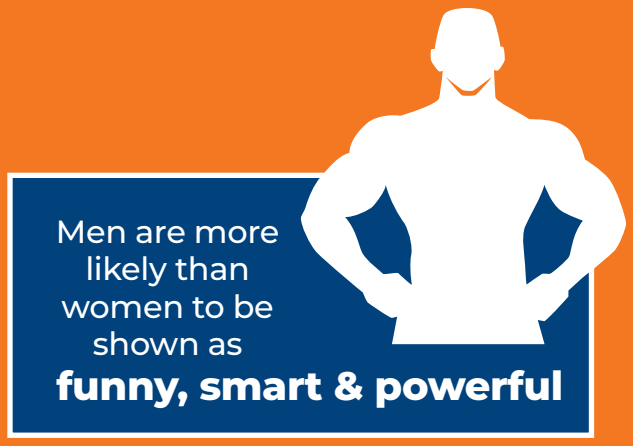
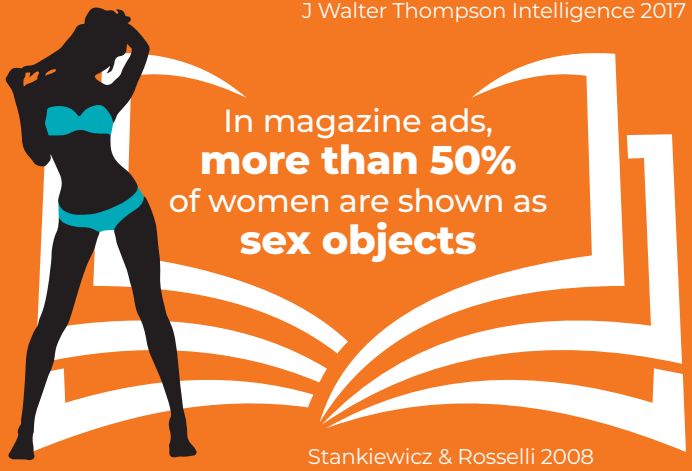


# Advertising (in)equality at a glance

Rubie-Davies et al. 2013; Peruta & Powers 2017




Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, J Walter Thompson Intelligence 2017




Stankiewicz & Rosselli 2008

Ads that show women as sexually powerful still have a **negative impact** on women's body image

Halliwell, Malson & Tischner 2011

Sweet 2014

When men are exposed to images that objectify women they are **more tolerant** of **sexual harassment** and **interpersonal violence**

Ward 2016; Reichl, Ali & Uyeda 2018

Sexual objectification in ads causes people to see women as **animals or objects**

Ward 2016

Realistic portrayals of women in ads **increased purchase intent** by **26%** among all consumers and **45%** among women

Association of National Advertisers (US) 2018

Sexual appeals **do not sell** products

Wirtz, Sparks & Zimbres 2017

# Executive summary

Our everyday lives are saturated with advertisements, which consciously and unconsciously shape our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. Alongside other forms of media, advertisements shape and reinforce gendered ideas about what it means to be a woman or man and how women and men are valued in our society.

Inequalities based on gender result in significant differences for men and women in terms of their education, income, employment, caring responsibilities, social status and participation in public and private life across their lifespan. Gender inequality is also recognised as the key underlying cause of violence against women. A comprehensive body of research now exists which links family violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women to expressions of gender inequality.

This paper examines the links between advertising and gender inequality and women's health and wellbeing. Research shows that advertising has historically under-represented girls and women and depicted them in stereotyped ways, and that, over time, portrayals of girls and women have become more sexualised and objectifying. This has helped to perpetuate inequalities based on gender in broader society. Advertising has also relied on stereotyped portrayals of men; however, the evidence shows that impacts of stereotyped and sexualised representations are not the same for men as they are for women.

This evidence paper explores how gender is represented in advertising today, and the impacts of these portrayals on the health and wellbeing of women and men, and boys and girls, in our society. The final section explores the evidence relating to consumer perceptions of gender portrayals in advertising, identifying evidence to support a business case for advertising equality.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Gender portrayals in advertising

- Girls and women are under-represented in advertisements. Boys and men provide more voiceovers and appear more often than girls and women.
- Advertising portrayals do not accurately reflect the diversity of our community. Advertising is dominated by representations of people who are white, young, able-bodied and heterosexual.
- Marketing to children has become increasingly gender-stereotyped, with colour used as a marker to indicate whether or not a product is considered appropriate for boys or girls to use. Toys and games marketed to girls are associated with a focus on appearance, nurturing and cooperative play, while those for boys are associated with competition, dominance, independence, and physical activity.
- Adult women continue to be portrayed in stereotypical roles such as housewives, mothers, wives and girlfriends, and the products they are associated with are appliances, furniture and products related to health, cleaning, beauty and fashion. Men are typically depicted as powerful and independent, are frequently shown in work settings and are used to advertise electronic, automotive, finance and insurance products, food and beverages.

- There is some evidence that gender role portrayals are becoming more egalitarian in some aspects. For example, women are increasingly portrayed in work roles, and men are increasingly depicted in more egalitarian roles or interacting with their children.
- However, the sexualisation and objectification of women is increasing. Women are more likely than men to be shown wearing revealing clothing or simulating sex acts, being dominated or portrayed as objects or animals. Digital technology enables images of women's bodies to be altered, producing even narrower conceptualisations of female attractiveness and helping to facilitate the objectification of women. There is also evidence that men are increasingly portrayed in sexualised ways.
- Problematic portrayals of masculine peer cultures are evident in marketing targeted to men. Gambling and alcohol advertisements are particularly likely to depict women in sexualised or subordinate roles, or as interfering with men's freedom, leisure time and their relationships with male friends.

## Impacts of advertising on gender inequality and women's health and wellbeing

- Children's understandings of gender, and their interests, behaviours and aspirations, are influenced by the advertising of toys and other products. Girls learn that they are expected to be attractive, cooperative and caring, while boys learn that they are expected to be strong, active and independent. Both boys and girls learn that activities and behaviours associated with masculinity have a higher social status.
- The sexualisation and objectification of women in advertising and other mass media has a negative impact on women's health and wellbeing. The ubiquity of sexualising and objectifying portrayals of women in advertising and other media causes girls and women to understand that they will be viewed and evaluated based on their appearance. Girls and women who are regularly exposed to sexually objectifying media content are more likely to objectify themselves and internalise unrealistic appearance-related ideals. In turn, this increases body dissatisfaction, contributes to disordered eating, lower self-esteem and reduced mental health and results in reduced satisfaction in sexual relationships and reduced participation in physical activity and exercise. Evidence suggests that, regardless of whether women are depicted as sexually passive or sexually powerful in advertising imagery, women's body satisfaction is negatively affected by sexualised portrayals. There is also evidence that women feel less comfortable and less safe in situations in which sexualised imagery is used to advertise events and products.

> **... regardless of whether women are depicted as sexually passive or sexually powerful in advertising imagery, women's body satisfaction is negatively affected by sexualised portrayals**

- Sexualised portrayals of men are increasing and have been found to reduce men's satisfaction with their bodies and increase their self-objectification. While some of the impacts of sexualisation on men are similar to the impacts on women, sexualised portrayals of men tend to be associated with power and dominance. These representations have different social meanings than sexualised representations of women.
- Sexualised and objectifying representations influence how women are perceived and treated. Sexualised representations in advertising and other media can cause women and men to have a diminished view of women's humanity, competence and morality. Women are perceived as less capable, less intelligent and more animal-like when they are portrayed in sexualised ways.
- Objectifying and sexualised media content is associated with attitudes that support violence against women. Specifically, exposure

to advertisements and media content that objectifies or sexualises women is associated with a greater support for sexist beliefs, attitudes that blame victims for sexual violence, a greater tolerance of sexual aggression, and men's use of sexually coercive behaviour. Attitudes and beliefs that condone violence against women are recognised as an important underlying cause of violence against women.

## A business case for equality in advertising

- Gender stereotypical advertisements are out of step with public opinion. International research shows that children and adults perceive advertising depictions of men, women and families to be clichéd, stereotypical and lacking diversity. Many consumers – particularly women and younger people – want more realistic gender portrayals that are in keeping with modern-day roles.

### Advertising representations that challenge gender stereotypes are positively received, particularly by women

- Advertising representations that challenge gender stereotypes are positively received, particularly by women. The depiction of non-stereotypical gender role portrayals generates more positive reactions than traditional advertising campaigns and leads to positive attitudes towards the brand.
- The advertising industry lacks diversity and is dominated by men. Research indicates that many in the industry perceive that gender-stereotyped representations are more readily received by consumers. Industry professionals tend to be unaware of the harmful impacts of stereotyped and sexualised portrayals.

The evidence summarised in this paper suggests that advertising, along with other everyday forms of media, contributes to gender inequality by offering a limited and stereotypical portrayal of the roles, aspirations and abilities of women and men. Further, adherence to rigid gender stereotypes is recognised as one of the key underlying causes of violence against women. Other factors that have consistently been shown to predict violence against women – including beliefs that condone or excuse violence, male dominance, and male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect for women – are also reinforced by advertising portrayals.

Advertising is all around us and plays a profound role in shaping community attitudes and expectations. Because advertising is so influential, it also has the potential to positively transform gender norms and to support and normalise gender equality. Until recently, media and advertising as a setting for the promotion of gender equality and the prevention of violence against women and children has remained relatively unexplored; however, recent Victorian and Australian frameworks and strategies have identified the need to focus on this.

While advertising is only one factor that contributes to harmful gender norms, practices and structures, it impacts on the entire community and increasingly pervades our public, private and online spaces. The findings from this paper highlight that the effectiveness of interventions to promote gender equality and reduce violence against women in other settings, such as in schools and workplaces, will be undermined if businesses, brands and the advertising industry continue to rely on stereotyped and sexualised portrayals.

Evidence also demonstrates that there is increasing momentum for change. Advertisements that challenge traditional gender stereotypes are positively received by many in the community, and advertisers are increasingly recognising the benefits of advertising equality. There is now compelling evidence to suggest that advertisements that provide realistic, respectful and diverse portrayals of women and men not only increase purchase intentions among consumers, but also help to improve health and wellbeing and promote gender equality in our society.

# Introduction

Advertising pervades all aspects of our everyday lives, infiltrating our homes, shopping centres, streets, transport and online activities. Market research in the US indicates that adults are exposed to over 360 advertisements per day via television, radio, internet, newspapers and magazines (Johnson 2014). Rates of exposure in Australia are likely to be similar, considering that everyday media use is high. The average Australian adult is estimated to watch 17.5 hours of television or video content each week (Deloitte Australia 2017) and Australian teenagers spend 3.3 hours a day on social media (Australian Psychological Society 2017).

Along with other media, advertising plays a powerful role in helping to shape social norms. It helps set the bar for what constitutes acceptable attitudes or behaviour for men and women, and influences how men and women are valued in our society.

> **Inequalities based on gender are so interwoven into the fabric and traditions of our society that they often seem invisible**

This paper explores the links between advertising, gender inequality and women's health and wellbeing. All Australians have a right to live in a safe society, have equal access to power, resources and opportunities, and be treated with dignity, respect and fairness. However, in Australia and elsewhere, entrenched inequalities based on gender result in significant differences for men and women in terms of their income and education, employment, caring responsibilities, social status and participation in public and private life across their lifespan.

Inequalities based on gender are so interwoven into the fabric and traditions of our society that they often seem invisible. These inequalities are expressed and maintained through longstanding social norms, practices and structures that support rigid gender stereotypes and the unequal distribution of power between men and women at every level of society. Gender stereotyping and inequality have negative effects for both men and women. However, because masculine roles, occupations and behaviours are associated with higher financial and social status compared to feminine ones, the consequences of inequality are particularly profound and harmful for girls and women.

Gender inequality is also recognised as the key underlying cause of violence against women. There is a comprehensive body of research that identifies that family violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women are linked to particular expressions of gender inequality, including stereotyped ideas about masculinity and femininity, male peer cultures that promote aggression and disrespect for women, men's control of decision-making in public and private life, and attitudes and norms that condone violence against women (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth 2015). Australian frameworks to address violence against women, such as *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women*

*in Australia* (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth 2015) and the **Victorian Government**'s *Free from Violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women* (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017) are based on this evidence.

> **Gender inequality operates in intersection with other inequalities and has different impacts on different demographic groups**

It is important to acknowledge that gender inequality is not experienced in the same way by all Australian women, and it cannot be considered in isolation from other forms of oppression and discrimination. Gender inequality operates in intersection with other inequalities and has different impacts on different demographic groups (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth 2015).

Feminist community activists and women's organisations have long identified the influential role of everyday media in perpetuating gender norms and stereotypes, as well as its potential to contribute to their transformation. **Women's Health Victoria**'s work has included contributing to research on the health and other impacts of exposure to sexualised and objectified representations of women in popular media (eds Greaves, Pederson & Poole 2014), advocating for stronger regulation of sexist advertising, and supporting community conversations on these issues through our well-attended 'Making Space for Women' events held during the annual '16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence' campaign. Other Australian organisations that have campaigned against the objectification and sexualisation of women and girls in media include the feminist activist group **Collective Shout**, community organisations and professional associations (such as **Plan International** and the **Australian Psychological Association**, who have undertaken research or collated resources to raise community awareness about stereotyping and sexualisation in advertising) and local councils (such as the **City of Melbourne**, which has developed guidelines to encourage community reporting of sexist advertising).

Until recently, government initiatives to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality in Australia have paid limited attention to the critical role of advertising. Although there have been some promising initiatives focused on the media setting, these have tended to focus on how the news media reports on violence against women.[1] More recently, Australian and Victorian government frameworks and strategies such as *Change the Story*, *Safe and Strong: a Victorian Gender Equality Strategy* (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2016) and Victoria's *Free from Violence: First action plan 2018–21* (Department of Health and Human Services 2018) have recognised advertising and everyday media as a priority setting for preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality.

> **Australian and Victorian government frameworks and strategies … have recognised advertising and everyday media as a priority setting for preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality**

## AIM OF THIS PAPER

The aim of this evidence paper is to provide an overview of significant literature currently published on the nature of gender portrayals in advertising, and the impacts of these representations on women's health and wellbeing, gender inequality and attitudes and behaviours that support violence against women.

1 These initiatives include **Domestic Violence Victoria**'s advocacy work to improve news media reporting of violence against women, and further research and guidelines for the news media developed by **Our Watch**.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper reviews existing literature, with a focus on studies conducted in Australia. We conducted a desktop search for articles and research in academic databases and 'grey' literature. The search combined terms (and variations of terms) related to 'advertising' or 'media'; terms relating to 'gender' or 'women'; and terms relating to 'impacts', 'stereotyping', 'sexualisation', 'objectification' or 'violence'. The search included academic databases, Google and Google Scholar, as well as browsing through the reference lists of existing research. Initially the search was limited to studies published after 2010, but after identifying that there were some important studies – particularly Australian studies – conducted prior to then, we also included selected studies before 2010 in our discussion.

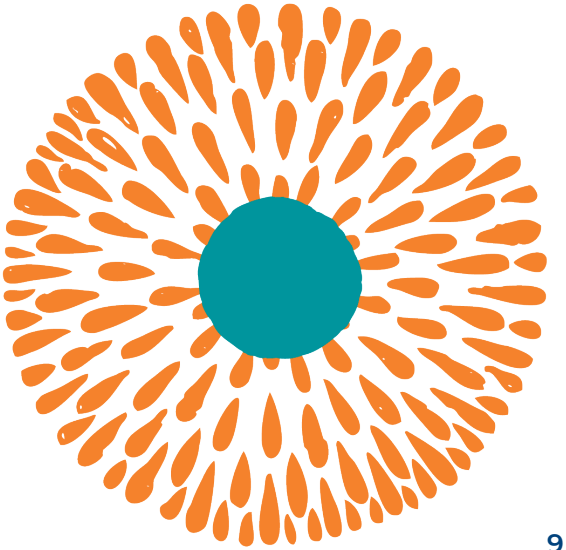
The search identified that many of the studies of the impacts of sexualisation, objectification and gender stereotyping explore the impacts of a range of media – including television programs, magazines, music videos, online gaming and social media – in addition to advertising. This paper summarises the findings from those studies, and where possible provides examples of studies specifically focused on exposure to advertising.

The search also identified several gaps in the available research. While there is considerable evidence on gender stereotyping or sexualisation in print or television advertising, there is little research on social media or online marketing (Grau & Zotos 2016; Ward 2016). The majority of the literature is from the US, while a smaller number of studies have been undertaken in Australia. Further, most of the available research is based on samples of adolescents or young adults attending universities, with few studies having been undertaken on the impacts on children or older adults (Ward 2016). The majority of studies have been based on experimental designs (for example, by exposing participants to advertisements or other media content) while fewer have examined everyday exposure to advertising and its impacts (Ward 2016).

## TERMINOLOGY

There are considerable overlaps between the terminology below (Ward 2016). However, for the purposes of this paper, the following definitions will be used:

- **Gender stereotype:** a widely-held, over-simplified idea about a group or individual based on their gender. Gender stereotypes are shaped by **gendered norms.** These are beliefs and rules of conduct that a society considers appropriate in relation to the types of roles, interests, behaviours and contributions expected from boys and girls, men and women (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth 2015).
- **Objectification:** when a person's body or body parts are separated from them as a person so that they are reduced to the status of a mere object. **Sexual objectification** is when a person is viewed primarily as an object of sexual desire (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr 2010).
- **Sexualisation**: when a person's value comes only from their sexual appeal or behaviour; or a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; or sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person; or a person is sexually objectified (American Psychological Association 2007).
- **Self-objectification**: viewing or experiencing oneself as an object to be looked at and evaluated by others on the basis of appearance, due to repeated exposure to cultural experiences of objectification over time (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr 2010; Ward 2016).



# Gender portrayals in advertising

Toy ads reinforce **male dominance**, **independence** and **power**

Auster & Mansbach 2012; Bush & Furnham 2013

A variety of studies have examined gender differences in advertising portrayals of the traits, images, statuses, settings and product categories associated with men and women. The research reveals that, although there have been some positive developments, women are still under-represented, depicted in negative and stereotyped ways, and are increasingly sexualised and objectified.

## GENDER AND DIVERSITY OF REPRESENTATIONS

For many years, research has consistently identified that men appear more often than women in television advertisements (Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016). Some studies suggest that this is still the case today, though the evidence is mixed. For example, a 2016 analysis of more than 2000 English-language advertisements in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand found that there were twice as many male characters as female characters, with women accounting for only 37 per cent of all characters in television commercials (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media 2017). In addition, women typically appeared on screen for a shorter duration of time than men. Men got about four times as much screen time as women, and this was consistent over a ten-year period from 2006 to 2016 (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media 2017). A recent study of children's television advertisements in the US also found that women were under-represented as lead presenters (Peruta & Powers 2017). However, a global review in 2014 of television advertisements from 13 Asian, American and European countries found that the number of advertisements in which men and women appeared was relatively equal (Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016).[2] Similarly, a relatively equal representation of men and women was found in a New Zealand study of over 3000 television advertisements in 2008–09 (Rubie-Davies, Liu & Lee 2013), and in an analysis of 394 US television advertisements in 2013 (Prieler 2015).

A consistent finding is that men provide a greater number of voiceovers in advertisements compared to women. Matthes, Prieler and Adam (2016) found that men provided 62 per cent of voiceovers across the 13 countries studied. Similar findings were identified in an earlier multi-country review of research on television advertisements (Furnham & Paltzer 2010), a review of US television advertisements (Prieler 2015), and a review of advertisements during popular children's television in the US (Peruta & Powers 2017). Additionally, advertisements with only male voices have also been found to be much more common than those with only female voices, with a multi-country study finding 18 per cent of advertisements had male-only voices, while 3 per cent had female-only voices (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media 2017). While voiceovers may be a subtle aspect of gender representation, the unequal inclusion of women's voices reinforces the social and cultural power and authority of men in our society, which is closely linked to the underlying causes of violence against women.

> **Advertising … typically relies on representations of individuals who are predominantly white, able-bodied and heterosexual**

The unequal representation of women in advertising is further compounded by a lack of diversity. Advertising has been found to significantly under-represent the diversity of our community and typically relies on representations of individuals who are predominantly white, able-bodied and heterosexual. Rubie-Davies, Liu and Lee (2013) found that in New Zealand television advertisements, people from European backgrounds were over-represented whereas Maori and Pacific Island people were only proportionally represented in government advertisements or those that used negative stereotypes. Similarly, the representation of people from Asian backgrounds also appeared to be based on stereotypes, as they were only proportionally represented in advertisements

2 Australia was not included in this study.

for finance products. Corroborating the finding that disadvantaged or marginalised groups rarely appear in advertising, Lloyds Banking Group (2016) examined 1300 advertisements in the UK and found that only 19 per cent included people from minority groups. People with disabilities, single parents and gay and bisexual people appeared in fewer than 1 per cent of advertisements.[3] Those aged over 65 and from Asian backgrounds were also significantly under-represented. Similarly, a US study of advertisements during children's television programming found Indigenous people and those from Asian or Hispanic backgrounds were grossly under-represented (Peruta & Powers 2017).

### The majority of advertisements feature younger people

The majority of advertisements feature younger people (Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016; Prieler 2015). When older women do appear in advertisements it is often in relation to health and beauty products, with ageing being framed as unhealthy, ugly, and undesirable (Brown & Knight 2015; Del Rosso 2017). An analysis of Australian women's magazines from 1960 to 2010 found that since the 1960s, the pressure on women of all ages to remain looking youthful and mask all signs of ageing has increased. In more recent years, both younger women and older women have been targeted by advertising selling anti-ageing products (Brown & Knight 2015).

The limited range of advertising representations acts to support other forms of structural inequality and disadvantage, including inequalities based on race, class, age, ethnicity, ability and sexuality. The depiction of marginalised groups – where they are depicted at all – often relies on stereotypes that are used to maintain oppression and justify inequality.[4]

3 For example, the study found that although 17.9 per cent of people in the UK have a disability, just 0.06 per cent of people featured in the UK advertisements appeared to have a disability.

4 There are signs this may be gradually improving, with several recent examples of Australian advertisements featuring people from a more diverse range of cultural backgrounds and people with disabilities (such as Kmart and Target in Australia) (Elsworth 2017).

## STEREOTYPED REPRESENTATIONS OF MEN AND WOMEN

From a very early age, children are influenced by advertising representations. The marketing of children's toys, clothes and other products both mirrors and perpetuates the gender norms and practices held by the wider community.

There is evidence that toy marketing has become increasingly gendered.[5] An examination of more than 3000 advertisements over almost a century of Sears' toy catalogues from 1905 to 1995 found that toy marketing had become more gender-stereotyped over time (Sweet 2013). Advertisements now appear to rely less on explicitly stereotyped messages (for example, messages that explicitly promote tea sets to girls to prepare them for a life of homemaking) and more on implicit gender cues such as colour, and fantasy roles such as the muscled, aggressive, action hero and the little princess (Sweet 2014).

Advertisements for toys and other products reinforce harmful and rigid gender stereotypes in a variety of ways (Peruta & Powers 2017). Advertisements influence children's judgements of whether toys are 'for boys' or 'for girls'. One US study with primary-school age children found that the gender of the model in commercials affected children's perceptions of who should play with particular toys (Pike & Jennings 2005). Colour (predominantly pink and blue) is consistently used as a marker for gender in advertising children's clothing and toys. Cunningham and Macrae (2011) found that of the pink coloured toys in toy catalogues, 97 per cent were listed in the 'girls' section of the catalogue. Another study reviewed toy advertisements on the Disney corporation's website and found that nearly all of the action toys, small vehicles, weapons, and

5 The gender stereotypes used in marketing of toys also reflects the ways in which toys are designed. Evidence indicates that toys have become increasingly gendered in their design, with girls' toys increasingly sexualised and boys' toys suggesting male dominance. For example, a recent US study found that 62 per cent of popular dolls targeted to girls had a noticeably thin body and were portrayed in sexualised ways in relation to the clothing and body position used in the design. In contrast, 42.3 per cent of action figures targeted to boys had noticeably muscular bodies and those figures were more likely than less muscular figures to be shown with hands in fists and with an angry expression (Boyd & Murnen 2017).

Incredible Hulk.
Photograph by Dan Forbes (Daly 2017).

My Little Pony.
Photograph by Dan Forbes (Daly 2017).

## Advertisements targeted at children frequently reinforce male dominance, independence and power

building toys were for 'boys only', while nearly all of the toys that were dolls or related to beauty, cosmetics, jewellery, and domestic work were for 'girls only', reflecting stereotypes that associate masculinity with physicality and action, and femininity with nurturing and a concern with physical attractiveness (Auster & Mansbach 2012). Similar findings have been reported in studies in the UK (Lewin-Jones & Mitra 2009). One UK study of television commercials found that children's toy advertisements often showed boys and girls playing separately in stereotypical ways, with girls shown as less physically active, with an emphasis on appearance, performance, nurturing and relationships (Let Toys Be Toys Campaign 2015).

Advertisements targeted at children frequently reinforce male dominance, independence and power. A study in the UK of television advertisements for children's games found that males tended to be shown as the main characters, were portrayed in dominant roles and were most often the verbal narrators of advertisements. Further, while males were shown playing alone, females were typically supervised by adults, suggesting that 'males ... are seen as independent and in control of themselves and their surroundings' (Bush & Furnham 2013). Along similar lines, a study of advertisements on the US children's television network Nickelodeon found that commercials reinforced traditional gender stereotypes through showing female characters in cooperative play situations, while male characters were portrayed in competitive interactions (Kahlenberg & Hein 2010).

In advertising targeted to adults, the types of products male and female characters advertise tend to be associated with gender stereotypes. A variety of studies have established that men are more often used to advertise electronic, automotive, finance or insurance products and food and beverages, while women frequently appear in advertisements for health, cleaning,

appliances, furniture, beauty and fashion products (Eisend 2009; Furnham & Paltzer 2010; Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos 2009; Prieler 2015; Rubie-Davies, Liu & Lee 2013).

## The roles and settings used in advertisements targeted to adults also tend to be stereotypical

The roles and settings used in advertisements targeted to adults also tend to be stereotypical. A meta-analysis of 64 studies on gender roles in television and radio advertising found that occupational status showed the highest degree of stereotyping (Eisend 2009). Consistent with this, a recent study of 394 Spanish- and English-language television advertisements in the US found a high prevalence of gender stereotypes in both samples, with women more often than men depicted as young and usually shown at home (Prieler 2016). One of the few Australian studies to review gender portrayals in television commercials identified that women were often portrayed in home or retail settings, while men were shown in outdoor or employment settings and typically portrayed in senior work roles (Milner & Higgs 2004). Based on the findings, the authors suggested that gender portrayals were becoming more stereotypical compared to earlier Australian studies. It appears no comparative study reviewing gender stereotypes in Australian advertising content has been published since that time.

These stereotypical associations with products and roles are reinforced by other, more subtle, gender differences in advertising portrayals. A study of television commercials in several countries, including Australia, found that men were almost twice as likely as women to be portrayed as funny, 62 per cent more likely to be shown as intelligent (for example, playing the character of a doctor or scientist), 29 per cent more likely to speak words associated with power and 28 per cent more likely to speak words associated with achievement (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media 2017).[6] In a study of UK television commercials, women were often portrayed in home settings, interacting with children or others through smiling or touching, while men were portrayed in work settings as experts and tended to address the audience directly (Rubio Milagros Del 2018).

However, other studies have found evidence of positive shifts. An analysis of 1755 television advertisements from 13 Asian, American and European countries found some evidence that aspects of gender role portrayals in television advertising have improved, at least in some countries. In the US, the UK and several European countries, men and women were evenly portrayed in work roles (Matthes, Prieler & Adam 2016).[7] Improvements in portrayals were also identified in a longitudinal comparison of television commercials aired during the Super Bowl sports event in the US across a 20-year period between 1990 and 2010. The study found that women were depicted less often as dependent upon men, and more often shown involved in non-stereotypical activities, while men were being portrayed less frequently as authority figures (Hatzithomas, Boutsouki & Ziamou 2016). Further, a study of over 3000 television advertisements in New Zealand found that while there was evidence of men and women being associated with stereotypical product categories, there was less evidence of gender stereotyping than has been previously reported. Women were equally likely to be depicted in roles outside of the home and men were almost equally likely to appear in advertisements for children's products (Rubie-Davies, Liu & Lee 2013). Similarly, a recent review of the literature in advertising and marketing journals published between 2010 and 2016 found some evidence to suggest that men are increasingly depicted in 'softer' or more egalitarian roles, or interacting with their children (Grau & Zotos 2016).

6 Additional data on these findings is available from the J Walter Thompson website: **https://www.jwt.com/en/news/unpacking-gender-bias-in-advertising**

7 It is unclear from this study if the portrayals of men and women in work roles reflected traditional gender-stereotyped occupations for men and women.

## HONEY BIRDETTE

Images from Honey Birdette 'Office party time' campaign (Wolfe 2017).

Australian lingerie brand Honey Birdette recently advertised a line of lingerie entitled 'office party time', in which women were shown wearing lingerie and surrounded by fully clothed men. These images appeal to the male gaze, suggesting that the women, rather than the lingerie, are the product for consumption, and that women's role in workplaces is to be subservient and to titillate.

By the end of September 2018, the Australian body that regulates complaints about advertising in Australia, Ad Standards, had received 12 community complaints against Honey Birdette based on concerns that these advertisements sexualised and objectified women.

Honey Birdette has a history of using sexualised images of women to sell their products and arguing that this imagery empowers women; however, health implications of exposure to sexualised and objectified images of women exist regardless of whether the intention of the images is to empower.

## SEXUALISED AND OBJECTIFYING REPRESENTATIONS

Research consistently finds that women are sexualised and objectified in advertising and mass media (Ward 2016). A recent study of television advertisements in the US found that women were more likely to be dressed suggestively while men were fully clothed (Prieler 2015).

A study of almost 2000 advertisements from popular magazines in the US found that in over half women were portrayed as sex objects. This was particularly the case in men's magazines, in which three-quarters of the images of women were sexualised (Stankiewicz & Rosselli 2008). Similarly, a cross-cultural comparison of newspaper advertisements in the Netherlands and Italy found that in both countries women were more often seductively dressed and portrayed in an objectified manner, though this was a stronger phenomenon in Italian advertisements than those in the Netherlands (Tartaglia & Rollero 2015).

There is evidence that advertising and mass media representations of women have become increasingly sexualised (Zotos & Tsichla 2014). A review of 40 years of representations in *Rolling Stone* magazine found that 'hypersexualised' representations of women (for example, those that depict women with their legs spread or

Image from American Apparel campaign (Stampler 2014)

pulling down their pants, lying on a bed or simulating sex acts) have become significantly more common (Hatton & Trautner 2011). The study also found some evidence that depictions of men have become increasingly sexualised, though women continue to be more frequently sexualised than men. Increased male sexualisation has also been identified in a small number of other studies of media portrayals (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018).

Increased sexualisation in portrayals of women was also identified in a review of magazines for teen and pre-teen girls, which found that the use of 'sexualised' clothing (for example, tight-fitting clothing, low-cut tops, make-up and high heels) had significantly increased in the period between 1979 and 2011 (Graff, Murnen & Krause 2013). Sexualised depictions of women and female athletes in sports advertisements have also become more common (Kim & Sagas 2014; Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson 2015). The sexualisation of girls in media and advertising has also been highlighted in government-commissioned reviews in the US (American Psychological Association 2007), UK (Papadopoulos 2010) and Australia (New South Wales, Parliament 2016). Some have linked these changes in the representation of girls and women to the influence of the pornography industry, arguing that pornography now constructs standards of beauty and fashion, and this is reflected by the prevalence of pornographic imagery and iconography in advertising and other popular media (Tyler & Quek 2016).

The practice of digitally altering women's bodies in advertisements has become widespread (Bury, Tiggemann & Slater 2016; Tiggemann & Brown 2018). Images are routinely altered to remove blemishes, elongate legs, reduce waist and hip sizes, and increase bust sizes (Tiggemann & Brown 2018). This practice has helped facilitate objectification and produce even narrower and more unrealistic conceptualisations of female attractiveness, portraying women as unrealistically thin, large-busted, long-limbed, unblemished, wrinkle-free and hairless. Technology has helped to extend the reach of the beauty industry 'across new areas of the body requiring product solutions', such as 'upper arm definition' and 'thigh gaps' (Gill 2017).

Objectification and sexualisation may operate in different ways for different women. Studies in the US have found that African-American women are portrayed in advertisements as having the least facial prominence of all demographic groups and are more frequently depicted as animals, while Asian-American women are more frequently depicted as exotic and subservient, when compared to other groups (Vance et al. 2015).

Alcohol and gambling advertisements are particularly likely to rely on sexualised portrayals of women (Towns, Parker & Chase 2012; Ward 2016). These products are frequently targeted to men (Lyons, Dalton & Hoy 2006; Towns, Parker & Chase 2012). An analysis of 85 gambling advertisements from 11 Australian and international companies found that men were the central actors, while women featured in secondary, service or subordinate roles (Deans et al. 2016). Just under half used gender stereotypes, and about a quarter objectified women. For example, one described the bikini as 'one of man's greatest inventions', while another presented a James Bond–

## GENERAL PANTS

Image from General Pants 'Wet dreams' campaign (Collective Shout 2014).

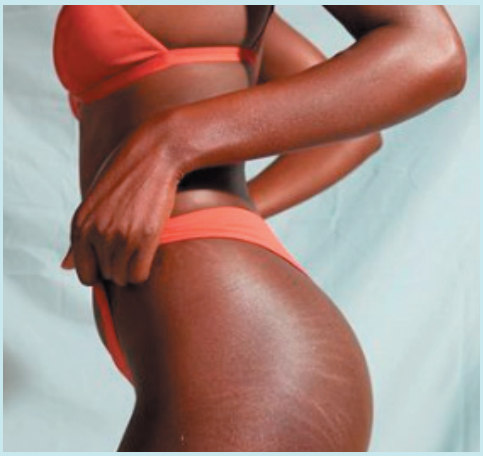
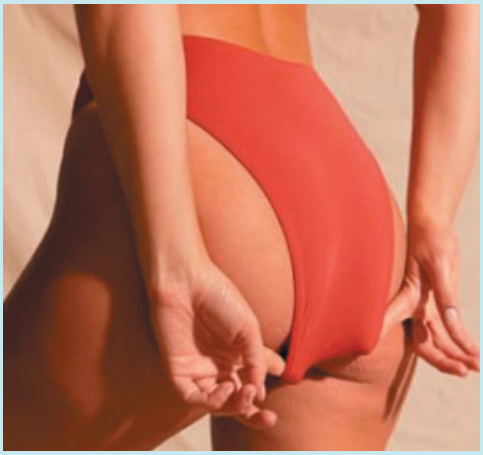


Image from General Pants 'Fit in' campaign (Alison 2016).



Images from General Pants 'Fit in' campaign (Alison 2016).

General Pants is an Australian fashion retailer that sells denim, street and surf wear. On its website, it explains it aims to 'disrupt the average and bring together the best global trends and fashion to inspire young-blooded individuals'. Yet General Pants regularly comes under scrutiny for its use of sexist advertisements and advertising that objectifies women. For example, in 2011, teenage staff were asked to wear 'I love sex' badges. In 2014, its 'Wet dreams' campaign showed women wearing bikinis lying in a bathtub with sultry facial expressions, and its 2016 'Fit in' campaign featured partially-clothed women. Most recently, its 2018 '#NoFilter' campaign, with tag lines such as 'Raw and real – it's a thing' (Davis 2018) promised a shift towards embracing women's bodies and their 'personally perceived flaws', using no airbrushing or editing. However, the advertisements show women undressing to reveal their bikinis, and use only young, able-bodied and slim models, with the camera zooming in on the models' breasts, groins and buttocks. Even if the images show stretch marks on women's skin, General Pants continues to sexualise and objectify women's bodies, despite its professed intention to empower women.

type character in a suit playing table tennis with a woman wearing a bikini, with the voiceover: 'When you have power, you can do what you want. With whoever you want, whenever you want, wherever you want, as many different ways as you want' (Deans et al. 2016).

This increase in sexualisation is not only linked to a desire on the part of advertisers to 'satisfy the male gaze, provoke, and stimulate hype' (Zotos & Tsichla 2014), but also to shifting conceptualisations of female empowerment in Western cultures. Influenced by 'post-feminist' notions of women's liberation and equality, traditional images of women as mothers or housewives have been replaced by portrayals of women as sexually assertive, independent and ambitious (Gill 2007; Gill 2012; Malson et al. 2011). Advertisers have embraced these changing cultural ideals, often presenting women as sexually powerful and in control, rather than as passive objects (Malson et al. 2011). Advertising agencies frequently defend their use of these portrayals by framing them as progressive and empowering. The influence of ideas about women's empowerment is evident in some of the determinations of the **Australian Ad Standards Community Panel**, which are considered in relation to the **Australian Association of National Advertisers**' Code of Ethics regarding the use of sexual appeal in advertising. Commenting on the determinations of the community panel in relation to fashion and lingerie complaints and whether or not they are 'exploitative or degrading' under the Code, the Ad Standards summary says: 'Advertisements for fashion or perfume which depict women in stylised sexual poses may be considered exploitative, but are not considered degrading if the women are shown to be confident and in control' (Ad Standards 2018).[8]

However, these representations ultimately undermine efforts to promote gender equality by constructing female success as being predicated on physical attractiveness, by relying on limiting, unrealistic images of women's bodies and by linking women's power to their sexual desirability to men. As discussed in the next section, these 'empowered' portrayals have been shown to have damaging impacts on women's body image.

## NEDS

One advertisement in Neds' 2017 'Time to bet' campaign depicts a man trying to escape a family gathering with his wife and in-laws in order to bet. Gambling is portrayed as a fun and relaxing way to escape family obligations.

Another advertisement depicts a woman shopping for clothes with her male partner. He encourages her to try on clothes in the fitting room and she praises him for his generosity. However, in reality he is using the time as an opportunity to continue betting on his phone.

Ogilvy Brisbane's strategy director, Ewen Pettit, says the advertisements offer 'Aussie blokes' a 'fun little escape', considering that 'After some research with Australian blokes we uncovered a startling truth – 80 per cent of our audience feel pressured by the demands of modern life and yearn for "me time"' (Campaign Brief 2017).

Complaints regarding these advertisements were made to Ad Standards (Ad Standards case no. 0460/17 and 0461/17 and 0475/17, available at adstandards.com.au/cases). These were predominantly based on concerns that the advertisements promote gambling behaviour, in addition to concerns about deceptive, condescending and dismissive behaviour towards women and family members. Ad Standards dismissed the complaints.

8 For a recent example in which complaints about objectifying, exploitative and degrading advertising imagery were dismissed by the Ad Standards community panel on the basis that the advertisement showed the woman's pose as 'confident and in control', see the Ad Standards case report from 7/3/2018, no. 0083/18 in relation to a Honey Birdette lingerie poster advertisement, available at https://adstandards.com.au/cases/2018/March.

## PORTRAYAL OF MASCULINE PEER CULTURES

As identified in Australia's framework for violence prevention, *Change the Story*, male peer cultures that promote hostility or disrespect towards women are one of the key underlying causes of violence against women (Our Watch, ANROWS & VicHealth 2015). The available research suggests that advertising targeted at men contributes to this by reinforcing masculine peer cultures that exclude or denigrate women.

### Women tend to be shown as peripheral in men's lives

A review of the research literature on alcohol advertisements has found these tend to promote disrespectful views of women. Based on a review of 80 studies of alcohol advertising over a ten-year period, Towns, Parker and Chase (2012) identified that the dominant representations of masculinity in these advertisements draw on stereotypes of the 'everyday guy' and the 'lovable larrikin'. Women tend to be shown as peripheral in men's lives, are frequently sexualised as 'hotties' or portrayed as demanding and interfering with men's freedom, leisure time and relationships with male friends. A common theme is that the demands of female partners can be managed by men with lies and deception, presented under the veil of humour. The authors conclude that such messages undermine equal relationships between men and women, promote a masculinity that marginalises or objectifies women and are problematic for the prevention of family violence. Similarly, a comparison of advertisements for alcohol in UK magazines for young women and men found that in men's magazines, young women's behaviour and the ways in which they drink are 'described in derogatory terms and generally devalued' (Lyons, Dalton & Hoy 2006).

Gambling advertisements also rely on excluding and denigrating portrayals of women (Deans et al. 2016). Although gambling advertisements are targeted to adult men, it is likely that these representations affect children, considering that a recent Australian study found that children aged 8–16 had a detailed recall of the content of sports betting advertisements they had seen on television and an extensive knowledge of sports betting products (Pitt et al. 2017).

## DEPICTIONS OF MALE DOMINANCE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women may be exploited by advertisers seeking to create controversy and attract attention (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan & Cherrier 2016). Although there is limited research on depictions of violence against women in advertising, the available evidence suggests that images of women being subordinated or victimised are not uncommon. One analysis of almost 2000 magazine advertisements in the US examined the extent to which women were presented as victims (for example, portrayals of acts of violence towards a woman; a woman being overpowered, watched or tricked by a man; or appearing lifeless, distressed or vulnerable in other ways). The analysis identified that women were presented as victims in just over 15 per cent of advertisements in both men's magazines and women's fashion magazines (Stankiewicz & Rosselli 2008). In the majority of these portrayals, women were simultaneously portrayed as sex objects.

The widespread use of violent representations of women in advertising was also noted in a recent content analysis (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan & Cherrier 2016). The advertisements selected as the focus of the analysis were from a variety of locations including Australia, were mostly aimed at a younger female demographic, and promoted fashion and alcohol products. In the advertisements, women were presented as passive and shown in a sexualised manner, portrayed in animal-like ways (for example, as a piece of meat), or depicted as being conquered, held down, assaulted or watched by a male. The advertising agencies involved justified their use of such imagery by constructing it as art or arguing that the representations were intended to be lighthearted and humorous (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan & Cherrier 2016).

# Impacts of advertising on gender inequality and women's health and wellbeing

Sexual objectification in ads affects women **across their lifespan**

**girls**
may internalise body ideals

**young women**
may develop low-self-esteem, eating disorders & body dissatisfaction

**adult women**
may have reduced satisfaction with sex & relationships

Slater and Tiggemann 2016; Ward 2016

## REINFORCEMENT OF GENDER STEREOTYPES

Children begin forming their identities, values and beliefs regarding gender from a very young age. A vast body of literature has documented the harms of gender stereotyping, which influences children's interests, behaviours, attitudes, educational and occupational aspirations, and beliefs about their self-efficacy and competence (Chandra-Mouli et al. 2017; Our Watch 2018). Gender stereotyping limits both girls' and boys' development and aspirations and helps to perpetuate inequalities based on gender.

> **From an early age, children learn to classify advertisements in line with gender stereotypes**

In combination with a variety of other familial and social influences, advertising transmits cultural ideologies about the position, status and value of men and women in society. Children's ideas about the kinds of interests, behaviours and roles that are considered appropriate for boys and girls are influenced by children's products and the ways in which they are marketed. As discussed earlier, the gendered marketing of children's toys is a topic that has been the subject of considerable public debate and empirical research.[9] Studies of young children suggest that, in the first few years of life, there is considerable overlap in boys' and girls' interest in toys (Fine & Rush 2016). However, from the age of three, children begin to display narrower and more gender stereotypical play preferences (Halim & Lindner 2013, Todd et al. 2018). A growing body of evidence suggests that these preferences are influenced by the marketing of products targeted to children (Fine & Rush 2016).

From an early age, children learn to classify advertisements in line with gender stereotypes (Cunningham & Macrae 2011; Lewin-Jones & Mitra 2009; Zimmermann 2017). Children as young as two years old are able to use colour to identify what toys are considered appropriate for them as a boy or girl (LoBue & DeLoache 2011; Let Toys Be Toys Campaign 2015), and this has been found to influence their toy preferences (Wong & Hines 2015). For example, a study of girls and boys aged between three and five years old found that their interest in toys depended on the colour of the toy. Girls were more interested in new toys if they were coloured pink, even if they were explicitly labelled as 'for boys' (Weisgram, Fulcher & Dinella 2014).

The use of colour and other gender markers to advertise toys not only limits children's ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour and interests, but may also have developmental implications. For example, play with toys marketed to boys often requires motor development and spatial skills, while play with toys marketed to girls may focus on verbal and social skills. This may contribute to gender differences in later spatial, cognitive and social development outcomes (Wong & Hines 2015).

Children's responses to advertisements reflect the development of an awareness of the greater social status of masculinity. A recent US study of preschool children's responses to television commercials found that toys associated with femininity were viewed negatively by boys (Zimmermann 2017). Overall, boys and girls showed more favourable responses to advertisements that targeted their own gender. However, girls tended to like commercials regardless of the target gender, while boys were less likely to like toy advertisements targeted to girls or to both genders (Zimmermann 2017). This preference increased over time, with older boys even less likely to like advertisements targeted to girls.

Researchers have found that from middle childhood, girls' growing awareness of the higher social status associated with masculinity influences their interest in male-stereotyped toys, while there is no equivalent phenomenon of boys becoming interested in girl-stereotyped

9 See for example, Australian debate about Play Unlimited's 2014 'No Gender December' campaign (Sullivan 2016), which prompted a 2016 Senate inquiry into domestic violence and gender inequality that considered the role of toy marketing, among other issues (Parliament of Australia 2016).

toys (Fine & Rush 2016; Halim et al. 2014; Spinner, Cameron & Calogero 2018; Todd et al. 2018). There is some evidence, however, that the development of gendered toy preferences can be shifted by exposing children to counter-stereotypic representations (Spinner, Cameron & Calogero 2018).

> **The impacts of gender-stereotyped media representations continue into adulthood.**

The impacts of gender-stereotyped media representations continue into adulthood. A study of young men in the US found that those who more regularly consumed male-oriented media (such as sports or reality television, or men's magazines) were more likely to adhere to traditional views about masculine roles (Giaccardi et al. 2016). Consistent with these findings, surveys have identified links between men's regular consumption of gender-stereotyped media and their endorsement of stereotyped beliefs about masculinity (Seabrook et al. 2016; Zurbriggen & Morgan 2006).

## IMPACTS ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### Self-objectification

A comprehensive body of literature has established that women who are regularly exposed to sexually objectifying media content are more likely to objectify themselves and internalise appearance ideals. A recent meta-analysis of 50 studies examined correlations between self-objectification and the regular use of sexualised mass media, including television, magazines, social networking sites and video games (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018). The meta-analysis found that, across various types of mass media, exposure to sexualised content increased self-objectification for women. A similar effect was found for men, leading the authors to suggest that the increasing prevalence of depictions of men's bodies as sexualised, manipulated and scrutinised by others may be contributing to self-objectification by men (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018). However, the authors note that it is also important to recognise that the sexualisation of men and women may have different social meanings; for example, the cultural ideal for male bodies is based on strength and power, while the ideal for female bodies relates to thinness and vulnerability. Additionally, women tend to receive more sexualising information than men throughout their lives. Thus, existing gender inequalities are perpetuated within these representations (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018; Rollero 2013).

### Body satisfaction

Concerns about body image are significant among Australian women, particularly in adolescence. An Australian survey of over 18,000 young people aged 15–19 found that 41 per cent of females and 17 per cent of males reported being extremely or very concerned about their body image (Bailey et al. 2016). Another survey found that more than half of Australian girls report that they feel more often valued for their looks rather than their brains or ability (IPSOS, Plan International Australia & Our Watch 2016)

> **...women who are regularly exposed to sexually objectifying media content are more likely to objectify themselves and internalise appearance ideals**

According to a recent review of 135 studies of the effects of exposure to objectifying media published over a 20-year period, there is 'substantial' evidence that advertising and other mass media contributes to body dissatisfaction (Ward 2016). In one study, male and female undergraduates in the US were randomly assigned to either view advertisements that sexually objectified women and portray appearance ideals, or non-appearance-

related advertisements. The study found body dissatisfaction increased for women and men exposed to advertisements that sexually objectified women, although this effect was larger for women (Krawczyk & Thompson 2015).

## ...children in primary school can also be affected by sexualised media images

While most of the research on the links between sexualised media and body satisfaction focuses on girls in late adolescence (American Psychological Association 2007; Ward 2016), a small number of studies have identified that children in primary school can also be affected by sexualised media images. One of these studies was recently undertaken in Australia. Based on interviews with 300 girls aged 6–9 years old, the research found that girls who had greater everyday exposure to sexualised images via television and magazines had a greater preference for sexualised clothing, greater internalisation of sexualisation messages and increased body dissatisfaction (Slater & Tiggemann 2016).[10]

A variety of studies have established a link between media that idealises thinness and body dissatisfaction in women (Tiggemann & Brown 2018; Ward 2016), with particularly pronounced impacts being identified in women who already have significant body concerns (Andrew, Tiggemann & Clark 2015; Ferguson 2013; Halliwell 2013). A recent Australian study found that undergraduate women who were exposed to fashion advertisements that used thin models experienced increased body dissatisfaction. The study also found that labelling the advertisements to indicate that the images had been digitally altered had no impact on women's body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Brown 2018), which suggests that women may be negatively affected by advertisements even when they are aware that the images used are not real women's bodies. Similar findings about labelling have been identified in other studies (Bury, Tiggemann & Slater 2014; Bury, Tiggemann & Slater 2016; Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith & Diedrichs 2015).

Culturally or racially specific representations may have different impacts on different women's body image, self-esteem and experiences of self-objectification, though the available research paints a complex picture. For example, while some studies in the USA have found that, compared to white women, African-American women are less influenced by media images of women that idealise thinness, due to a rejection of white standards that equate thinness with beauty (see for example, DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Schaefer et al. 2018), other studies have found no differences, or small differences only (Grabe & Hyde 2006; Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018).[11] However, other aspects of media representations of women's bodies have been found to affect African-American women's body image. One study found that African-American women's body image was negatively influenced by internalising media representations of black women with lighter skin and long straight hair, particularly when women perceived that these representations were valued by African-American men (Capodilupo 2015).

Although there is an absence of research on the impacts of advertising representations on young Indigenous Australians, one study found that, to some extent, a critical perspective on the 'thin ideal' body for young women, as well as community connections and politicisation around issues of Aboriginality and discrimination, acted as protective factors against the body image pressures that are reinforced in advertising and other everyday media (Flaxman et al. 2012). Many of those interviewed in the study identified with African-American cultural representations, because they perceived African-American body

10 Consistent with this, an earlier study in the US found that both boys and girls aged 6–12 said they liked magazine images of women and men that depicted them in objectifying ways (for example, wearing revealing clothing, or men with bare, muscular torsos), though there was a stronger relationship between girls' responses, their internalisation of body image ideals and their feelings about their own bodies (Murnen et al. 2003).

11 American research on levels of self-objectification among Hispanic women has also produced inconsistent results (Schaefer & Thompson 2018).

types to be similar to those of Aboriginal women. Further research is needed that explores media representations and self-objectification for a more diverse range of women, including those of different ages, abilities, sexualities and gender identities, and from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018; Ward 2016)

## Men's body image has also been shown to be negatively affected by advertising portrayals

Men's body image has also been shown to be negatively affected by advertising portrayals. Young Australian men have been found to have increased body dissatisfaction after exposure to television commercials that portrayed 'idealised' muscular male bodies, compared to those exposed to non-appearance-related commercials (Hargreaves & Tiggemann 2009). Men who were highly appearance-focused were the most negatively affected. Further evidence of impacts on both men's and women's satisfaction with their bodies was identified in a recent Australian study of social media marketing (Tamplin, McLean & Paxton 2018). The study exposed 187 young women and 187 young men to social media advertisements for alcoholic drinks, with some participants viewing 'appearance-ideal' images of celebrities, models, or peers advertising alcoholic drinks, and other participants viewing control images of the drinks only. Exposure to 'idealised' images of the same gender increased body dissatisfaction for both women and men. The authors observed that this effect is likely to be amplified in a real-world social media environment, as young people typically spend several hours a day on social media.

As discussed earlier, while depictions of women as passive sex objects in advertising remain common, in recent years there has been a shift to include images in which women appear sexually powerful and in control. Although advertisers have argued that these are positive for women, there is evidence that women's body image is negatively affected by 'sexually agentic' advertising portrayals. In a UK study, female undergraduates viewed advertising images of women in their underwear, framed either by slogans emphasising their physical appearance ('sexually passive') or slogans emphasising the woman's empowerment and sexual self-confidence ('sexually agentic'). The impact of viewing these advertisements was compared with the impact of viewing images of only the product being advertised ('control' condition). The investigation found that both the sexually passive and agentic representations were associated with increased weight dissatisfaction, compared to exposure to control images. Further, viewing sexually agentic representations was associated with higher self-objectification than viewing sexually passive representations or the control images (Halliwell, Malson & Tischner 2011).

## While girls and women are influenced by advertising messages, they are not necessarily uncritical recipients of them

While girls and women are influenced by advertising messages, they are not necessarily uncritical recipients of them. A study of 71 girls aged 11–13 in New Zealand found that many felt that advertisements and other media images made them feel 'bad' about themselves and 'under constant pressure' to be thin. However, at the same time, the girls were frequently highly critical of these representations (Vares, Jackson & Gill 2011). Research with young women has also found that their ability to critique appearance-ideal advertising portrayals helps to offset the impact of viewing these images to some extent (Tamplin, McLean & Paxton 2018).

### Mental health and eating behaviours

A variety of studies have established a link between self-objectification and eating disorders, lower self-esteem and reduced mental health (for reviews, see Moradi & Huan 2008; Schaefer & Thompson 2018; Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr 2010).

For example, a recent meta-analysis of 53 studies found a significant positive link between self-objectification and eating disorders for women as well as for men, although the effect size was larger for women (Schaefer & Thompson 2018).

Similar findings have been identified in Australian settings. A South Australian study of over 1000 young women aged 12–16 found an association between greater levels of regular exposure to teen and women's magazines and social networking sites, and increased self-objectification (Slater & Tiggemann 2014). In turn, self-objectification was associated with self-surveillance, body shame, and disordered eating (Slater & Tiggemann 2014). These associations have also been identified in previous Australian studies (Slater and Tiggemann 2010).

Associations between self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating have also been found among racially and ethnically diverse groups of women (Moradi & Huan 2008) and among both lesbian and heterosexual women (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr 2010).

## Cognitive performance

There is some evidence to suggest that viewing sexualised advertising images of models of the same gender reduces children's performance on cognitive tests. In an Italian study, 8–10 year olds were exposed to advertisements of sexualised or non-sexualised children (sexualised images were pictures in which the models wore swimwear or underwear, or were portrayed in 'provocative' adult-like poses), then asked them to complete a maths test and a working memory test. Exposure to sexualised advertisements disrupted both girls' and boys' performance on both tests (Pacilli, Tomasetto & Cadinu 2016). This appears to be the first study to identify the negative effects of sexualised advertising on children's cognitive performance, and further research to explore this phenomenon in detail is needed.

## Relationships and sexual health

Greater exposure to sexually objectifying media has been found to be related to greater self-consciousness about body image during sex (Ward 2016). A recent US study identified links between young women's media exposure, self-sexualisation (defined as valuing oneself for one's sexual appeal, to the exclusion of other characteristics) and their sexual agency (Ward et al. 2017). Of the 754 young women surveyed, those who frequently consumed women's magazines, lifestyle or reality television programs and situation comedies were more likely to engage in self-sexualisation. In turn, self-sexualisation predicted a greater use of alcohol to feel sexual, less self-efficacy in condom use and more negative feelings about their level of sexual experience. The findings indicate that self-sexualisation influenced by media exposure may also be associated with a reduction in women's sense of efficacy and comfort with their sexual experiences. These findings call into question the idea that viewing sexualised imagery in advertising and other mass media is sexually empowering for women (Ward et al. 2017).

**Greater exposure to sexually objectifying media has been found to be related to greater self-consciousness about body image during sex**

Consuming objectifying media may also have negative effects on relationship and sexual satisfaction for both women and men. A study of undergraduates in the US found that both men and women who had greater exposure to sexually objectifying television, films and magazines were more likely to objectify their romantic partners, though this effect was stronger for men. In turn, partner objectification was linked to decreased relationship satisfaction for women and men, and decreased sexual satisfaction for men (Zurbriggen, Ramsey & Jaworski 2011).

## Physical activity

Self-objectification affects girls' and women's physical performance and reduces the likelihood that they will participate in physical activity (for

reviews, see Stiefler Johnson 2014; Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr 2010).

In Victoria and elsewhere in Australia, girls are less likely than boys to participate in sport (VicHealth 2016) and studies have found that body image concerns and self-objectification are significant contributors to this (Slater & Tiggemann 2011).

Exposure to objectifying advertising has been found to reduce women's motivations to exercise. A study of magazine advertisements for exercise products compared the impact of viewing advertisements that focused on women's bodies with the impact of viewing advertisements that focused on the product itself (sport shoes). Women exposed to advertisements that focused on women's bodies reported greater body-image anxiety and reduced motivation to exercise (Sabiston & Chandler 2010).

### Sense of safety and participation

A survey of 1750 Australian girls aged 10–17 found that 93 per cent said they felt it would be easier to succeed in life if they were not judged on their appearance (Plan International Australia 2017).

Experimental studies have found that when women perceive that their bodies are the focus of attention, they talk and participate less in social interactions (Heflick & Goldenberg 2014; Saguy et al. 2010). One recent study explored the impacts of sexualised advertising on women's comfort in participating in a social event promoted at an academic conference. The research identified that women were more likely than men to anticipate feeling uncomfortable, objectified and incompetent at the event that was advertised with an eroticised image of a woman, compared to an event that was advertised with a non-eroticised image (Biernat & Hawley 2017).

Research also indicates that advertising on city shops and billboards that objectifies or excludes women decreases women's perceptions of safety. The **Monash University XYX Lab** and **Plan International Australia** asked women to identify areas in Melbourne where they felt safe or unsafe, using the web-based interactive map Free to Be. Women and young girls felt less safe in city areas where businesses used objectifying advertising, masculine business names and logos (Salen 2017).

As some have pointed out, although sexualised images of women may be common in advertisements in shopping centres, public transport and other public spaces, the display of similarly sexualised images of women within a workplace setting would contravene laws relating to sexual harassment (Rosewarne 2005).

## IMPACTS ON ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN

Exposure to sexualised and stereotyped media content not only affects how women view themselves, but also influences how women are perceived by others. It can also help shape beliefs and attitudes about violence against women, including perceptions of responsibility for violence.

### Perceptions of women's humanity, competence and morality

A variety of experimental studies have identified that exposure to sexually objectifying images of women causes people to view women in dehumanising ways. A recent review of the research literature found that viewing sexually objectified images of women activates cognitive processes that are used for perceiving objects, rather than for perceiving humans (Ward 2016). Experimental studies have used implicit association tasks to demonstrate that objectified women tend to be associated with animal-like characteristics, while the same association is not found for objectified men (Vaes, Paladino & Puvia 2011).

Images that focus on a girl or woman's physical appearance or portray her in a sexual manner have been found to reduce other people's perceptions of her competence, warmth and morality (for reviews see Heflick & Goldenberg 2014; Ward 2016). One study showed adults advertising images of a pre-teen girl in childlike clothing, somewhat sexualised clothing, or 'definitely sexualised' clothing. Participants perceived the girl in the sexualised image as less

intelligent or competent, and lower in self-respect and morality (Graff, Murnen & Smolak 2012).

> **...women are more likely than men to be perceived as less capable and intelligent when they are sexualised**

Research indicates that women are more likely than men to be perceived as less capable and intelligent when they are sexualised (Fasoli et al. 2017; Heflick et al. 2011). In an Italian study, participants who viewed images of female models wearing underwear or swimwear perceived the female model as less competent, but when participants viewed similar images of male models, there was no significant reduction in how they perceived the competence of the male model (Fasoli et al. 2017). However, other studies have found that there are similar effects when men and women are objectified. Loughnan et al. (2010) found that both women and men were perceived to have fewer thoughts and a lesser moral status when advertising images focused on their bodies rather than their faces.

While there is considerable research on how media and advertising portrayals affect perceptions of women, almost all of the available studies examine portrayals of able-bodied women. As discussed earlier, women with disabilities are rarely represented in advertising, and when they are shown, they are often portrayed as asexual and dependent on others. It has been argued that their invisibility in everyday media encourages marginalisation and contributes to negative perceptions of their humanity, sexuality and reproductive rights (Parsons, Reichl & Pedersen 2016). One study found some evidence that participants who were exposed to advertisements depicting people with disabilities had more positive perceptions of the rights of people with disabilities, though the findings were mixed. The online study exposed male and female participants to advertisements featuring images of men and women with and without physical disabilities (Parsons, Reichl & Pedersen 2016).[12] The study found that after participants were exposed to advertisements featuring individuals with physical disabilities, they generally had positive attitudes towards the reproductive rights of people with physical disabilities; however, male participants' attitudes towards the reproductive rights of women with disabilities actually became more negative. The authors conclude that addressing the negative stereotypes and the lack of representation of individuals with disabilities in the media and advertising may help to improve perceptions of the rights of people with disabilities; however, negative ideas about women with disabilities are persistent and may be slow to change (Parsons, Reichl & Pedersen 2016).

> **...men exposed to objectifying images of women in a variety of media are more tolerant of sexual harassment, rape myths and interpersonal violence**

### Violence-supportive attitudes

Experimental studies have demonstrated that men exposed to objectifying images of women in a variety of media are more tolerant of sexual harassment, rape myths and interpersonal violence (Ward 2016). A recent Australian video-based 'dating game' experiment found that when young men interacted with a woman portrayed in a sexualised manner, they were more likely to perceive her in sexual way and to behave aggressively towards her if they perceived she had rejected them (Blake, Bastian & Denson 2018). A US study of male undergraduates found that those who were more frequently exposed to men's magazines that objectify women, pornography and reality television were more likely to hold sexually aggressive attitudes that support violence against women (Wright & Tokunaga 2016). Similarly, men's exposure to sexually objectifying

12 For example, the advertisements showed Paralympic athletes and able-bodied people doing physical activities.

television portrayals has been associated with an increased proclivity to engage in sexual coercion and gender-based harassment in hypothetical scenarios (Galdi, Maass & Cadinu 2013).

**Exposure to objectifying imagery has also been found to influence both men's and women's perceptions about responsibility for rape**

Exposure to objectifying imagery has also been found to influence both men's and women's perceptions about responsibility for rape (Romero-Sánchez et al. 2015). For example, when male and female British undergraduate students were presented with objectifying or non-objectifying pictures of a woman and were then asked about their responses to her in a hypothetical acquaintance-rape scenario, those who were exposed to the objectified pictures were more likely to perceive her as being responsible for being raped (Loughnan et al. 2013).

A small number of studies have directly examined how advertising contributes to violence-supportive attitudes in particular. One study exposed adult men and women to magazine advertisements selected from real campaigns that depicted sexualised violence against women. Males and younger consumers who were exposed to the advertisements were more accepting of rape myths and sexualised violence than females or older consumers (Capella et al. 2014). The findings supported earlier studies that identified links between exposure to print advertisements and acceptance of rape myths (Lanis & Covell 1995, MacKay & Covell 1997). In contrast, a more recent study found that experimental exposure to sexualised or objectifying print advertisements had no influence on undergraduates' acceptance of rape myths, leading the authors to speculate that the saturation of sexually objectifying advertisements in young people's lives today may have meant the experiment had little impact (Vance et al. 2015).

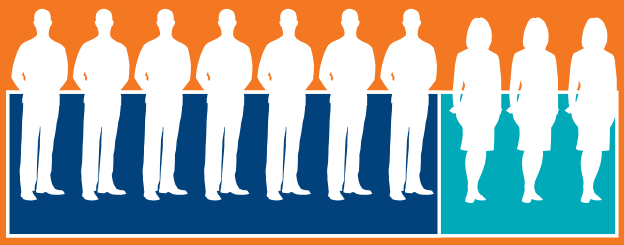
However, there is recent evidence that experimental exposure to subtle or latent forms of sexism or sexual violence in advertisements can contribute to the acceptance of sexual violence (Reichl, Ali & Uyeda 2018). Participants were more accepting of sexual violence described in a vignette after being exposed to magazine advertisements that depicted latent sexism or sexual violence (such as the depiction of dismembered body parts, bruises on a woman's face or a woman in a vulnerable position), compared to those exposed to advertisements that did not contain sexism or those exposed to overtly sexist advertisements (for example, portrayals of women as sex objects or as inferior to men). The authors conclude that latent sexism may produce more harmful effects than sexism that is overt and easily recognised.

It is important to note that the majority of the studies discussed here demonstrate impacts from relatively brief exposure to sexualised imagery in experimental situations. Considering that these representations are ubiquitous in advertising and in other everyday media, regular exposure is likely to produce more pernicious effects on perceptions, attitudes and behaviour.

# A business case for equality in advertising

**84% of CEOs** & **71% of creative & design** professionals in Australian advertising are men

Baker 2017



Ads that challenge gender stereotypes are **positively received**, particularly by women

Beale, Malson & Tischner 2016; Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen 2017

## GENDER STEREOTYPES, CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

There is mounting evidence to demonstrate that gender stereotypical advertisements are out of step with public opinion. An Australian survey in 2018 of attitudes towards gender equality in Australia found that a third of those surveyed believed sexism to be widespread in advertising (Evans et al. 2018). Consistent with this, an Australian survey of young women aged 15–17 found that the overwhelming majority of participants said women were not treated equally in the media (Plan International Australia 2017).

Overseas studies have also identified that a desire for change in gender portrayals in advertising. A recent public opinion study in the UK, commissioned by the Advertising Standards Authority, found that children and adults felt that advertising depictions of men, women and families were 'clichéd and stereotypical' and lacking diversity. Participants wanted more realistic gender portrayals that were in keeping with modern-day roles (Crush & Hollings 2017). Studies in the US have found that women and younger consumers in particular have negative attitudes towards advertisements that rely on gender stereotypes (Huhmann & Limbu 2016).

Evidence also suggests that using 'aspirational' gender-based stereotypes may be ineffective as a marketing strategy. A study of advertising that used idealised portrayals, such as depictions of strong athletes or beautiful slim models, found these could be psychologically damaging to consumers, lowering self-esteem and in turn reducing the consumers' purchase intentions and perceptions of the brand (Dimofte, Goodstein & Brumbaugh 2015).

## DIVERSITY IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY

A lack of diversity in the advertising industry may contribute to the narrow range of portrayals in advertising. Like many other industries, women continue to be under-represented in Australian advertising agencies, both in decision-making and creative roles. The Agency Circle, an industry body that promotes diversity in Australian advertising agencies, surveyed Australia's creative agencies in 2016 and 2017. The 2016 survey, based on 1211 employees from 15 agencies, found that men dominated leadership and creative roles in the industry, comprising 84 per cent of agency CEOs, 60 per cent of senior executives and 71 per cent of those working in creative and design. Concerningly, 42 per cent of women surveyed said they had been sexually harassed at some point in their career in advertising, and 45 per cent of women felt vulnerable in the industry because of their gender, compared to 3 per cent of men (Baker 2017).[13] Minor improvements were found in the 2017 survey in relation to sexual harassment and gender equity in pay for male and female employees (The Agency Circle (Australia) 2017). However, almost 50 per cent of those surveyed rated the industry's performance between 'mediocre' and 'terrible' when it came to hiring a diverse range of professionals (in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation). This data is consistent with international research. A 2014 survey of 50 countries found the average number of women in advertising creative departments was only around 20 per cent.[14]

While the presence of women in leadership and creative roles does not guarantee fewer gender-biased representations, it may help to promote more diverse or positive representations of women and men. The contention that a lack of diversity among advertising agency professionals contributes to the use of gender stereotypes was supported by the findings of a recent study, which was based on interviews with advertising agency professionals in the US (Windels 2016). The study explored professionals' perceptions of why agencies rely on gender stereotypes. The research

13 Similar findings were reported in B&T Magazine (2016).

14 A global survey of advertising creative departments in 50 countries across the world found a global average of only 20.3 per cent female representation in advertising creative departments (Grow & Deng 2014). Similarly, a study in 2016 of the UK advertising industry found women made up more than half of junior agency roles, but only 25 per cent of those in creative roles. Only 30 per cent of leadership positions were held by women, according to data from the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising. Those from non-white/Anglo backgrounds accounted for only 13 per cent of agency staff (Magee 2016).

found that professionals perceived stereotypes as a quick and easy way to communicate and to ensure advertisements were easy for consumers to process, while non-traditional representations were perceived to be potentially 'distracting' to consumers.

Most professionals believed that consumers were attracted to seeing representations of themselves or who they aspired to be. They also recognised that creative departments were dominated by men and shaped by masculine cultures and values, and this was perceived to contribute to the use of stereotypes (Windels 2016). A dependence on stereotypes was also linked to client needs; practitioners felt that clients tended to be risk-averse and wanted to avoid offending consumers. At the same time, practitioners recognised that subverting stereotypes could be very effective and attract consumer attention (Windels 2016).

> **Advertising professionals tended to conceptualise responses to advertising in ways that mirrored gender stereotypes**

## INDUSTRY AWARENESS OF HARMS

A lack of awareness of the impacts of stereotyped and sexualised gender portrayals may be another reason why agency professionals rely on these representations. A recent study of professionals in the US found that, while a small number perceived they had a moral responsibility to make ethical choices in relation to gender portrayals, many did not understand the ways in which gender portrayals could be problematic (Zayer & Coleman 2015). Advertising professionals tended to conceptualise responses to advertising in ways that mirrored gender stereotypes, perceiving that only women were vulnerable to the influence of advertising and other media and needed to be 'protected' from negative portrayals, while men were 'less sensitive' and immune to any impacts. When advertisers did express concerns about gendered portrayals, these largely related to strategic considerations rather than ethical ones, and were linked to the needs of clients, the requirements of media regulatory bodies or the risk of backlash from consumer groups.

> **... advertisements that portray women respectfully and accurately increased purchase intent**

## CONSUMER SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Growing evidence demonstrates that advertising representations that challenge gender stereotypes appear to be positively received, particularly by women. This is particularly relevant for product owners and advertising agencies, considering that 70 per cent of all brand purchasing decisions are made by women, 75 per cent of women identify themselves as the primary shopper for their household and 64 per cent of all consumer spending is controlled by women (The World Federation of Advertisers 2018). A recent study of adult women identified that 'femvertising' campaigns (print advertisements that used women with larger body types, and video advertisements that showed non-stereotypical gender role portrayals) generated more positive reactions than traditional, stereotypical advertising campaigns, and that this leads to positive attitudes towards the brand (Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen 2017; Chu, Lee & Kim 2016). Research undertaken for the #SeeHer campaign (a campaign for gender equality in advertising led by the Association of National Advertisers in the USA) found that advertisements that portray women respectfully and accurately increased purchase intent by 26 per cent among all consumers and 45 per cent among women (Association of National Advertisers (US) 2018). Along similar lines, a survey of Facebook users in the US found that advertising that subverted gender stereotypes (such as by celebrating

female athleticism or encouraging girls to study a STEM subject) generated more positive reactions among women than other advertising. For example, women were almost twice as likely to say they wanted to watch a related movie trailer after seeing an advertisement for the movie featuring an image of a woman dressed as a firefighter compared to seeing an advertisement featuring a woman dressed in revealing clothing. There was, however, no significant difference between men's reactions to the advertisements (Facebook 2017).

The use of 'real' models in marketing also receives positive responses from women. A survey of young women about Dove's 'Real beauty' campaign found that women favourably viewed the use of plus-size models in the campaign, in comparison to campaigns that used thin models (Beale, Malson & Tischner 2016).

## Non-stereotypical advertising representations of men as fathers have also been found to prompt positive reactions from Australian consumers

Non-stereotypical advertising representations of men as fathers have also been found to prompt positive reactions from Australian consumers; however, this may depend on the consumer's own views about gender roles (Baxter, Kulczynski & Ilicic 2016). People with non-traditional views were particularly likely to have positive attitudes towards advertisements that showed men as caregivers, highlighting the potential value of advertising that depicts male caregivers in non-stereotypical roles.

Contrary to the popular adage that 'sex sells', research suggests that this is not necessarily the case. A recent meta-analysis based on the findings of 78 peer-reviewed studies (Wirtz, Sparks & Zimbres 2017) found that, although people are more likely to remember advertisements with sexual appeals, the effect does not extend to remembering the brands or products featured in the advertisements. Sexual appeals have no impact on purchase intentions. Also, people – particularly women – are more likely to have a negative attitude towards the advertisements. Consistent with this, Australian studies have also shown that women respond negatively to sexualised portrayals. An Australian study examined male and female undergraduates' reactions to sexist portrayals of women in a selection of alcohol advertisements drawn from popular magazines. Compared to males, females reported more negative attitudes towards advertisements that used demeaning sexual appeals and more positive attitudes towards empowering advertising images (Jones & Reid 2011). Similarly, a study commissioned by the Australian Advertising Standards Bureau (now known as Ad Standards) found that women were significantly more likely than men to consider advertisements negatively if they used sexual appeals (Colmar Brunton Social Research 2013; Jones & Reid 2009).

Considering that women drive the majority of consumer purchasing,[15] there is a growing commercial imperative for businesses and advertisers to recognise that sex and stereotyping does not sell (Brideson 2017). Some advertising agencies are recognising this momentum for change, developing campaigns and organisations to promote gender equal and diverse representations. Examples include the US Association of National Advertisers' #SeeHer campaign, which aims to increase the percentage of accurate portrayals of women and girls in US advertising and media by 20 per cent by 2020, and Unilever's #Unstereotype alliance, an industry-led initiative convened by UN Women to end harmful stereotypes often perpetuated through advertising.

15 Women are expected to control nearly 75 per cent of discretionary spending worldwide by 2028, according to research by Boston Consulting Group, cited in Ernst & Young Global (2013).

# Conclusion

The evidence summarised in this paper identifies that advertising not only mirrors the values and stereotypes that already exist in our society, but also helps mould them in ways that have detrimental long-term effects on both women and men.

A dependence on gender stereotypes is evident in advertising aimed at both children and adults. From a young age, children are targeted by colour-coded marketing, which is used to signify the gender-appropriateness of toys, games and clothing. The reliance on gendered cues in children's advertising appears to have increased over time. Marketing representations associate boys with dominance, independence, performance and competition, and girls with attractiveness, nurturing and relationships.

## Female characters and voices are under-represented in marketing representations

Female characters and voices are under-represented in marketing representations. Boys and men appear more often, receive more screen time, and provide more voiceovers than girls and women, while people from marginalised groups barely appear at all in advertising. When girls or women are portrayed, they are often shown in domestic settings, and are associated with stereotypically feminine merchandise, such as cleaning, fashion or beauty products.

Increasingly, girls and women are portrayed in sexualised or objectifying ways. Further, it is not uncommon for advertisers to use 'transgressive' images of women being dominated or victimised by men in order to shock and gain attention. The growing influence of the pornography industry may have contributed to the increase in sexualised portrayals, in addition to changing cultural conceptions of women's sexual empowerment.

It is important to acknowledge that advertising is only one of many factors in our society that contribute to gender inequality. However, it is an influential form of media that increasingly saturates our public, private, and online spaces. Advertising enters our homes via television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the internet, and through the products we purchase. It is ubiquitous in public spaces such as transport, shops, entertainment and sporting venues and it filters into our online and social media activities. Advertising has impacts on the entire community, regardless of our age, gender identity, race, cultural background, ability, sexuality, socioeconomic status or geographic location.

The advertising industry's continued use of gender stereotypes and increasing reliance on images that sexualise, objectify, denigrate and subordinate women undermines efforts to promote gender equality in Australia. Gender-stereotyped portrayals limit the aspirations, expectations, interests and participation of women and men in our society. Advertising's reliance on characters who are able-bodied, slim, white and heterosexual significantly under-represents the diversity of our community.

These portrayals are also highly problematic for the prevention of family violence and other forms of violence against women. The factors that consistently predict or cause violence against women include adherence to stereotyped gender roles, the condoning of violence against women, men's control over decision-making, and male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect for women. Advertising representations frequently support these kinds of gender inequalities by under-representing women or portraying them in stereotypical roles, while depicting men as powerful and in control. The ubiquity of sexualised and objectifying advertising representations promotes perceptions of women as sexually available, as well as beliefs that sexualised women are incompetent and morally deficient. Evidence demonstrates that even brief exposure to these images is linked to sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours. The frequency of these everyday portrayals in print, television, radio, public spaces and online fosters a culture that normalises male dominance and sexual entitlement, in which disrespecting, dominating or degrading women is considered acceptable.

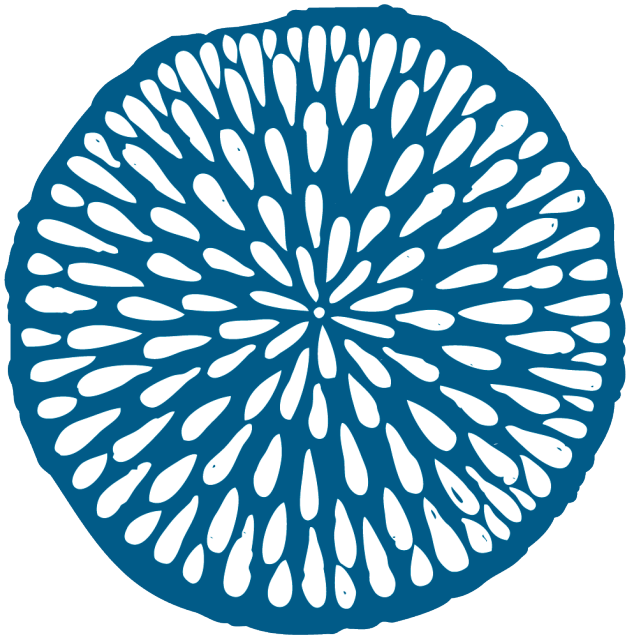
The use of gender stereotypes and sexualised advertising portrayals is increasingly the focus of consumer concern – particularly among women – and this can create negative brand perceptions and reduced purchase intentions. The studies cited in this paper demonstrate that there is a clear business case for change. Brands, businesses and creative agencies can benefit from portraying both women and men proportionately, respectfully and realistically, in ways that reflect the diversity of ages, races, bodies, cultures, abilities, genders and sexualities in our community.

More importantly, there are ethical reasons why businesses and advertising agencies should reconsider the use of sexualised and gendered portrayals. The ubiquity of these representations is having serious and damaging impacts on the health, wellbeing and safety of women. Narrow gender roles and an emphasis on muscularity and performance is also detrimental to men's health.

**... there are ethical reasons why businesses and advertising agencies should reconsider the use of sexualised and gendered portrayals**

The good news is that marketing representations that challenge gender stereotypes appear to be positively received, particularly by women, but also by many men. Further, the ubiquity and influence of advertising across the community means that it is a setting that provides significant opportunities for encouraging positive representations of men and women and promoting gender equality.

It is hoped that this paper will raise awareness of the damaging impacts that the use of gender stereotypes and sexualised portrayals has on the health and wellbeing of women and men, and girls and boys. The evidence discussed in this paper should help to create momentum for businesses, brands and the advertising industry to identify a business case for change, and to take a leading role to ensure that advertising has a positive impact in promoting gender equality in our society.



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**Advertising (in)equality: the impacts of sexist advertising on women's health and wellbeing**

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Women's Health Victoria acknowledges and pays our respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.

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