

Gender stereotypes should be of equal concern to all sexes

The BBC gender pay gap, the first female Dr Who and the Advertising Standards Authority's latest report prove there's a long way to go



Jodie Whittaker, who will become the first woman to play the Time Lord in Doctor Who. (Image: PA)

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Aside from the Government's daily willingness to demonstrate its cluelessness over Brexit, the recent news agenda has been dominated by what are traditionally (and patronisingly) called "women's issues".

In journalism, there has been the news that [Carolyn McCall is to become chief executive of ITV](#) and that, at the BBC, only one third of the people earning over £150,000 per year are women.

This led BBC Director General Lord Hall to say it highlighted [a need to “go further and faster” on gender issues](#).

In politics, there has been [the revelation that an alarming number of women MPs are experiencing online abuse](#), with the problem so severe the Prime Minister asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to investigate the hounding of MPs during election campaigns.

And then there was the Dr Who unveiling...

But what really seemed to engage the nation - and to particularly annoy some keyboard warriors on Facebook and Twitter - was the fact that the new Doctor Who was to be played by a woman, Jodie Whittaker.

Among the more turgid responses of the anti-Whittaker brigade was that this was “PC gone mad” and that the Doctor was a “Time Lord not a Time Lady”.

MORE: [People are losing their minds about a woman being Doctor Who](#)

It was left to American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster to point out: “‘Doctor’ has no gender in English.”

Could it be that this furore is emblematic of the uncertainty felt by some men, and fewer women, as their roles and identities in a post-industrial society continue to change?

The norms and practices taken for granted in the last century are gradually disappearing and the fact that a relatively unremarkable event such as the sex of an alien fictional character can be such a topic of discussion in 2017 illustrates just how relevant gender politics is.

Where advertising reigns... as king

Which is why the recent report by the [Advertising Standards Authority](#) (ASA) into gender stereotyping in advertising is particularly worthy of comment.

It's worth pointing out that advertising - and its many offshoots such as sponsorship, public relations and marketing - is the prevailing modern culture.

It is ubiquitous, often unconscious, ever-present in Western life. It's the media that drives all other media.

And, in the words of scholar Sut Jhally, advertising as a cultural form displays a pre-occupation with gender that is hardly matched in any other genre.

So when the ASA states that “reinforcing and perpetuating traditional gender roles [in advertising] can lead to suboptimal outcomes for individuals and groups in terms of their professional attainment and personal development”, we should take notice.

It means that advertising does not exist in a vacuum and that, in the opinion of the ASA, gender stereotyping can have serious, harmful consequences to children and young people in particular.

Time to stop the gender segregation and sexual objectification

As a result the ASA now proposes to strengthen its regulation. Commercials which deride people for not conforming to stereotypical gender roles will be critically examined and existing practices intending to ensure that sexual objectification does not occur will be reinforced.

As can be expected, this was welcomed by some and criticised by others.

[In the Guardian, Anne Perkins wrote](#) that every blow against over-sexualised imagery or gender segregation should be cheered, while occasional Sun columnist Brendon O'Neill saw the ASA proposals as alarming and an affront to everyone who believes in the free exchange of ideas and information.

For him, this was a “gender jihad” which was disturbingly patronising.

All the evidence suggests, though, that since the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the consumer boom, advertising has generally objectified women as either sex objects or guardians of the home.

More than this, as theorist Jean Kilbourne asserts: “Ads never let us forget that a woman's worth is determined by her appeal to men. Nothing else about her matters, not her thoughts, feelings or experiences. She is an object to be judged, evaluated and deemed desirable enough by the observer.”

21st century women's issues are also men's issues

But the ASA is not gender-specific - it recognises that in the 21st century women's issues are also men's issues.

One area of concern is ads that feature men trying and failing to undertake simple parental or household tasks.

This has become a trend in recent years (see the long-running Flash commercials featuring Karl Howman) where men are depicted struggling with acts that are traditionally in the female domain.

In the end, of course, the man is saved by the usefulness of a product which enables him to do what he really wants. Which is usually – nothing!

Then there are ads which portray men as roguish, childlike, irresponsible and only really happy in the company of other men.

All manner of advertisements for alcohol use this technique because the ASA is strictly clear that an ad for beer, for example, cannot link the product with sexual success or attractiveness, suggest the product enhances masculinity or feature characters in a significant role who look under 25.

These days, ads for alcohol rarely feature the product at all and instead use the brand to suggest its refreshing qualities and necessity to camaraderie.

Mirror or mould?

I suppose part of the value of the ASA's report is determined by whether we subscribe to the "mirror" or "mould" theory of gender stereotyping.

The mirror theory suggests that ads simply reflect the prevailing norms of society and use these recognisable standards to sell products, while the mould concept suggests that advertisers are actively trying to influence behaviour to make their wares more attractive.

As psychologist Adrian Furnham points out, if an ad draws upon stereotypes - which can be inaccurate or misleading - then vulnerable audiences may view such representations as the norm. This way myths and perceptions are reinforced and go unchallenged.

But whatever your views, even a cursory glance at the news agenda over the past week or so should tell us that "women's issues" is a redundant phrase.

Equal opportunities in the workplace and fair representation across all media forms are issues which should be of concern to all sexes.

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