

Gender in Singapore Advertising: a Study by AWARE and R3

Compelling, effective advertising must reflect certain realities about our lives. Yet in promising to reflect reality, our ads end up shaping reality, too—their norms become our norms; their boundaries map our imaginations.

In the context of gender, this means that we want ads that i) acknowledge the complex set of obstacles women face in the world, and/or ii) depict women overcoming those obstacles and succeeding. Are ads in Singapore succeeding in either of those tasks?

EXAMINING 200 TELEVISION ADS

Gender-equality organisation AWARE and marketing consultancy R3 Worldwide embarked on a project to examine gender portrayal in Singapore commercials. We looked at 200 television advertisements produced by Singapore's top 100 advertisers, spanning a range of industries including telecommunications, financial services, beauty and government. The ads were all broadcast in Singapore between 2018 and 2020.

Besides observing overall trends, we drew up a shortlist of ads we found to be exemplars for gender equality. While guidelines on gender portrayal have been published for advertisers in other countries (e.g. [by the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK](#)), there has been no such endeavour in Singapore. We therefore hoped our list would give local advertisers a nudge to think more critically about their own depictions of gender.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT: REPRESENTATION BY THE NUMBERS

First, to get a quantitative measure of representation, we tallied men and women in lead and supporting parts across the 200 ads to derive a ratio of male to female characters.

On both counts, men outnumbered women. The ads featured 23% more male lead characters (179 to 146), and 8% more male supporting characters (328 to 304), than female.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT: GENDER ROLES

Next, we listed out some common roles relating to gender and power, and tallied the number of ads that featured i) male and ii) female embodiments of those roles. These included:

- Working characters

We found that ads were 48% more likely to depict men (62 ads) than women (42 ads) as having paid employment of some sort.

- Characters performing domestic work



Ads were almost six times more likely to depict women (23 ads) performing some sort of domestic work (e.g. cleaning, cooking or childcare) than men (4 ads).

- Expert/novice characters

More than twice as many ads depicted men (35 ads) providing knowledge in our ads—e.g. teaching others or answering questions—than women (14 ads). This was despite the fact that ads depicted men and women *receiving* such knowledge at around the same rate.

- Saviour/saved characters

Similarly, more than twice as many ads depicted men in heroic, rescuer roles (e.g. repairing objects for others, assisting the injured) than women (13 ads to 6 ads). These roles were often driven home by such stylistic conventions as swelling, romantic music. Meanwhile, the reverse was true for ads depicting characters in distress, requiring rescue: 13 ads featured women, and 6 ads featured men, in that role.

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

Moving on to individual ad evaluations, we scored each ad on how it treated gender stereotypes in behaviours and characteristics, and how it portrayed body image (in size, hair, skin and other attributes). For this portion, we invited a panel of top local advertising professionals—from companies such as VMLY&R, Wunderman Thompson, DBS, Prodigious and Marina Bay Sands—to participate in the assessment to get a broader view.

STEREOTYPES IN BEHAVIOURS AND CHARACTERISTICS

We awarded high marks for ads that actively broke stereotypes, and low marks for ads that reinforced them. Examples of stereotypes included “women are emotional and men are rational” and “women are absorbed in appearances and other superficial concerns”.

High scorers in this category included:

- [Singtel’s “In Return: Interview with Shaza Ishak”](#): which stars a driven young woman who runs the Malay theatre company Teater Ekamatra. We witness her passion and ambition to bring minority voices to the stage, while her supportive father cooks a meal for her at home.
- [Vaseline’s “Visible Scars, Invisible Strength”](#): The ad features 71-year-old Lee Hwee Chin, who overcame gender discrimination in her 40-year career as a blade-sharpener. Her scarred hands represent not disfigurement, but her professional “achievement”.

Low scorers in this category included an ad in which a sternly patronising father explains mobile banking to his ditzy, vain daughter; an ad in which a frazzled housewife flies off the handle when her husband forgets to put the toilet seat down; and an ad that upholds



conventionally gendered divisions of labour—with a mother baking tarts for her daughter while a father writes a cheque for his son.

BODY IMAGE AND BEAUTY STANDARDS

In scoring this, we asked: Does this ad foster a progressive and diverse idea of beauty by recognising the attractiveness of people who fall outside of society’s narrow physical ideals? Or does it instead shame these people for their looks?

High scorers in this category included:

- [Dove’s “Rachel’s Story”](#): in which a woman with eczema talks openly about learning to be proud of her skin, after years of disparagement from others: “I look at every mark on my body as... a point where I’ve gotten through the pain and I’ve come out stronger.”
- [Apple’s “Behind the Mac”](#): a simple, powerful montage of well-known female artists and leaders, from Lady Gaga to Malala Yousafzai, who all look distinctively radiant in their own skin.
- [Singtel’s “GOMO feat. Preetipls”](#): With Preetipls, a body-positive local entertainer, doing sultry beach yoga à la Instagram influencers and comically sporting a fake unibrow, the ad challenges ideas of who is allowed wit and glamour in media.

That said, the vast majority of ads did feature slim, fair-skinned and pretty women. These conventionally “beautiful” women were sometimes coupled with schlubby men, in a display of gendered double standards. Indeed, women across the ads were much more likely than men to adhere to traditional beauty standards.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lastly, ads were penalised if they featured violence against women and/or objectification of women’s bodies. However, few ads in our set lost points here.

ABOUT AWARE

AWARE is Singapore’s leading women’s rights and gender-equality advocacy group. It works to identify and eliminate gender-based barriers through research, advocacy, education, training and support services. AWARE embraces diversity, respects the individual and the choices she makes in life, and supports her when needed. aware.org.sg

ABOUT R3

R3 Worldwide is the only truly global consultancy that offers marketers access to the expertise and services required to establish and administer effective multi-national agency engagements. R3 is the most experienced organisation of its kind with on-the-ground



consultants and in-market insights in major markets around the globe. Its objective counsel guides marketers and their agencies towards more effective and efficient working relationships. rthree.com

ANNEX

TOP 10 SCORING ADS		
Rank	Brand	Advertisement
1	Vaseline	Visible Scars. Invisible Strength: Lady without Fingerprints
2	Apple	Chinese New Year Shot on iPhone 11 Pro — Daughter
3	Apple	Behind The Mac — International Women’s Day
4	Singtel	In Return: Interview with Shaza Ishak
5	Singtel	GOMO feat. Preetipls
6	FWD	Cancer Insurance - My Girlfriend’s Such a Fighter
7	Starhub	Founding Mothers of Singapore
8	UOB	Black Belt
9	Dove	Rachel's Story: Living with eczema
10	McDonald’s	McDelivery Day