

ADVERTISING AND STEREOTYPES A HIGH-RISK RELATIONSHIP

ARGENTINA
MARCH 2021



International
Labour
Organization



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A research to know the impact of sexist advertising on brand positioning

This research was conducted within the scope of the “Win-Win: Gender equality means good business” programme, which is implemented by UN Women together with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and funded by the European Union (EU), and its purpose is to contribute to women economic empowerment, acknowledging them as beneficiaries and partners of growth and development, by promoting companies commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women, and the strengthening of company actions to implement those commitments.

Methodology

A mixed research methodology with quantitative and qualitative approaches was designed. First, we conducted a study of habits to know the opinion, attitudes and messages of the population as regards gender issues, and to determine the relationship between those aspects and brands. The study was conducted in Argentina by means of a self-administered online survey with a sample size of 1034 cases, including men and women aged 14 to 55 years, SES: ABC1/C2/C3, residents of AMBA (Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires) and the rest of the country. Secondly, we performed a study to validate the hypothesis of consumer behavior changes towards advertising pieces created without regard to gender perspective. In this instance, focus was on both, the level of perception (individual and social) and the level of action or behavior towards a piece of advertising. A qualitative analysis of cases (by means of campaigns and brand actions) which were collected from the Argentinian market between 2018 and 2020 was also performed at both instances.

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Win-Win Program and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

STUDY OF HABITS.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER EQUALITY

Which are Argentina's main concerns?

56%

Fifty-six percent (56%) of the answers revolve around gender issues in a guided manner:

femicides, gender violence, women and LGBTIQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer) individuals' rights, the comprehensive sexuality education law and gender-based discrimination.

70% 

43% 

Seventy percent (70%) of women mention gender-related matters as a priority for the country, whereas only 43% of men state the same.

47% 

23% 

Forty-seven percent (47%) of women consider that gender-related violence is one of Argentina's main problems, but only 23% of men agree.

PEOPLE UNDER 20 YEARS OLD

59% 

PEOPLE OVER 30 YEARS OLD

28% 

Although this aspect seems to be highly relevant for people under 20 years old (59%), it does not seem to be as important for those over 30 (28%).

Concern for gender inequalities is strongly finding its way into the social agenda, mainly promoted by women and young people.

STUDY OF HABITS.

3 ATTITUDINAL PROFILES

During the research, substantial attitudinal differences were identified which allowed us to create three clearly defined groups.

Transforming group

They demonstrate the highest degree of agreement with issues relating to the gender agenda and they also strongly disagree with phrases showing inequalities. This group mainly includes women (62%), although there is a 36% of men and 2% of individuals who did not report their gender identity. As regards age, 55% of them are under 30 years old.

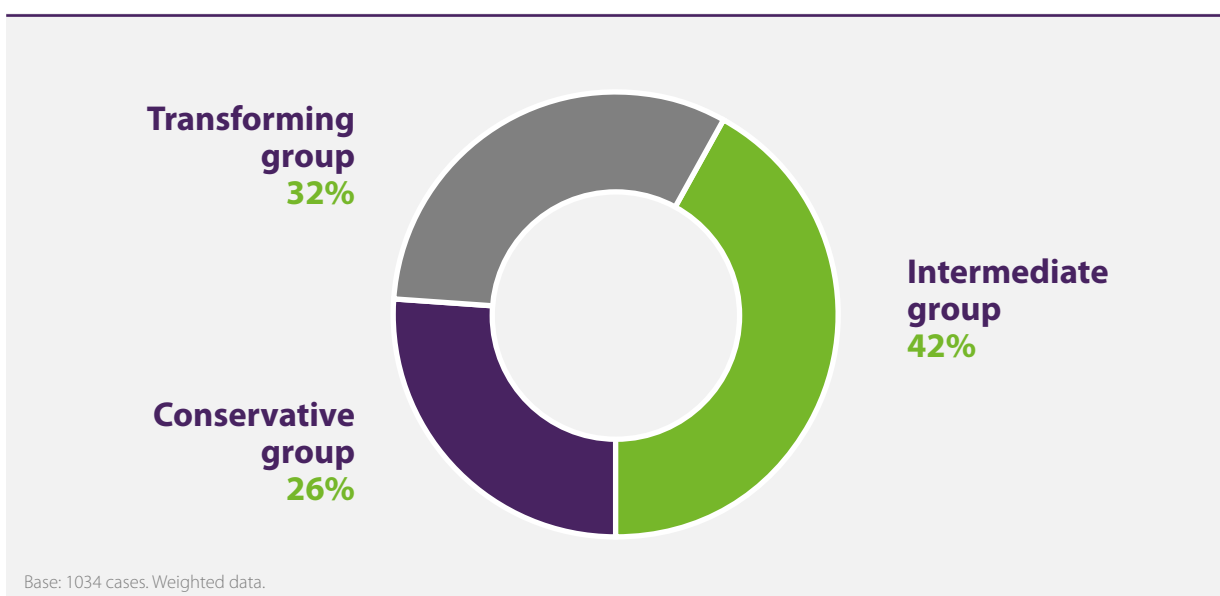
Intermediate group

It includes people who partially agree with gender equality premises, in line with the transforming group, but, at the same time, they show some contradictions. They express their disagreement with key aspects of equality, thus warranting the need to identify a second group that is neither entirely resistant nor transforming.

It consists of men and women in an equal amount; 59% of this group is over 30 years old and most of them live in different provinces of the country (62%).

Conservative group

It includes people who identify themselves as reluctant to gender agenda items, in absolute opposition to the transforming group. Mainly, it consists of men (67%) over 30 (66%), who live in the AMBA (Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires) and the rest of the country, evenly.



STUDY OF HABITS.

4 OUT OF EVERY 10 INDIVIDUALS

MAKE THEIR PURCHASE

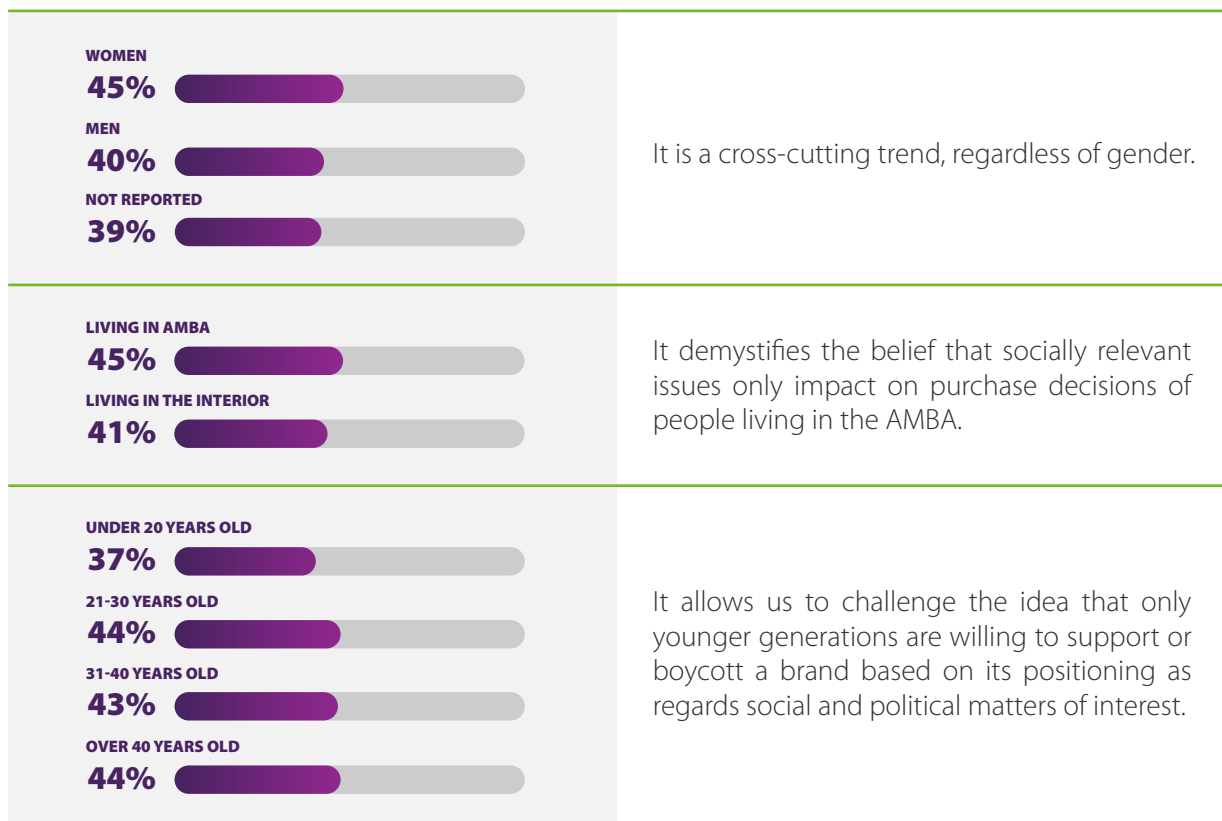
DECISIONS BASED ON

THEIR VALUES

Research data suggests that four out of every 10 individuals in Argentina are willing to start purchasing, stop purchasing or even boycott a brand if their messages do not fit their interests

and values. This group includes both, men and women, and other gender identities of all ages who live across the country.

Who are these people?



STUDY OF HABITS.

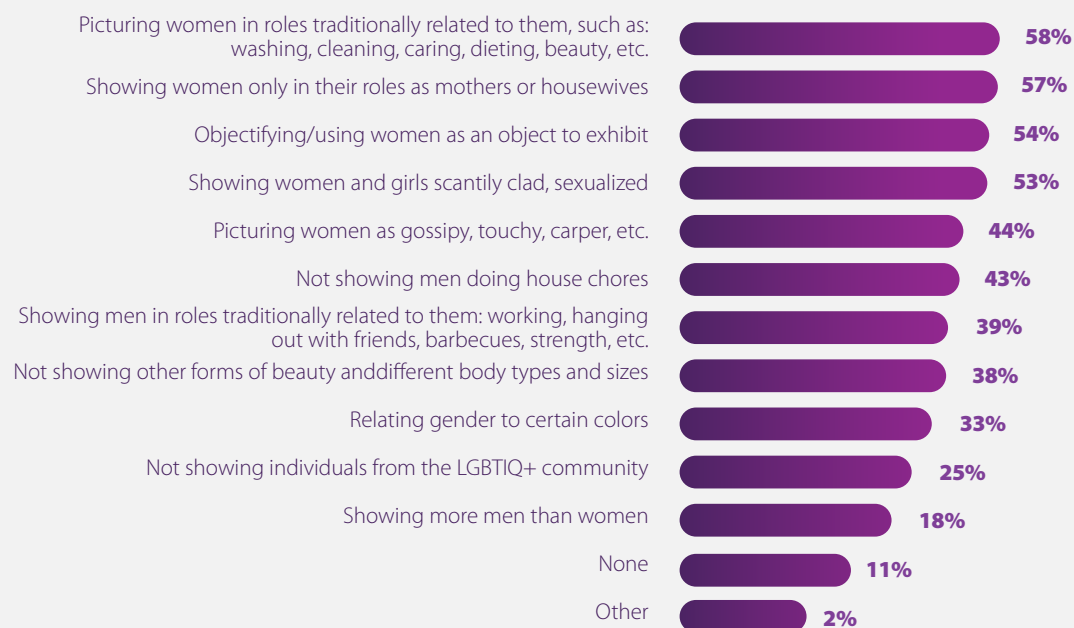
SEXISM BECOMES APPARENT

What makes an advertisement sexist?

This research showed that the understanding of sexism in advertising is determined by a perspective which predominantly promotes the identification of sexism with the roles assigned to women.

Sexism can be clearly seen in the ways advertising pictures women. Washing + caring + buying + objectification + sexualization.

Sexist-advertising characteristics



Representation of the masculine stereotype is not as apparent yet. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the people who participated in the research consider that what makes a piece of advertising sexist is showing women in roles traditionally associated to them, such as cleaning, cooking, dieting, beauty, etc. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the people consi-

der that showing women only as housewives or mothers is what makes a piece of advertising sexist. Underneath these characteristics, there are issues relating to the body and sexualization: 54% of the people think that it is sexist for a piece of advertising to show women as objects to exhibit or scantily clad.

BEHAVIOR-CHANGE STUDY

We conducted a study to identify how social condemnation promoted by sexist campaigns impact on brand reputation.

To that purpose, we divided our sample in three comparable groups and we presented each of them with different stimuli. Group 1 was shown a campaign without apparent gender bias (base campaign); group 2 was presented with a sexist campaign, and for group 3, we used the same sexist campaign together with some social condemnation cases relating to such a communication. All stimuli were from the same brand. Advertising that reproduces, in images, words and / or concepts, stereotyped gender roles that promote inequality is considered sexist.

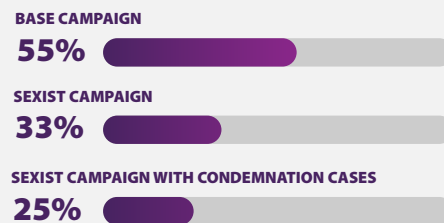
Results are absolutely conclusive: yes, sexism in communication makes people less willing to purchase the product being offered.

Purchase interest

While group 1 purchase interest (i.e., people exposed to a piece without apparent bias) reaches 55%, such an interest falls to 33% for those who were shown the sexist advertising piece and it is significantly lower for people who saw the sexist piece together with social condemnation cases, reaching a purchase intent of just 25%. The reduction is significant and it is accompanied by strong anger feelings. The more sexist the piece, the more difficult it is to highlight positive aspects and the easier it is to point out the negative ones. This group shows a substantial decrease with social condemnation cases, since only 58% of them can mention any positive aspect about the stimulus.

These results show that the more sexist an advertising piece is interest in purchasing decreases, since they are spontaneous assessments. Disagreement with sexist pieces, and even more with those raising rejection conversations in social networks or the media, was immediately apparent before even asking any gender-related questions.

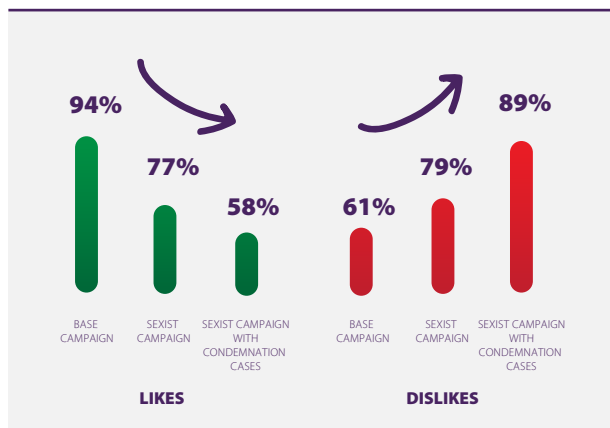
Purchase interest



Likes and dislikes: social network impact

While disagreement goes from 79% to 89% when being exposed to social repercussions generated by the piece, this has a stronger impact on the agreement cases (likes) which would fall from 77% to 58%. This could be seen as an expression of the value of social network interventions aiming at the analysis of advertising pieces from a gender perspective and clearly pointing out sexist biases and symbolic violence. There are still a lot of people who need help to identify sexism on advertising pieces and as soon as they find it, their perception changes.

Likes and dislikes



How did that piece of advertising make you feel?

In the analysis of emotions, it is clear that, unlike the communication without apparent bias, the sexist piece promotes anger which is exacerbated as the media and social networks condemn the message conveyed by the piece. Positive feelings start declining as we move from group 1 to group 2 and, in contrast, negative feelings are increased.

Reputation

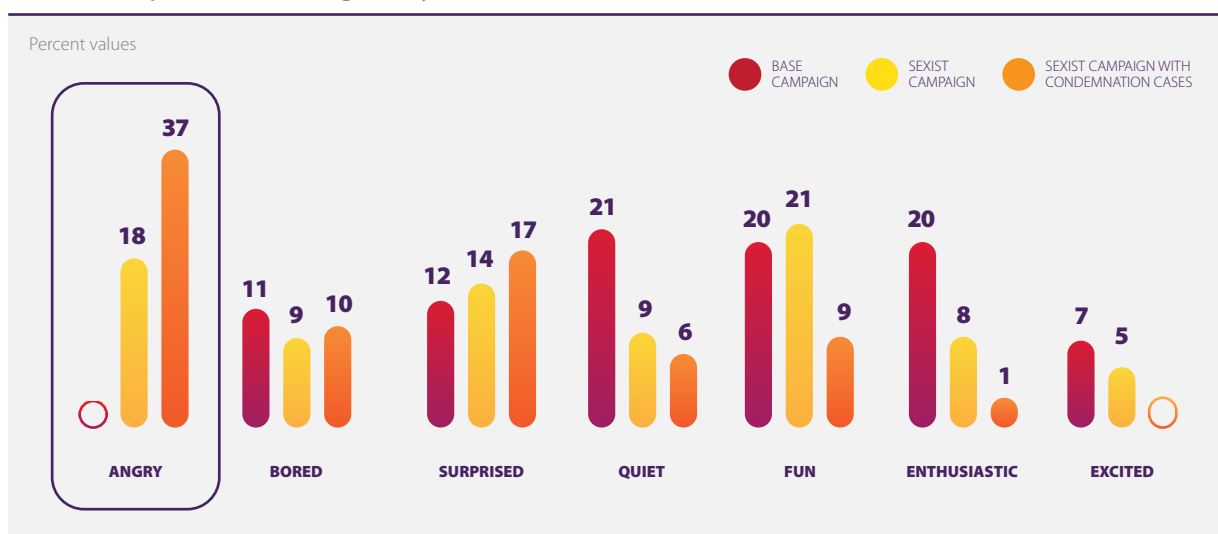
Of note, as sexism becomes more apparent in the pieces, whether because people identify it by themselves in the advertising piece or because social conversation helps them focus on those issues, all variables relating to brand reputation are

affected. The more sexist evidence is observed, the less affinity people show to that brand.

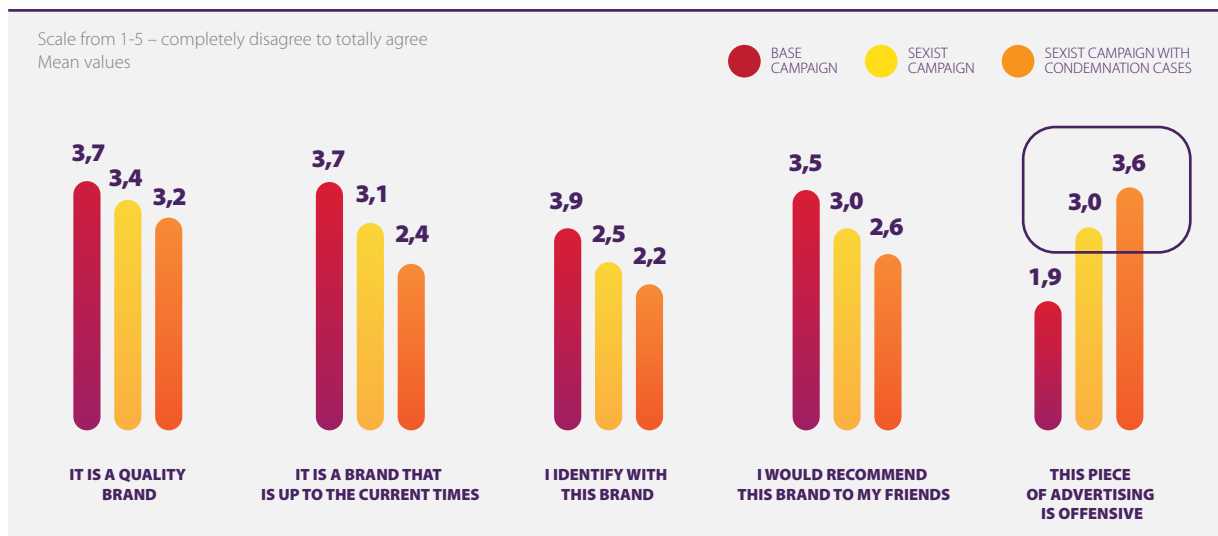
Symbolism

People tend to think they are completely rational beings capable of shielding themselves from the persuasive strategies used by the media to influence them. In this case, data shows how results significantly change with the same piece between those who see the piece together with media repercussions and those who only see the piece without considering the "social noise" around it. This shows the huge power of social networks and the work done there by gender models and specialists, feminist organizations and associations related to women and diversity movements, for the understanding of sexist campaigns. Even in cases where people cannot clearly and consciously identify the relevance of the explanations and discussions posted in social networks, and the fact that, in many cases, they become part of the main media headlines in the country, the truth is that those repercussions are specifically promoting and facilitating the identification of symbolic violence in advertising.

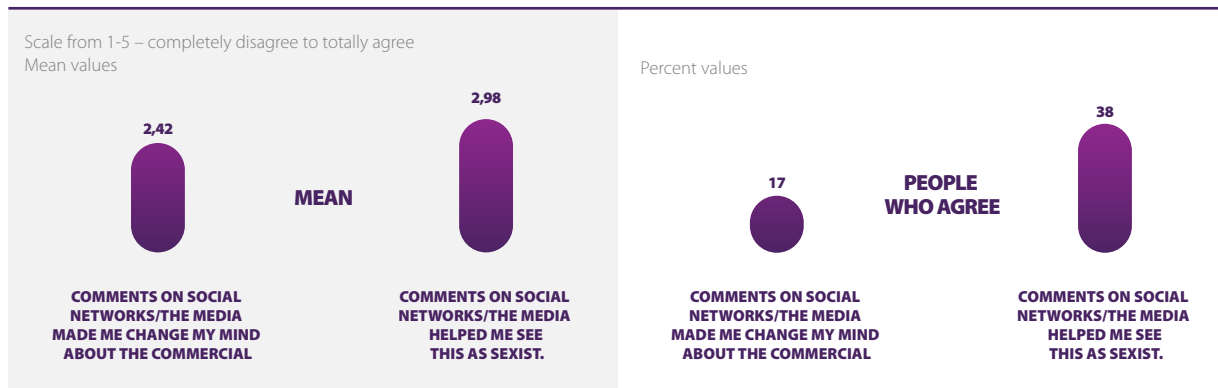
How did that piece of advertising make you feel?



Which is your degree of agreement with the following phrases as regards this piece of advertising?



Agreement with phrases



Sexism in advertising is extremely harmful. Not only does it impact on people's behavior, but also on brand reputation and purchase intent.

Male chauvinist messages, symbolic violence and severely gender-biased communications, which lead to sexist messages, affect both purchase intent and the way people relate to the brand, since as the brand becomes apparently sexist, they see it as offensive and get angry.

However, as regards purchase intent and emotional correlation, it has been shown that sexist advertising also affects other brand reputation variables: a sexist message makes the product seem of an inferior quality and uncool, it hinders people identification with the proposal, and it definitely makes them less willing to recommend it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has shown that, in order to avoid replication of gender stereotypes, it is not enough to give companies a corporate purpose towards gender equality, but it is essential that such a commitment strongly lays on marketing, communication, advertising and brand management. In order to avoid the replication of stereotypes, marketing strategies and actions have to be carefully thought from a gender-based approach, using mechanisms and tools that help promote consideration focused on the points of view, images and models directly or indirectly set by brands.

Marketing teams should consistently address gender-related training needs to support the necessary gender perspective change which will enable us to see beyond gender preconceptions suggested by stereotypes. It is important to consider that learning this is not immediate nor will it happen spontaneously, but it requires planning, prioritizing and determination to maintain it over time.

In this context, the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are an initiative of UN Women and the United Nations Global Compact for the private sector to promote the gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community. They consist of 7 principles, including Nº 5, "Implement business development practices, supply chain and marketing practices that

empower which includes putting an end to harmful gender-based stereotypes in advertising. In some professional settings, resorting to gender specialists who can keep this concern visible throughout the brand construction chain is being useful. Having specialists and assigning responsibility to a specific team is a good way to promote transformation.

The **guide for adequate gender representation in advertising**¹, prepared by Colombia's National Association of Advertisers (Asociación Nacional de Anunciantes) with the technical support of UN Women also recommends to promote gender diversity in working teams, which is a good initiative to think brands from various perspectives. Plural and diverse teams help bringing up unique experiences, opinions, ambitions and paths, and it is at these discussions where privileges and inequalities are brought to light.

In 2019, the Argentine Advertising Council (Consejo Publicitario Argentino) developed a commitment between advertisers, agencies and the media to eradicate gender stereotypes from communications.

This commitment includes nine principles which should be considered to eradicate sexist and discriminatory messages from brand management.

¹ Colombia's National Association of Advertisers. "Guide for the adequate representation of gender in commercial communication". Available at: <<https://bit.ly/3vUumlw>>

- 1** **Not perpetuating traditional gender roles,** since this imposes structural limitations on the access to opportunities in various social settings.
- 2** **Not conferring stereotypical qualities and behaviors to men and women, under the excuse it is natural,** since this reinforces established ideas about how people should be or act based on their gender, and it promotes discrimination against people who are different or act differently.
- 3** **Not hypersexualizing or objectifying women and girls,** since this promotes the idea that they are not subjects of right but objects for male consumption.
- 4** **Not associating success or happiness to a certain physical appearance,** as this reinforces mandates over women's bodies, which has an impact on their self-esteem since childhood.
- 5** **Not showing or suggesting women and girls in a position of inferiority or dependence.** This kind of representation reinforces asymmetry of power and exacerbates gender inequality.
- 6** **Not promoting messages that, explicitly or implicitly, limit or condition women and girls' opportunities and ambitions.** This affects their opportunities and it also conditions their perception of their future possibilities.
- 7** **Not excluding or discriminating through language.** Often, through language, stereotyped preconceptions are reinforced, part of the population is excluded, and asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships, and inequalities are reproduced.
- 8** **Not justifying or legitimizing sexist violence in any way, through resources such as humor or irony,** since this normalizes gender-based violence, one of the most serious problems in our country and the world.
- 9** **Not discriminating or overshadowing the diversity of gender identities.** Usually, the LGBTIQ+ community has no media representation, which results in lack of visibility and failure to recognize their existence.