

# Meat is masculine: how food advertising perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes

June 19 2019, by Kate Stewart And Matthew Cole

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK Advertising Standards Authority has introduced a new rule in its advertising code which [bans adverts which feature gender stereotypes](#) "that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence."

This is a welcome step towards challenging the everyday normality of

patriarchy in popular culture. But [gender stereotypes](#) in advertising cannot be untangled from human oppression of other [animals](#). Consuming other animals is normalised in our culture, so those sorts of "stereotypes that are likely to cause harm" go unnoticed, and aren't usually judged to have caused "serious or widespread offence."

In recent years there has been an increase in the popularity and visibility of veganism—and there are [more new vegan products being launched in the UK](#) than anywhere else in the world. While [animal ethics](#) remains a core reason for adopting vegan practices, [increasingly health concerns and the climate crisis](#) are prompting people to switch to veganism.

[We have previously written](#) about adverts that reproduce harmful gender stereotypes while normalising human oppression of other animals. For example, in a [2015 Father's Day TV](#) advert for Aldi supermarket, a girl's voiceover says her favourite thing is cooking her father a roast dinner.

The accompanying visual shows a woman's hand serving a roasted chicken's carcass. This is followed by a voiceover from a boy explaining his favourite thing is watching his father eat a "juicy steak." This communicates a subtle message—girls aspire to prepare and serve cooked animals and sons aspire to share the adult male pleasure of consuming those animals.

Is that "likely to cause harm"? Obviously consuming animal products is harmful to the animals—but it harms humans too, especially women. This isn't just about reinforcing gender stereotypes, like in the Aldi advert. [Research has shown](#) that some married women are deterred from vegetarianism because of the disapproval, rejection and even violence from their husbands. But are boys also being harmed by these stereotypes? Certainly insofar as they are encouraged to identify with a version of masculinity that depends on power over women and over other animals.

We have argued [elsewhere](#) and here that "humour" is a defensive response that attempts to insulate oppressive power relations from critique. But we should remain alert to the potency and power dynamics of jokes in advertising.

## **Just a bit of fun?**

Like many adverts, Cravendale's "[Milk Me Brian](#)" uses comedic armour to deflect criticism of its gender stereotypes. It features a spoof origin myth of the human consumption of cows' milk. The advert begins with a modern man gazing through a kitchen window at a field of contented-looking cows, while a woman is busy with housework in the background. "Brian" daydreams a bygone version of himself—lying beside a sleeping woman and being visited by a spectral cow inviting him to "milk me Brian." The voiceover then heralds Brian as a "lion among men," for having solved the "problem" of expropriating cows' milk for human consumption.

"Milk me Brian" naturalises male dominance as resulting from controlling female reproductive processes. That is, Brian is lionised for successfully milking a cow. [Comparing men to lions](#) in particular, is a common tactic for normalising rigid and immutable hierarchical social relations. This is because patriarchal cultural meanings tend to associate masculinity with charismatic carnivorous animals, who are used to symbolise masculine power and authority.

Cultural Studies researcher [Vasile Stanescu](#) wrote in 2016 about the highly successful 2008 Burger King campaign "[The Whopper Virgins](#)". It featured "blind" taste testing by people in countries who had been "deprived" of American fast food. The campaign used the tag line: "Real locations. Real burgers. Real virgins." These adverts play into shared understandings of links between meat eating, gender and western superiority. Here, lack of familiarity with Western fast food is equated

with sexual immaturity ("virgins") and inferior masculinity.

## The male appetite

Feminist scholar [Carol J Adams](#) has written about connections between gender and animal products for 30 years. Her work illustrates the symbolic links between the consumption of meat and the oppression of of meat and the oppression of women—and the way that adverts are never only promoting products, but also promoting dominant cultural meanings.

Foremost among these are gender stereotypes that harm women and harm non-human animals. The packaging of dead flesh and female flesh have long been connected in advertising. Adams has collected a [massive archive](#) of advertising imagery in which both meat and women are presented as wanting to be ravished/consumed.

In advertising images such as "Chick It Out," which advertised a new menu at a self-styled "eatery and funhouse" in Nottingham in the Midlands, anthropomorphic images of animals as human women are presented in sexually provocative ways. They position both women and animals as purposed for the enjoyment of appropriate male appetites for food, sex and power. Eating and fun, therefore, at this venue (and many others using similar imagery) is aimed at the straight male meat eater and, by association, communicates this space as a place for men.

If the advertising watchdog really wants to remove harmful gender stereotypes, it needs to recognise and address how the invitation to consume any bodies as objects for enjoyment reinforces these destructive power relations and objectifies both animals and women.

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