



Advertising Association takes action against sexist billboards

By Rishi Raj Ramnauth

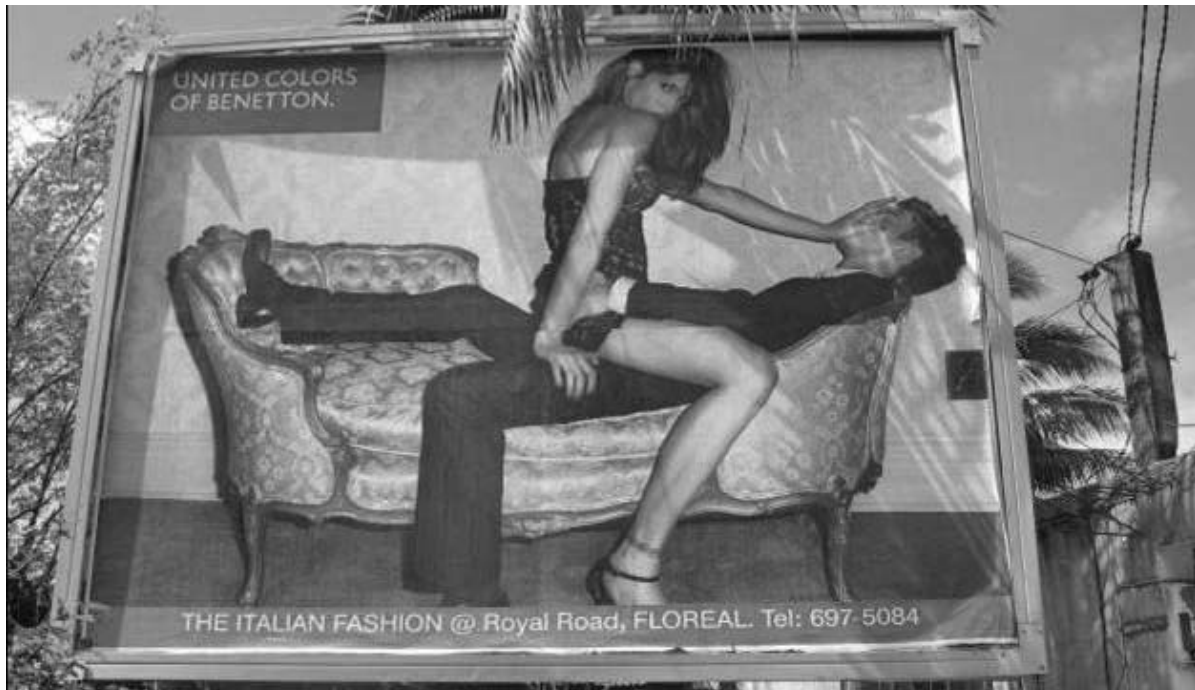
More than 50% of the billboards scattered around the paradise-island of Mauritius have images of women. However, the portrayal of women in these adverts is often negative if not plain degrading.

According to Davina Sholay of the Mauritius Media Watch-GEMSA Organisation, advertisements portray women only for their attractiveness and “women are used as baits” by marketing and advertising agencies for promoting various products.

“Very often women have nothing to do with the product which they appear along with on billboards. By portraying women the wrong way, marketing and advertising

agencies in Mauritius tend to send the wrong signal to their customers,” says Sholay. Presenting findings from research on gender and advertising in Mauritius at the GEM Summit, Sholay says the study shows that women appearing in still images on billboards are highest in the age groups 25-35.

Advertising trends in Europe and the United States are now on the “intelligent and responsible trail,” said Priya Thakoor, President of the Association of the Advertising Agencies (AAA) of Mauritius. She is convinced that there will be some light at the end of the Mauritian advertising tunnel in the coming years.



“As of now, in Mauritius, women are still constantly being used in advertising. However, in Europe we no longer find bikini-clad women posing in front of cars for adverts. There is nothing easier, non-creative and in bad taste than putting a bikini-clad woman on top of a car. This shot has been overcooked and it is sad to note that in Mauritius, we are still using the images of women to catch the attention of men for targeted products,” she says.

Thakoor adds that the current 55% images of women on billboards will tone down to 35% intelligent portrayal of woman in around two years time. “We will be playing more on the creativity surrounding the product itself instead of dragging the image of women into it. It is up to us as watchdogs to make people in the business more and more gender aware,” she says.

According to Thakoor, there are around 40% women working in the advertising agencies in Mauritius and many of them are in the decision-making positions. “At one stage or the other, the advert has to pass through the hands of a woman and definitely she will have a say in the finished product.”

Meanwhile, the AAA in Mauritius has implemented its own code of ethics that has recently been updated, giving particular attention to gender balance. Whenever complaints are received at the AAA, a disciplinary meeting takes place whereby the agency is called upon to explain. There and then, there is a dialogue between the concerned parties to decide whether the advertisement has to be altered or simply pulled down. Sometimes if the agency is reluctant to do so, then the higher authorities like the Ministry of Women’s Rights are informed.

Thakoor cautions however, that gender and media activists and citizens should not get too “over-sensitive” about the gender issue and kill creativity in the process. “My job is to promote creativity and as

the advertising industry gets more creative, the concept of using the body of a woman will fall like a dead leaf, because that’s far from being creative,” she points out.



In Mauritius, there is no real media regulatory authority and NGOs like the Media Watch have initiated several awareness campaigns for marketing and advertising companies. These campaigns focus on the difference these companies can make if they had a code of conduct with ethical guidelines while producing adverts.



Writers Bio

Rishi Ramnauth is a journalist from Mauritius.