Recently, a mother in the United Kingdom created a petition that objected to a local PSA ad that used different language based on the perceived gender of the individual in the ad.

The “Love Essex” campaign encourages those living in the county north of London to keep their streets pristine with two different pictures. One shows a woman with a tag stating that putting garbage in the trash is “a pretty quick thing to do.” (The emphasis is from the campaign.) Not only do some residents take issue with the ad’s grammar, but others were displeased that the men’s ad said putting trash in a bin was the “smart thing to do.

Natalie Collins created the petition because she found the advertisements sexist. “Women experience the issue of pretty-versus-smart all the time,” said Collins. “I have a 12-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old son, and this is not a message I want them to see.”

While Collins viewed this ad through the lens of her own children, her actions support all youth. Advertisements often use gender and gender stereotypes to sell products. This is done in subtle and overt ways. These affect youth who are viewing the ads. The messages that advertisers use to market products or deliver PSAs can fuel gender norms. If you do not perform as society expects you to within the strict parameters of your identity, then you become suspect. It is a way to enforce conformity. Even to the detriment of all involved.

There are a variety of reasons that advertisers use gender and gender stereotypes to sell products to all consumers. The Washington Post recently discussed a study that looked at the food industry’s messages associated with gender.

These tired gender stereotypes are as old as commerce — and that’s probably not coincidental. New research, published this week in the journal Social Psychology, reinforces what creative agencies have long exploited: Cultural cues can shape our food choices. If a product doesn’t arrive in its expected gendered packaging, we may be less likely to buy or savor it.

While these “tired gender stereotypes” may appear to be working, they lead to other questions. Will young people and parents begin to push back against advertisements that are overtly sexist or utilize ignorant and outdated gender-based stereotypes? Will this group be
large or vocal enough to make change? Collins took action on something that she thought was a harmful message for youth. Her actions were covered by media outlets because Collins represents a growing number of caregivers and young people who utilize online communication tools to share what they like, dislike, or think is offensive. These actions reflect individuals that pay attention to how and why they’re being sent specific messages by advertisers.

As we look to the future, how will advertisers change as their primary consumer base has an expanded understanding of gender? As an increasing number of youth identify on a broader spectrum of gender, rather than the traditional binary of “male” and “female”, innovative advertisers are going to work to ensure that these individuals see themselves reflected in the advertisements used to sell specific products.

What are other examples of blatant gendered advertising focused at youth? What are examples of advertisements that were thoughtful and reflected greater understanding of gender? If you’re interested in discussing this, join us in our new Lounge group – Gender POP!, a conversation about TV shows, music, fashion, advertisements, and how pop culture and gender interact.

Photo used with blog post is from TakePart.com article.