

Ford India Apologizes Over Berlusconi Bondage Ad

Kay Johnson, Associated Press

MUMBAI, India (AP) — The Indian unit of Ford Motor Co. has apologized for advertisements decried as demeaning to women, including one depicting Italy's former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi with a trio of bound women in the trunk of a car.

A Ford India spokeswoman said Monday that the company is investigating whether anyone at the automaker ever saw the print ads, which were never used commercially but appeared over the weekend on a website showcasing creative advertising.

The ads caused an uproar online and came just after India passed a new law on violence against women following a fatal gang rape of a student on a bus that prompted mass protests and spotlighted the status of women in India.

Featuring Ford's logo, one ad showed three women bound and gagged in the trunk of an Indian-made compact, the Ford Figo, with Berlusconi smiling from the driver's seat alongside the slogan "Leave your worries behind with the Figo's extra-large boot."

Similar ads featured Paris Hilton apparently kidnapping reality television rivals the Kardashian sisters — all three sisters tied up and one in a bikini — and Formula One driver Michael Schumacher abducting his male racing competition.

Ford said Monday that it regrets the incident, calling the images "contrary to the standards of professionalism and decency within Ford."

The ads were created at advertising agency JWT India and appeared on the website adsoftheworld.com late Friday.

"Ford India Needs to Fire Its Advertising Execs," read a headline on a slate.com blog while Indians on Twitter reacted with posts like "Disgusting!" and "SHAME."

It was unclear Monday whether anyone at Ford India had approved or seen the ads.

"We take this very seriously and are reviewing approval and oversight processes, and taking necessary steps to ensure nothing like this ever happens again," Ford spokeswoman Sethi Deepti said by email.

JWT advertising's parent company, the British advertising and public relations giant WPP Group, also condemned the ads.

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"We deeply regret the publishing of posters that were distasteful and contrary to the standards of professionalism and decency within WPP Group," a company statement said.

"These were never intended for paid publication and should never have been created, let alone uploaded to the internet. This was the result of individuals acting without proper oversight and appropriate actions have been taken within the agency where they work to deal with the situation."

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