

## **ASA Complaints Review and Media Monitoring Insights**

### ASA Complaints Review

The UK Advertising Codes include rules that prohibit ads from causing harm and serious or widespread offence, and require them to be socially responsible. The Advertising Codes specify that special care must be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, though they do not specifically address racial or ethnic stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

The ASA has a strong track record of investigating and banning ads that break these rules. While ads are not necessarily a problem if, in the ASA's opinion, they do not offend against prevailing standards in society, they might be considered problematic if they depict or represent a specific group of people in a way that is likely to cause serious offence to members of that group.

The ASA undertook a review of its decisions in 518 cases arising from complaints about depictions of race and ethnicity, which were received between January 2013 and June 2020.

The review identified a number of important issues that consumers consistently raised with regard to the depiction of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including the extent to which those depictions in individual ads, which might seem to be on the right side of the line in isolation, might nevertheless be contributing to a cumulative effect of offence or harm.

The review informed our project, initiated in September 2020, which set out to explore these issues in more depth and better understand how the use of particular racial and ethnic stereotypes might cause harm to those being depicted, or omitted, from advertising.

### Consumer Insights: Social Media Monitoring

The project team sought additional intelligence from the Brandwatch Strategy & Insights team, who analyse and uncover consumer insights from online sources and social networks.

We commissioned intelligence to review which ads consumers had been discussing between 2016-2020, either positively or negatively online, and identify the themes emerging within those discussions.

In order to do this, a broad search was created to capture UK-based conversation on advertising, when mentioned alongside identifiers for racial and ethnic minority groups. Those identifiers included a wide range of terms denoting race and religion, including pejorative terms. This data was then segmented in three general categories; appropriation, discrimination and representation.

Each segment was reviewed over a time period for recurring themes in conversation, and to identify specific adverts being mentioned by UK audiences. To ensure all conversation was UK-based, Twitter served as the primary content source for the analysis.

While all conversation was UK-based, not every ad discussed originated in the UK.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non\\_broadcast/code\\_section/04.html](https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_section/04.html)  
[https://www.asa.org.uk/type/broadcast/code\\_section/04.html](https://www.asa.org.uk/type/broadcast/code_section/04.html)

## Key Themes

This report identifies a number of key themes, some of which are interrelated, which arose from the review of ASA complaints, and the online media intelligence review. We have highlighted feedback from individuals and groups obtained via the review that, in our view, illustrate some of these themes.

### Depiction of Roles and Characteristics

A common theme arising from the reviews related to the repeated use of similar racial and ethnic stereotypes appearing in ads. These stereotypical portrayals included linking negative behaviours with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as showing South Asian men as sexual predators or linking Black men to criminality, and stereotypes regarding physical appearance, such as Jewish men having large noses or Black women being deemed to be unattractive

Depictions that placed specific attention on, or exaggerated, particular mannerisms were also often a frequent cause of complaint, particularly in relation to the perceived mocking of accents.

Ads that were perceived to feature racial and ethnic stereotypes, particularly when using confrontational or mocking approaches, generated complaints that the depictions were likely to cause serious or widespread offence. For example, the ASA formally investigated an ad which was seen in the context of widespread news coverage of the developing outbreak of COVID-19 in China, at a time when there were a small but growing number of cases confirmed in the UK. It featured an image of the Union Jack flag and language that was intended to draw attention to the fact that the advertiser's products were made in the UK. However, the ASA's investigation concluded that the use of the phrase "NO NASTY IMPORTS", in combination with an image of a surgical mask, was likely to be read as a negative reference to immigration or race, and in particular as associating immigrants with disease.<sup>2</sup>

The social media monitoring review identified numerous comments about racial and ethnic stereotyping in ads, such as the following, concerning a telecoms ad, seen in November 2020: "Horrible advert. So if the girl in the ad was white... [Kevin Bacon] wouldn't be knocking on the door of what is obviously a council flat. It would be a house instead wouldn't it? Are you advertising an iPhone or trying to show that you know how to stereotype Black people?".

Conversely, some ads depicted a person in a subjectively favourable way, based on a stereotypical belief held about the racial or ethnic group they belong to. An example of an ad identified in the review of ASA cases that was formally investigated included an allusion to a Black man having large genitals in comparison to White men. As opposed to negative stereotypes, positive stereotypes represent a 'positive' evaluation of a group that typically signals an advantage over another group. However, while they might first appear to some as flattering or innocuous, these depictions may also contribute to the generalisation of vastly diverse groups, have the effect of fetishising or exoticising, and can be seen to reinforce or promote outdated views about a particular racial or ethnic group, which could have the potential to cause harm.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/vic-smith-bedding-ltd-g20-1055998-vic-smith-bedding-ltd.html>

## Culture

The ASA review of complaints highlighted that when ads included people from different cultures, they were often featured in a way that mocked, denigrated or were otherwise insensitive to that culture. Common concerns under this theme related again to the exaggeration and mocking of accents, as well as using 'lazy' references to culture, cultural appropriation and the use of imagery reminiscent of colonialism and imperialism.

### The Use of Humour

Humour is frequently used in advertising, and light-hearted depictions of certain stereotypes can be well received. However, the use of humour does not render all racial or ethnic stereotypes inoffensive or unproblematic.

The balance between humour and offence is complex; context, tone and other factors such as whether that humour challenges particular tropes or long-held stereotypes, all play important roles.

An area that was a common source of concern related to ads that mocked other people's accents. The ASA's assessments in most of these cases relied on the position established in a published ruling relating to a case in which an ad attempted to derive humour through a character's inability to pronounce certain words due to his accent.<sup>3</sup>

### Objectification and Sexualisation

The following categories broadly relate to how people's bodies and sexuality are displayed in advertising:

- **Objectification** is the depiction of an individual in a way that focuses on their body, whether or not in an overtly sexual manner, and reduces them to a physical object.
- **Sexualisation** can be defined separately from objectification in that it refers more generally to the portrayal of individuals in a sexual manner. It can vary in its degree of explicitness. In some contexts, sexualised imagery may be considered acceptable, however, concerns often arise when it is used to depict people or situations where this type of approach is considered inappropriate or harmful – chiefly in ads that feature young people.

These categories frequently intersect and an ad that sexualises might also objectify. However, sexualisation can also differ from objectification in that those portrayed may display a controlled, authoritative or powerful demeanour. They may not be objectified, but they are still presented in a way that defines them by their sexuality, when this may be irrelevant to the product being advertised, or highly sexually explicit.

Complaints about objectification and sexualisation are regularly investigated by the ASA under the Advertising Codes. In other cases, when an initial assessment suggest the Codes have not been breached, they may be referred to the ASA Council with the recommendation that there should be no further investigation after Council decision (NAICD). While the majority of complaints about objectification and sexualisation relate to White women, the ASA complaints review identified a number of complaints relating to how people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds were portrayed, the majority of which concerned the depiction of Black people;

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/brunel-road-timber-ltd-a13-230663.html>

either Black men and the size of their genitals (as highlighted earlier in this report), or the sexualisation of Black women.

Concerns about the sexualisation and objectification of Black men were also identified as a talking point in the online media review: “the sexualised objectification of Black men... was developed under slavery and shored up the power of enslavers, but it continues today”.

The media review also highlighted that Asian women are fetishised and objectified in Western media.

### Depiction of Religion in Advertising

Religious beliefs and practices may be an integral part of someone’s identity and, therefore, a representation of that belief in advertising might also intersect with issues of race or ethnicity.

Comments gathered in the online media review showed online support for increased representation of Muslims, and ads that did not draw specific attention to the race or ethnicity of the person depicted were particularly well received. For example, in an ad for Walkers Crisps, Dev, a character that some commentators thought was a Muslim, could not bring himself to share his crisps with the Spice Girls despite being their greatest fan. The ad was praised as the character’s race or ethnicity did not play a specific role in the ad.

“Dear @walkers\_crisps, in an increasingly xenophobic, #Islamophobic climate, your advert normalising #Muslims is so empowering, & such a breath of fresh air. Thank you”.

Other portrayals were less well received. For example, repeated depictions of Muslim women wearing the hijab were criticised for reducing their meaning to an ‘aesthetic’ of what a Muslim woman should look like.

“All Muslim women don’t wear hijab. Yet dozens of Western ads have a hijab model”.

### Cumulative Effect

The review of ASA complaints found examples where complainants objected to the repeated presentation of a particular race or ethnicity in a particular way. They raised concerns about the potential effect of ads which could have a real life impact on people, such as associating stereotypical behaviours with a particular racial or ethnic group, and thus reinforcing certain racial and ethnic stereotypes. For example, the ASA received complaints that a specific ad in a wider campaign aimed at tackling knife crime, which featured a young Black man, reinforced negative racial stereotypes that ethnic minorities were criminals; the complaints were not investigated further after consideration by the ASA Council.

### Representation

Representation was another important issue identified in the ASA review, with a significant number of cases raising concerns that Black people and those from minority ethnic groups were either under- or over-represented in ads. A key theme in both of these categories were what the complainants viewed to be the frequent depiction of mixed race families or couples in ads, such as a couple always comprising a Black man and a White woman, as opposed to depicting a Black couple, for example. Several of the complainants raising this concern, who identified their race or ethnicity in their complaints, considered these depictions to be unrepresentative of and detrimental towards other racial and ethnic groups, for example towards Asian people.