The depiction of older people in ads

Summary Report

June 2025

Legal, decent, honest and truthful

ASA

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Background

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing and the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the UK Advertising Codes[1]) written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, and takes action when advertising is misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

The Advertising Codes contain rules that require advertisers to prepare ads with a sense of responsibility and that prohibit ads from causing serious or widespread offence. As per those rules, particular care must be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of: age; disability; gender; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation.

As part of its 2024-2028 strategy[2], the ASA committed to prioritising protecting vulnerable people. In its strategy, the ASA states, "*…we will also identify, and develop our understanding of other vulnerable groups, and people who are situationally vulnerable, who we will need to prioritise protecting, including by taking into account variations between the nations and regions. We will use various intelligence-gathering methods, including desk research, increased investment in public research and AI-assisted monitoring, to find out what ad-related issues are the most important for us to tackle and which vulnerable people need protecting…*"

The ASA is aware that the UK's population is ageing[3]. Over the last 40 years, the number of people aged 50 and over has increased by over 6.8 million (a 47% increase), and the number aged 65 and over has increased by over 3.5 million (a 52% increase)[4].

With that context in mind, age-related charities such as Centre for Ageing Better and Age UK have raised concerns about how older people are (or are not) portrayed in the media, including in advertising.

The issue has also been explored by the Women & Equalities Committee (WEC). An inquiry considering the rights of older people was launched in 2023. In 2024, CAP provided oral evidence to the WEC as part of this inquiry[5]. The subsequent report was published in 2025[6].

In response, the ASA announced the launch of a project looking into the depiction of older people in advertising in December 2024[7]. As a key first step, the ASA proactively engaged with three national age-related charities to seek their views on how older people are depicted in advertising. In addition, we reviewed a wide range of reports exploring related issues, many of which have been published by the charities.

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[1] Advertising codes - ASA | CAP
[2] AI-Assisted, Collective Ad Regulation - our new strategy - ASA | CAP
[3] The UK's changing population
[4] Our Ageing Population | The State of Ageing 2023-24 | Centre for Ageing Better
[5] committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/14629/html/
[6] The rights of older people
[7] Looking into the depiction of older people in advertising - ASA | CAP

The ASA would like to thank Centre for Ageing Better, Age UK and Independent Age for their contributions to the project so far.

Project scope

Discussions with the charities and the intelligence gathered through our initial desk research helped to refine and shape our project scope. The ASA also conducted a review of the complaints received since October 2021 (covering a three-year period to the start of the project) that related to how an older person had been portrayed in a particular ad. This exercise was done not only to better inform the ASA as to the types of themes and depictions which generate complaints with regards to this issue, but also to identify potential stimulus material to use in the research.

It is hoped that the wide range of ad stimulus used in the research will give both advertisers and the ASA a greater appreciation of the types of portrayals, or themes, which may generate a certain strength of feeling, or particular response, amongst consumers.

The common themes we saw raised in complaints are about ads which are perceived to depict older people as:

- "out of touch", or incapable of using or understanding technology
- lacking knowledge, easily confused, or unintelligent
- being easily dismissed, particularly by the younger generation
- the subject of humour, mockery or being ridiculed for the sake of entertainment
- a stereotypical "caricature" of an older person i.e. wearing "Grandma" clothing, with grey hair, and/or with an ailment of some description, and
- grumpy, alone or intolerant of youth.

The ASA also receives complaints about the frequency with which certain types of ads are seen to be targeting older audiences. Such complaints are predominantly received in respect of ads for: charities, funeral services, cremation services, life insurance products, will writing services and equity release.

The primary focus of the project has been to understand to what extent, and how, certain depictions of older people in ads can give rise to offence or harm.

Based on previous complaints and our initial intelligence gathering, we understood that issues relating to the extent to which older people feel targeted by certain types of ads (i.e. the reported 'bombardment' of older audiences with, for example, cremation ads) and the omission of older people from ads more generally, were likely to be areas of concern raised in the research. Our findings in respect of these two issues are included in the final report for the benefit of stakeholders across the ad industry to better understand the public's views on them.

Topline research findings

The detailed findings of the research are set out in our report, The Depiction of Older People in Ads.

The research study comprised a qualitative and quantitative phase, with fieldwork taking place between November 2024-January 2025. The qualitative research consisted of online focus groups and in-depth face-to-face interviews involving 60 participants from across the age spectrum. The quantitative phase was conducted as an online survey, delivering a nationally representative sample of 4,306 UK respondents aged 16 or over. The structure of the study ensured we were able to examine attitudes across the population as well as conduct robust analysis across different demographic groups.

We found that older people[8] are relatively positive about their age and feel growing 'old' today looks very different to previous generations. Older people are living and staying active for longer, and as a result are contributing to society and their local communities for longer. And there is a sense that current portrayals of older people in ads, such as those showing them as frail, inactive and isolated, do not reflect the more positive realities of 'modern day' ageing.

While there was acknowledgement that advertising *can* play a role in impacting perceptions of older people, it was not seen as being as influential as other drivers, such as portrayals in the news or on television. Advertising does not tend to be taken as seriously as other influences, given its predominantly commercial purpose, and is usually 'taken with a pinch of salt', sometimes reflecting and reinforcing attitudes, but not determining them. However, it was felt that repeated exposure to certain types of depictions could perpetuate perceptions over time.

Forty-five percent of those aged 55 or over agreed that older people tend to be negatively stereotyped in ads, compared with 28% of 16-54-year-olds. Older respondents (38% of those aged 55 or over) were also significantly more likely than 16-54-year-olds (24%) to disagree that older people are portrayed accurately in ads.

It was felt that ads tended to present older people in extremes – for example, in severe financial hardship or as extremely wealthy. While participants acknowledged that such depictions could be representative of *some* older people, they were not considered accurate reflections of the lives of *most* older people.

To explore attitudes to depictions of older people we tested over 30 different ads in the qualitative phase. That enabled respondents to take a view on the elements of ads that felt positive, elements that were seen as irritating or whether they had potential to cause offence or harm. In the survey, we explored attitudes by asking respondents to categorise 15 different themes.

- Ads were most likely to cause **offence** when they:
    - used humour at the expense of older people, especially if the storyline was addressing subjects such as relationships or intimacy.

[8] For the purposes of the study, 'older people' were defined as those aged 55 or over. A detailed explanation of the reasons behind this can be found in section 3.1 of the research report.

    - felt dismissive of older people, particularly when coming from a younger person or where an older person was depicted as being less capable because of their age.

- The study found the ads most likely to cause **harm** were those that:
    - showed older people as being isolated or lonely, as such portrayals could tap into underlying fears about isolation in later life.
    - were felt to suggest older people had no purpose in life.
    - suggested ageing was something to be fought – this was raised as a particular issue by women who felt beauty ads reinforced unrealistic standards, potentially putting pressure on women across ages, not just older women, to look a certain way and could lead to low self-esteem.

- The most **positive** depictions were in ads that: tended to focus on the person and not their age; showed the positives and freedoms that were felt to come with ageing; and actively subverted stereotypes without going ‘too far’.
    - Participants felt authenticity and inclusivity were the two most important features to consider when depicting older people in ads – focusing on the individual rather than their age; showing intergenerational depictions; and portraying a spectrum of experiences rather than extremes were all felt to be important.

- Targeting and Omission
    - The targeting of ads for ‘end-of-life’ products (e.g. funeral services) and the omission of older people in ads were spontaneously raised as issues by older focus group participants. It was felt that these issues could compound a sense of narrow depictions of older people in ads, implying a view of them ‘sitting around planning the end of their lives’, which did not align with their lived reality.

    - While commercial reasons behind targeting were acknowledged, there was concern that the volume and tone of some end-of-life ads could be harmful to those who lived alone or with long-term health conditions, serving as a constant reminder of what they may be trying to avoid thinking about.

    - Tone played an important role in determining whether a depiction in an ad was considered offensive, and some felt the use of humour could help make ‘light’ of the ageing process, even in relation to ads for end-of-life products.

    - Forty percent of those aged 16–54 feel people in older age groups are underrepresented or not represented at all. This rises to 52% of those aged 55+. In addition, the survey found that certain groups, such as women aged 55+ (62%) and members of ethnic minority groups aged 55 or over (64%) are much more likely to want to see people of their own age in adverts than the general population (49%).

    - The omission of older people from ads for certain sectors such as technology products or even ‘everyday’ products was referenced. As well as businesses missing out on an audience with substantial spending power, omission was felt to reinforce stereotypes of older people as not interested or capable of using certain products.

Next steps for the ASA and CAP

The project findings have provided important information on, and a deeper understanding of, some of the key considerations about how older people are depicted in advertising.

By sharing the findings of the research, the ASA can provide clarity on the types of creative treatments that pose a risk of causing harm and/or offence. It can also reflect the nation's view on the representation of older people in advertising generally, and the perceived targeting of the older generation with ads for certain product types.

However, the ASA's work on this issue will not stop with the publication of these findings. Some of the areas identified for further exploration by the ASA include:

- **CAP Review**: following a request by the ASA, CAP and BCAP have agreed to review the research findings, with a view to considering the need for any further action. By way of example, the CAP Executive will consider the evidence and explore whether further guidance is necessary to help advertisers identify the types of creative treatment that have the potential to be problematic under the Advertising Codes.

- **Complaints and case handling**: The ASA will take the research findings into account when assessing complaints about the depiction of older people in ads. The ASA will, at the end of Q2 2026, conduct a review of its decisions in complaints relating to the portrayal of older people since publication of the research, and present its findings to the ASA Council, CAP and BCAP to help ensure it is drawing the line in the right place.

- **Promoting the project Outcomes**: We intend to hold an event to present the project findings with industry stakeholders.

- **AdviceOnline entry review**: CAP's Copy Advice team will update any relevant AdviceOnline entries to reflect the findings of the research.

Contact us

Advertising Standards Authority
Castle House
37-45 Paul Street
London EC2A 4LS

www.asa.org.uk

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