Tackling Harmful Racial and Ethnic Stereotyping in Advertising

Summary Report

Background

The killing of George Floyd and the subsequent global reaction prompted many organisations to confront the problem of racism and address inequalities within their own policies, practices and activities.

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 CAP Code specifies that special care must be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, though the rules do not specifically address racial or ethnic stereotypes.[1]

The ASA has a strong track record of investigating and banning ads that break these rules. Ads are not necessarily a problem if, in the ASA's opinion, they do not offend against prevailing standards in society. However 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.

As a first step to help determine what more the ASA could do, from its perspective as the UK advertising regulator, to address the factors that cause people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to experience, disproportionately, adverse outcomes in different aspects of life, we undertook an in-depth review of our decisions in cases that related to race and ethnicity, going back over a seven year period.

The review identified a number of important issues that consumers consistently raised about 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 learnings from the review informed our project, initiated in September 2020, which operated across three primary strands:

1. **Complaints Review and Online Media Insights:** We continued to monitor trends in complaints submitted by members of the public, and also sought additional intelligence from the Brandwatch Strategy & Insights team, to review which ads people had been discussing online between 2016-2020, either positively or negatively, and identify the themes emerging within those discussions.

   Read the full [ASA Complaints Review and Online Media Insights](#) report

2. **Literature Review:** We undertook desk research and analysis of existing literature, and sought views from a range of stakeholders, in order to identify the key themes and debates in relation to racial and ethnic stereotypes in ads and to establish whether, and if so to what extent, racial and ethnic stereotypes, when featured in ads, may contribute to real world harms.

   Read the full [evidence from stakeholders and literature analysis](#) report

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[1] https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_section/04.html

3. **Public Opinion Research:** We commissioned research agency COG Research to undertake research to understand to what extent, and how, stereotypes associated with race and ethnicity in ads can give rise to widespread or serious offence and/or harm, primarily from the perspective of members of racial and ethnic minorities.

   COG Research took a two-stage approach, conducting both qualitative and quantitative research between March and June 2021.

   Read the full [COG Research report](#).

A Word About Language

Readers will note that in the course of our work we have used the term 'BAME', which stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic.

Although a common term used in the UK, it has been criticised for grouping together numerous ethnicities, each with different experiences and outcomes, arguably stripping them of their individual identities. By excluding White ethnicities, it has been suggested that the term suggests that Whiteness is the default and minority ethnicities therefore exist as an 'other.'

The term BAME has also been criticised because it isn't always seen to include White ethnic minorities such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, and their exclusion contributes to their marginalisation.

While the language used by companies and public bodies should be understandable and should not cause offence, given the complexity of how race and ethnicity is defined and categorised, it is unlikely that any acronym will ever be truly suitable. It is also vital that concerns around terminology do not prevent organisations from being able to share and evaluate research findings, such as those that compare experiences and attitudes across a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, particularly when those findings attempt to identify and tackle inequalities.

It is on this basis that the acronym 'BAME' has been used in the course of the project when necessary to facilitate discussion about the research findings.

The ASA recognises that it is imperative that we discuss race and ethnicity in a way that is open, inclusive and sensitive to how individuals identify themselves, and therefore invites continued feedback on the terminology we use.

Findings

The findings discussed here take into account the information gathered from all of the project strands, including the views of academics and interest groups, advertising industry representatives and the general public.

While some stereotypes are not inherently harmful, certain types of racial and ethnic stereotypes do have the potential to cause harm by creating a set of limiting beliefs about a person that might negatively restrict how they see themselves and how others see them.

The consumer research found that over half of BAME respondents felt that, when they were represented in ads, they are not portrayed accurately, and of those, just over a half felt people from their ethnic group are negatively stereotyped.

The project identified five categories of racial and ethnic stereotypes:

Roles and characteristics – this included stereotypical portrayals in relation to appearance, behaviour and employment status, as well as mannerisms, accent, tastes and other preferences.

These stereotypical portrayals might be overt, such as linking a person from the BAME community to criminal activity - or subtle, such as infrequently showing BAME people in positions of power or authority. Conversely, ads may take a subjectively favourable approach, which might appear, at first, to be flattering or innocuous. However, these portrayals may also contribute to the generalisation of vastly diverse groups, and reinforce or promote outdated views about a particular race or ethnic group.

Culture – showing BAME people either homogenised into British culture, with a lack of diversity in areas such as language and accents, or alternatively, featuring people from cultures other than British in a way that mocked, denigrated or was otherwise insensitive to that culture.

Humour at the expense of other ethnic groups – 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. However, stakeholders generally interpreted situations negatively when an advertiser attempted to derive humour from making fun of a group or their appearance, accent, culture or tastes.

A common example in this category relates to the use of accents; the use of different accents can be seen as welcoming and can help those from the group depicted feel a sense of connection to the product and brand, or, it can be seen as mocking or 'othering', by reinforcing a stereotype which asserts that people from different racial or ethnic minorities who speak with an accent are different from White or Western people.

Objectification and sexualisation – while examples of diversity of body shapes and sizes, portrayed in a positive manner, were generally welcomed, depictions that sexualised and/or objectified ethnic groups were considered harmful. Common areas of concern related to ads that sexualised Black men and women, and those which fetishized and exoticised Asian women.

Depiction of religion – the project found there was an interest in seeing increased representation of different religious groups in ads, particularly in those portrayals that did not draw specific attention to a person's racial or ethnic background, but which were natural and non-stereotypical. Many stakeholders referenced the use of the hijab to depict Muslim or Asian women, which was seen as an easy stereotype that lacked authenticity.

<u>**Harms**</u>

The project identified three board potential harms that could arise from adverse portrayals of race and ethnicity:

•   **Reinforcement of existing stereotypes**

The most common theme emerging from the consumer research, this was often described as 'always showing us the same way'. The repeated use of certain stereotypical portrayals was seen to make it easier for others to see people from minority groups as different from the mainstream, and by emphasising the idea that entire groups share the same characteristics, facilitate limited beliefs about what is expected from people from across these groups.

•   **Creating new stereotypes**

As portrayals have changed over time, new stereotypes have started to emerge that continue to paint a one-dimensional picture of people from BAME groups, which was seen as inauthentic and a tokenistic way of meeting diversity expectations.

- **Perpetuating or reinforcing racist attitudes and behaviours**

Ads that featured any depictions of racist attitudes or behaviours, even in those instances where it was appreciated the advertiser intended to challenge negative stereotypes, were met with concern; these depictions were felt to pose a risk of evoking past trauma and reinforcing prejudice.

Industry Initiatives

The advertising industry has already taken steps towards addressing the issue of racial and ethnic stereotypes, conducting its own research and introducing various initiatives independent of regulation. The changes that have been made have been both internal, in terms of organisational structure, and external, in terms of the ads being produced.

Some notable recent examples include:

- The All In Census – the UK advertising's first industry-wide survey took place in March 2021. More than 16,000 advertising and marketing professionals responded to the Census, and the results showed that just 1% of high-ranking senior executive roles are held by Black people. Improving representation among Black people was identified as a critical area requiring action by the industry, and to encourage this, the Inclusion Working Group has introduced a process for any company wishing to declare publicly that it is an 'All In Company'.[2]
- Recruitment resources designed to help organisations tackle racial and ethnic imbalances in their recruitment processes, for example the IPA's Diversity Hub provides advice and practical recommendations, and acts as a facilitator, putting agencies in touch with networks and allies who specialise in different strands of diversity, including ethnicity.[3]
- Collaborations between advertisers and other bodies such as charities and specialist groups to drive racial equality, for example the haircare brand Pantene has recently partnered with Black Minds Matter and Project Embrace to help address afro hair discrimination in the UK.[4]

Next Steps for the ASA and CAP

The project illustrated that the advertising industry is seen as important and influential, and that a great deal of value is placed on those ads that are inclusive, both in representation and portrayal. Nevertheless, the ASA understands how the 'fear of getting it wrong' and the risks of causing inadvertent harm or offence can act as a disincentive to featuring people from minority and diverse backgrounds in ads.

Our project has provided a wealth of information and deeper understanding of some of the key issues around how people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are portrayed in ads, and by sharing the findings of this report, the ASA can help provide clarity on the types of creative treatments that pose a risk of causing harm and/or offence.

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[2] https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/all-in-census-results-adland-vows-action-black-disabled-working-class-talent/1718577
[3] https://ipa.co.uk/diversity
[4] https://www.pantene.co.uk/en-gb/end-hair-discrimination

While the analysis did not give reason to believe that the ASA's administration of the Advertising Rules was generally out of keeping with the opinions of consumers and stakeholders, some of the areas that have been identified for further action by the ASA and CAP include:

- **Interpreting Trends in the Research** – One finding from the qualitative phase of the consumer research was that all members of each of the groups interviewed did not necessarily share the same views about whether particular depictions or portrayals in the ads we showed them were offensive or harmful. For example, some people viewed ads that showed a range of body types as positive and inclusive; others thought that a focus on a particular body type could be stereotyping or imply unnecessarily sexualisation. The insights from the research suggest this area merits further thought.

- **Complaint and Case Handling Decisions** – The ASA will reflect on the learnings from the project and consider whether certain portrayals that might have been acceptable in the recent past continue to have a place in advertising in the 21st century. We will also continue to analyse trends in the complaints we receive from members of the public in order to add to our ongoing understanding of the issues that are important to the public.

  We will review our case handling procedures and identify how we can continue to develop nuanced approaches to those themes brought out in the course of the project, such as the use of humour as a mitigating factor in harm and offence cases.

  The ASA will, at the end of 2022, conduct a review of its decisions in cases relating to racial and ethnic stereotypes and present its findings to the ASA Council, CAP and BCAP to help ensure we are drawing the line in the right place and proactively identifying newly emerging areas of concern.

- **Advertising Guidance** – The evidence presented in this report provides a knowledge base for identifying stereotypical portrayals that could pose a risk of harm to consumers. The ASA has asked CAP and BCAP to consider this evidence and explore whether additional guidance is necessary to encourage creative treatments that challenge or reject potentially harmful stereotypes, and diminish issues arising from cumulative effects.

  New guidance on racial and ethnic stereotypes could help identify the types of creative treatments that have the potential to be problematic. For example, ads that attempt to derive humour from highlighting or mocking another person's accent.

- **Promoting the Project Outcomes** – We intend to hold an event to present the project findings with industry stakeholders, and consider ways of developing our thoughts and insights about creative choices in light of the research findings.

- **Industry Engagement** – In the event that new CAP guidance on racial and ethnic stereotypes is introduced, CAP will deliver training and advice to assist advertisers in ensuring that their ads are compliant. By sharing findings from its project, the ASA hopes to provide greater clarity on scenarios which may lead to inadvertent harm or serious offence being caused.