



## Body Image in Advertising Review Final statement

### 1. Introduction

In 2021, CAP and BCAP launched an [open call for evidence](#) to assist in their regulation of advertising which gives rise to potential harms related to body image. The primary objective of the call for evidence was to understand whether there are body image related harms in advertising that are not already addressed by the existing rules in the [UK Advertising Codes](#) and guidance, or the ASA's application of both.

CAP and BCAP published an interim statement in 2022, which sets out their evaluation of the responses received in the call for evidence and the three policy areas identified for further enquiry:

1. Digitally altered images in advertising and labelling
2. Depiction of muscularity in advertising
3. Depiction of women from minority ethnic backgrounds and the potential for creating new and unattainable body image ideals

CAP and BCAP have completed their evaluation of the evidence base, taking into account their [evidence-based policy making principles](#); this final statement of their Body Image in Advertising Review sets out their evaluation and next steps.

In summary, CAP and BCAP do not consider there is a case, at present, to justify new regulatory interventions in relation to the above three areas, on the basis that the evidence base examining the specific impact caused by advertising in contributing to potential harms related to those areas appears to still be developing. The findings from this Body Image in Advertising Review suggests that there are other environmental factors, such as cultural and social influences, driving these concerns, which fall beyond the scope of advertising regulation.

Notwithstanding, the ASA can readily and will continue to take action under a number of existing protections offered in the Codes and published guidance to ensure potential body image related harms arising from advertising are mitigated.

CAP and BCAP noted some stakeholders' call, during the Review, for greater diversity in body types or proportions depicted in ads as a means to improve the visual diet of body types seen by consumers. The UK Advertising Codes cannot impose requirements or quotas to include a range of body types in the content of ads, nor do they prevent ads from featuring glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people or lifestyles (unless the content and context of the ad



is irresponsible or is likely to mislead), as this has the potential to infringe upon freedom of commercial expression.

To that end, CAP and BCAP commit to engage with members of the advertising industry by sharing their findings and insights from this Review, with the view to inform any wider considerations and initiatives of industry intended to address such potential body image related harms.

## **2. Digitally altered images in advertising**

In their consideration of the use of digitally altered images in advertising, CAP and BCAP wished to gain an up-to-date understanding of: the nature of the techniques used to digitally alter images in ads, specifically how body parts or proportions can be modified with such tools; any potential for body image related harms arising from the use of such images in advertising; and, as relevant, the advertising regulator's role in mitigating such harms.

In June 2023, CAP and BCAP hosted a roundtable discussion which brought together 15 stakeholders representing a range of expertise and backgrounds: advertising industry, media platforms, academics, NGOs, and policy makers. Our [update statement](#), published in November 2023, reported on the findings of the stakeholder roundtable and CAP and BCAP's consideration of the evidence base related to the effectiveness of the requirement to label images that have been digitally altered.

CAP and BCAP noted that children and young people were highlighted by the stakeholder roundtable attendees as a demographic group particularly susceptible to body image harms more generally. To ensure, as far as possible, the range of perspectives from this group were taken into account as part of the enquiry work, CAP and BCAP convened a separate roundtable for children and young people to inform their Review.

The youth roundtable, facilitated by Girlguiding and Childnet, took place in October 2023. During the discussions, six young participants aged between 14-17 were invited to share their own experiences and observations, and those of their peers, on the use of digitally altered images in advertising, as well as on broader questions about the potential body image related harms arising from advertising, particularly on social media. The group consisted of five girls and one boy; five of whom were aged between 16 and 17 years, with one young person aged 14 years; two were of minority ethnic backgrounds and there was a mix in geographical representation.

CAP and BCAP would like to thank the young participants for their insightful contributions, Girlguiding, and Childnet for their invaluable support in facilitating the youth roundtable.

### Youth roundtable

As outlined in CAP and BCAP's update statement in November 2023, the focus of the discussions was predominantly on social media. Some of the comments suggested that different platforms seem to result in different kinds of impact because of variations in the way in which the ads are served to users from platform to platform, but also the nature of, and trends in, the surrounding content on particular platforms. The young people were highly aware of, and adept at describing, the body image-related impact on them in the immediate term when seeing ads that show particular body ideals or ads for products to change appearances. Participants described the longer-term impact – the pressure to maintain a certain appearance – that comes with repeated exposure to these ads: even when the young people were aware of such an impact, they still felt that they succumbed to that feeling of pressure.

Relatability of people featured in advertising was felt to be a notable factor – for example, people of similar ages to the young people, or influencers with whom followers formed a parasocial relationship – amplifying the impact of that advertising.

CAP and BCAP note that, in common with much discourse around negative body image, it was difficult to discern whether editorial content or advertising was at issue in the discussion, raising questions for regulators about the basis for intervention. While some considered editorial content might be a greater influence, the young people said exposure to ads that could cause body image concerns was harder to control than exposure to editorial content; for example, it is easier to 'unfollow' or scroll past editorial content they did not wish to see, whereas it was more difficult to control which ads were served to them. Influencer content was viewed as being more impactful because of the relatability aspect discussed above.

Like stakeholders in the first roundtable in June, participants in the youth roundtable too drew out the interwoven nature of advertising, peer pressure and editorial content: the increased incorporation of social media into young people's relationships with peers and social behaviours (for example, due to the pressure to be more active online) appeared to have amplifying effects.

On digitally altered images, young people observed that such edits were commonly used to enhance certain features, both in editorial content and advertising. They felt that age and level of maturity, as factors, affect the ability of young people to easily recognise whether an image had been digitally altered, as well as the potential impact of seeing such images on their own body image. This was in addition to the ease and sophisticated nature of digital alteration tools available at present. Some participants commented that seeing digitally altered images of people of similar ages created pressure to conform to the appearance ideals presented in those images.

Comments from participants provided a sense of how prevalent digital alteration is as a practice more generally beyond advertising, for example, the use of photoshop in school photos or altering one's own image in social media profiles.

Some participants spoke about instances in which their images had been digitally altered without their consent and how they felt that this fact, in itself, could amplify and perpetuate body dissatisfaction. This echoed a point made by one of the stakeholders in the June roundtable.

#### CAP and BCAP's evaluation

CAP and BCAP noted that the insights offered by the young participants echoed some of the points raised by stakeholders at the June 2023 roundtable. The discussions highlighted the complex nature of the factors influencing young people's body image, particularly where social media use comes into play. The youth roundtable discussions suggest that although young people are keenly aware of the impact of being exposed to depictions of body image ideals on social media, whether from editorial content or advertising, other pressures, such as peer behaviour, related to how social media is used by young people, can exacerbate the effects. CAP and BCAP are aware of the strength of concerns and developing evidence base<sup>1</sup> related to the potential impact on young people's body image arising from the online and social media environments more generally. Although CAP and BCAP are concerned to ensure children and young people are protected from body image related harms from advertising, there appears to be little evidence at present that demonstrates the specific impact of advertising, differentiated from editorial content, in those media that would otherwise help inform CAP and BCAP's considerations.

In relation to digitally altered images in advertising, CAP and BCAP's consideration remains, in that there is not a persuasive case to introduce a labelling requirement for digitally altered images in advertising. Whilst the youth roundtable discussions indicated that exposure to digitally altered images, particularly on social media, was a significant concern amongst young people in relation to body image, it was also suggested that such practice is prevalent and extends beyond advertising. CAP and BCAP also note the lack of clear evidence demonstrating the specific impact of the use of digital alteration in advertising, as distinct from editorial content, on body image, specifically in relation to social media (the media environment in which the present concerns are focussed on). Additionally, CAP and BCAP are continuing to be mindful of the existing evidence on the ineffectiveness of labelling (as evaluated in the [Digital Alteration Update Statement](#)) and the strong caution by some stakeholders in the June 2023 roundtable about the need for careful consideration of any possible regulatory intervention in this area to avoid unintended consequences and disproportionate effects. These could include, for example: the requirement to label images in which body parts had been digitally altered could inadvertently contribute to harmful impact on viewers of those images; a disproportionate ban on image editing techniques that are unlikely to perpetuate negative body image perceptions; restrictive interventions, such as labelling or a ban on digital alteration, could place pressure on influencers to undergo cosmetic interventions and negatively impact on their mental wellbeing, which may then in turn be felt by their followers.

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<sup>1</sup> [Harriger et al \(2023\)](#)

CAP and BCAP are mindful that particular presentations or depictions of bodies in ads, whether or not those have been digitally altered, could equally result in detrimental effects on viewers' body image perceptions. As such, the consideration of the adequacy of regulatory intervention in this area should focus on the overall impression, and therefore impact on viewers, such depictions in ads make. Whilst CAP and BCAP do not, at present, consider there is a case to introduce a new intervention specifically in respect of the use of digitally altered images in advertising, they consider that the existing general rules on misleading advertising and social responsibility in the Codes can be readily applied by the ASA to take action against ads featuring digitally altered images that are misleading or irresponsible. In recent years, the ASA has ruled against a number of influencer ads on Instagram in which post-production techniques, specifically beauty filters, have been used to exaggerate the performance of cosmetic products ([We Are Luxe Ltd](#), [Skinny Tan Ltd](#), [BPerfect Ltd](#), [Charlotte Dawson](#)).

In 2019, the ASA investigated a number of social media ads, including influencer marketing, which promoted weight control products. Amongst other issues, the ASA considered that the ads promoted the body images and lifestyles of the featured influencers as desirable and aspirational and created the impression that it was necessary or advisable for those who were already slim to use the appetite suppressants advertised to lose weight. The ASA also considered that the influencers' waists in the ads had been digitally altered to look artificially thin and were not representative of their real body shapes, which was particularly irresponsible in the context of the ads. The ASA concluded that the ads were irresponsible and banned the ads ([Protein Revolution Ltd](#), [BoomBod Ltd](#)).

### **3. Depictions of muscularity**

In CAP and BCAP's initial call for evidence in 2021, one of the academic respondents, while welcoming the fact that the gender stereotyping guidance addresses pressures to achieve 'idealised gender stereotypical body shape and physical features', urged that greater attention should be given to muscularity ideals for young men. They cited studies that indicated exposure to images showing muscular bodies affect viewers' perception of ideal male bodies, whether or not the depictions were presented positively; such depictions create pressure not only directly on male viewers, but also indirectly through broader perpetuation of such male body ideals. In contrast, viewers' preference in muscularity becomes less extreme after exposure to images of male bodies with low muscularity.

Another academic respondent to the call for evidence provided unpublished research data that examined the impact of short-term exposure to fashion advertising campaigns featuring either models with bodies conforming to the muscular ideal, or models with bodies not conforming to the muscular ideal; the data suggested that participants reported improved body positivity and self-esteem after viewing images of the latter.

In 2017, the ASA published its [report](#) on gender stereotyping in advertising, which found that society had begun to recognise how gender stereotypes can reinforce certain expectations and behaviour that can have a negative effect on men and boys as well as women and girls. It also found that the growing body of evidence demonstrated how ingrained expectations placed on men and boys can lead to harm, including a stereotype that implies men should be physically strong, among other stereotypes.

Although the appeal and impact of fitness related themes such as ‘Fitspiration’ are not limited to men, pressure to achieve muscularity is one highlighted to be of particular concern to men and boys in relation to their body image; these concerns are increasingly brought to the fore in wider policy discourse<sup>2</sup> as well as explored in academic research, including the association with ideals of masculinity. Preliminary desk research suggested that the depiction of muscular physiques in ads tended to be more prevalent in ads for products and services targeted at male audience. These factors guided CAP and BCAP’s decision to look further into the depictions of muscularity in men and boys in advertising for this policy focus.

To assist with their enquiry in this area, CAP and BCAP undertook a review of the evidence base and an analysis of the content of a sample of ads.

#### Evidence review

CAP and BCAP conducted an in-depth evidence review and engaged with academics from different disciplines with an interest in body image to consult their expertise and gain an understanding of the current state of play in relation to the evidence base.

The academics considered that whether advertising plays a role in the desire to conform to muscularity ideals amongst men and boys is not a straightforward determination; the evidence base which specifically examines the impact of advertising is still developing. They noted that muscularity norms are closely linked to masculinity ideals in a historical cultural context, with influences wider than advertising. The motivations behind the drive to achieve muscular physiques, including through means such as the use of anabolic steroids, are not limited to body image concerns, but also as a way for men to assert their masculinity and strength.

One academic noted that the previous preference for hyper-muscularity conventionally associated with body builders has become less popular and more likely to be vilified by current attitudes; instead, the desire to achieve athletic body types similar to those of Premier League football players has become increasingly common.

The findings from our analysis of academic literature broadly aligns with information provided by the academics; please note that CAP and BCAP mainly focused on

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<sup>2</sup> For example, ‘[The impact of body image on mental and physical health](#)’ report published by the Health and Social Care Committee (2022)

more recently published evidence, bearing in mind the rapid development in the social media advertising landscape and changes in consumers' media habits towards online in recent years. There is a body of contextual evidence which includes the examination of the relationship between muscularity and masculinity norms<sup>3</sup>; research on body image concerns amongst British men<sup>4</sup> with different characteristics (such as sexual orientation<sup>5</sup>).

Additionally, there exists research on the effect of exposure to idealised male body portrayals (such as visible muscles and bare chest) in Instagram fashion and fitspiration content<sup>6</sup>; and content analysis of fitness related content of Instagram posted by men and/or depicted men<sup>7</sup>. The former indicated that while exposure to images showing bare-chested and muscular bodies resulted in significantly lower body satisfaction relative to viewing clothed fashion images, viewing both did not alter the amount of appearance-based social comparison among viewers, nor the inspiration to exercise or eat healthily. The latter found that the majority of sampled posts showed high levels of muscularity and leanness. In addition, posts depicting men adhering to this specific body type received significantly more engagement ('likes' and comments) from users.

However, there appears to be little evidence that directly examines the impact of advertising that differentiates from the impact of media influence generally. There also appears to be some research that examined the effect of exposure to images featuring physiques that do not conform to muscular ideals and indicated a positive impact in improving body satisfaction.

### Content analysis

In addition to the evidence review, we also carried out content analysis of a random sample sourced using our Data Science capabilities from ads on Meta and TikTok. The objective was to undertake a review of depictions of men and boys in advertising to identify whether there are particular trends in the way muscularity is portrayed and whether there are, if any, problematic messaging that might create pressure to conform and potentially raise issues under the UK Advertising Codes.

The data capture focused on paid-for advertising by large brands from the fashion, outdoors, fitness and technology sectors which are more likely to be targeted at and portray men; commercial organic content (non-paid for posts on advertisers' own social media profiles) and influencer marketing content were excluded from the data capture. The dataset from which the random sample was obtained was captured over a one-week period between November and December 2023.

Our observations from reviewing the sample were that no obviously irresponsible or harmful content that potentially raised concerns under the CAP Code were identified,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, [DeJesus et al \(2015\)](#), [Franko et al \(2015\)](#), [Monaghan & Malson \(2014\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Alleva et al \(2022\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Alleva et al \(2018\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Tiggemann & Anderberg \(2020\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Gültzow et al \(2020\)](#)

for example, messaging that creates pressure to conform to a particular male body ideal. Where body types of the male-presenting models could be discerned from the images, most tended to be of athletic and slim body types, with a very small number of ads that depicted hyper muscular men, mainly in fitness ads, or average or plus size men.

However, we are mindful that results might vary depending on seasonal campaigns, fashion trends, types of marketing (such as organic content and influencer marketing), types of media in which the ads appear and other factors, therefore the findings were treated as a snapshot.

#### CAP and BCAP's evaluation

CAP and BCAP consider that there is not currently a persuasive case to support proposals for new regulatory interventions – whether a Code rule or guidance – specific to this policy focus. Whilst the evidence base on male body image and the link between muscularity and masculine norms continues to develop, the ASA can already readily apply the general Code rule on social responsibility<sup>8</sup> and the [gender stereotyping rule and guidance](#) in cases which raise issues relating to irresponsible portrayal or to pressure to conform to an idealised gender-stereotypical body shape or physical features where appropriate. During the course of the Body Image in Advertising Review, the ASA ruled<sup>9</sup> an Instagram ad from a fitness trainer which featured 'before' and 'after' pictures of a 15-year-old boy to be irresponsible, as it reinforced that the significant increase in muscle mass in the 'after' photo suggested that the body shape shown was the ideal of males, including teenage boys.

#### **4. Depictions of women from minority ethnic backgrounds and the potential to create new, unattainable body ideal**

This area was identified for further enquiry in CAP and BCAP's [interim statement](#). This followed evidence submitted to the initial call for evidence which included small and unpublished studies that looked at the content of advertising campaigns for Boohoo and PrettyLittleThing and focus groups' perception of the bodies portrayed. The evidence suggested that while more ethnically diverse models were being depicted, a particular focus on slim waist, thicker thighs and fuller bottoms risked inadvertently creating new, unattainable body shape ideals.

We noted that more curvaceous physiques – for example 'slim thick', a seemingly exaggerated form of the hourglass figure with toned features – have gained popularity in the media in recent years, alongside body ideals that conventionally premised on thinness and Eurocentric beauty standards. We are also mindful that wider discourse around the popularity of such physiques such as 'slim thick' are

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<sup>8</sup> CAP Code rule [1.3](#): *Marketing communications must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and to society*; BCAP Code rule [1.2](#): *Advertisements must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to the audience and to society*.

<sup>9</sup> [JA Physique Ltd - ASA | CAP](#)



underpinned by contentions about the appropriation of fuller body types conventionally attributed to women from particular minority ethnic backgrounds.

While body image concerns related to women from minority ethnic backgrounds include other issues such as colourism and hair discrimination, the enquiry of this policy area has focused on whether portrayals of a particular body type described above could create potential body image related harms. This decision was guided by the evidence received in the call for evidence.

To assist with their enquiry of this area, CAP and BCAP undertook a review of the evidence base and an analysis of the content of a random sample of ads.

### Evidence review

CAP and BCAP conducted an in-depth evidence review and engaged with academics from different disciplines with an interest in body image to consult their expertise and gain an understanding of the current state of play in relation to the evidence base.

One academic commented that the existing mass of research on body image related to women have predominantly focused on white women; research that has previously examined body image dissatisfaction among women from minority ethnic backgrounds through a 'White' lens, without an understanding or acknowledgment that women from these groups may possess body image specific to their culture and identity<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, body image research related to the latter group is effectively still developing.

Our own review of academic literature indicates that generally, research that does examine body image issues related to women from minority ethnic backgrounds is focused mostly on groups in other countries, such as the US and Asia, with the evidence base that relates to the UK population still emerging. While such research may have relevance to the UK context to some extent, we are mindful that nuances exist in the identities of minoritised racial and ethnic groups between different countries. It is also worth noting that grey literature, such as the [report](#) from the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry and the Mental Health Foundation [report](#), tended to have cited international academic studies in connection with body image issues and women from minority ethnic backgrounds, with the inclusion of their own surveys conducted on the UK population. Nevertheless, while there is research that supports the shift from thin body ideals to 'slim thick' ideals amongst young women<sup>11</sup>, our review found a dearth of evidence that examines the specific impact of advertising in giving rise to potential harms through perpetuation of this body ideal.

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<sup>10</sup> [Lowry et al \(2021\)](#), [Harriger et al \(2023\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [McComb & Mills \(2021\)](#)

### Content analysis

In addition to the evidence review, we also carried out content analysis of a random sample sourced using our Data Science capabilities from ads on Meta and TikTok. The objective is to undertake a review of depictions of women from minority ethnic backgrounds and identify whether there is a particular trend in certain body shapes attributed to them in advertising images, as well as any messaging that might create pressure to conform and potentially raise issues under the Code.

The data capture focused on paid-for advertising by large brands from the fashion, cosmetics and fitness and technology sectors which are more likely to be targeted at and portray women; commercial organic content (non-paid for posts on advertisers' own social media profiles) and influencer marketing were excluded. The dataset from which the random sample was obtained was captured over a one-week period between November and December 2023.

Our analysis of the sample did not identify any obviously irresponsible or harmful content that potentially raised concerns under the CAP Code, for example messaging that creates pressure to conform to particular female body image ideals. We observed that there was a wider range of body shapes depicted among the female-presenting models in ads across the board, in comparison to the depiction of men in the muscularity sample. Our observations were that the majority of portrayals in which the models' body types could be easily discerned tended to be of very thin, thin/slim and athletic physiques, and in mostly fashion and fitness ads. The depiction of 'slim thick' physique was not found to be prevalent and limited to a small number of ads within the sample (mainly fast fashion brands). There were no obvious patterns in particular body types attributed to specific ethnic minority groups within the sample.

However, we are mindful that results might vary depending on seasonal campaigns, fashion trends, types of marketing (such as commercial organic content and influencer marketing), types of media in which the ads appear and other factors, therefore the findings were treated as a snapshot.

### CAP and BCAP's evaluation

CAP and BCAP do not consider there is currently persuasive evidence to support proposals to introduce new regulatory interventions – whether a Code rule or guidance – specific to this policy focus. The evidence base concerning this area as it relates to the UK population appears to still be emerging and there is, at present, little which examines the specific impact of advertising, differentiated from the impact of media more generally, in giving rise to potential related body image harms.

CAP and BCAP further consider that the existing protections in the Code, such as the social responsibility rule<sup>12</sup> and the [gender stereotype rule and guidance](#), allow

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<sup>12</sup> CAP Code rule [1.3](#): *Marketing communications must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and to society*; BCAP Code rule [1.2](#): *Advertisements must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to the audience and to society*.

the ASA to continue to take action against potentially irresponsible and harmful depictions shown in ads.

## 5. Conclusion

For reasons set out above, CAP and BCAP do not consider there is a case, at present, to justify new regulatory interventions in areas related to the depictions of muscularity, and the depictions of women from minority ethnic backgrounds and the potential for creating new and unattainable body image ideals. Additionally, the findings from the youth roundtable on body image and digitally altered images indicated that the impact of advertising cannot be easily discerned, particularly in view of how advertising is situated within the social media landscape, in which the boundaries between advertising and organic and influencer content are often blurred.

This Body Image in Advertising Review suggests that there are other environmental factors, such as cultural and social influences, driving these concerns, which fall beyond the scope of advertising regulation. CAP and BCAP noted some stakeholders' call for greater diversity in body types or proportions shown in ads as a means to improve the visual diet of body types seen by consumers. The UK Advertising Codes cannot impose requirements or quotas to include a range of body types in the content of ads, nor do they prevent ads from featuring glamorous, attractive, successful, aspirational or healthy people or lifestyles (unless the content and context of the ad is irresponsible or is likely to mislead), as this has the potential to infringe upon freedom of commercial expression.

Where advertising potentially causes body image related harms, the ASA can readily and will continue to take action under a number of existing protections offered in the Codes and guidance<sup>13</sup> to ensure such harms are mitigated.

CAP and BCAP are aware that there are already will and efforts within the advertising industry to tackle body image issues and diversify body depictions. To that end, CAP and BCAP commit to engage with members of the advertising industry by sharing their findings and insights from this Review, with the view to inform any wider considerations and initiatives of industry intended to address such potential body image related harms.

The protection of consumers from potential harms arising from advertising remains at the heart of CAP and BCAP's regulation, including those that relate to body image. They consider that the existing protection in the UK Advertising Codes will continue

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<sup>13</sup> [CAP AdviceOnline on Social responsibility: Body image](#); [CAP Advertising Guidance on depicting gender stereotypes likely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence](#); [CAP AdviceOnline on Cosmetic interventions: Social responsibility](#); [CAP Advertising Guidance on the marketing of surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures \(page 10\)](#); [CAP AdviceOnline on Beauty and Cosmetics: The use of production techniques](#); [CAP Advertising Guidance on the use of pre and post-production techniques in ads for cosmetics](#); [CAP AdviceOnline on Weight control: general](#)



to enable the ASA to take action against body image issues in ads where appropriate. General discourse and policy debate about body image continues to evolve and CAP and BCAP commit to continue monitoring the developing evidence base relating to the three policy areas focussed in their further enquiry work, as well as new issues, such as the use of Artificial Intelligence in advertising and its potential to perpetuate harmful body image ideals, as they emerge.

CAP and BCAP would like to thank all stakeholders involved in the Review for their valuable contributions and insights.