

[GB] Advertising watchdog publishes report on tackling harmful racial and ethnic stereotyping in ads

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*Alexandros K. Antoniou
University of Essex*

On 3 February 2022, the UK's regulator of advertising across all media, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), published its research in harmful racial and ethnic stereotyping in UK advertising. The survey highlighted a number of important issues that participant consumers raised about the depiction of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Ads that are likely to cause serious or widespread offence and/or harm owing to particular portrayals of race and ethnicity have long been regulated under the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising (CAP Code) and the Code of Broadcast Advertising (BCAP). Rule 4.1 of the CAP Code states that 'Marketing communications must not contain anything that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. 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'. Equivalent provisions are found in Rule 4.2 of the BCAP Code. Marketers are urged to consider public sensitivities before using potentially offensive material and compliance is typically assessed with reference to several factors, including the context, medium, audience, type of product and generally accepted standards.

Advertising can play a role in legitimising stereotypes. Certain types of racial and ethnic stereotypes can, in particular, cause harm by creating a set of limiting beliefs about a person that might negatively affect how they perceive themselves, and how others see them. In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd (whose murder by a police officer in the US city of Minneapolis in 2020 sparked a global movement for racial justice and led to pressure for change across the world), the ASA has been reflecting on what further efforts could be made to address factors that contribute to Black, Asian and other minority racial or ethnic groups experiencing disproportionately adverse outcomes in different aspects of their lives.

As a first step, the regulator commissioned public opinion research in order to establish whether stereotypes associated with race and ethnicity can, when featured in ads, give rise to widespread or serious offence and/or contribute to real-world harm, such as unequal outcomes for different racial and ethnic groups.

The research, which was conducted between March and June 2021, comprised two stages: a qualitative study that covered different interest groups, and a quantitative study that was designed to identify the extent to which attitudes and beliefs were held across individual communities and the UK as a whole. The research indicated that: ‘over half of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic respondents felt that, when they were represented in ads, they are not accurately portrayed, and of those, just over a half felt people from their ethnic group are negatively stereotyped’.

Five categories of racial and ethnic stereotypes were identified by the research (some of which are interrelated):

1. Roles and characteristics: overt or subtle stereotypical portrayals pertaining to appearance, behaviour, employment status, mannerisms, accent and preferences. Such portrayals may contribute to the homogenisation of vastly diverse groups and can be seen to reinforce or promote outdated views of a particular race or ethnic group.
2. Culture: the exaggeration and mocking of accents, ‘lazy’ references to culture, cultural appropriation, and the use of imagery suggestive of colonialism.
3. Religious beliefs and practices: repeated depictions of Muslim or Asian women wearing the hijab were seen by participants as ‘an easy stereotype that lacked authenticity’. There was, however, support for portrayals that did not draw specific attention to a person’s racial or ethnic background.
4. Objectification and sexualisation: concerns were expressed about depictions of sexualised and/or objectified Black men and women as well as depictions that ‘fetishised and exoticised’ Asian women. However, positive portrayals of the diversity of body shapes and sizes were generally welcomed.
5. Use of humour at the expense of other ethnic groups: making fun of a group or their appearance, culture or tastes, e.g., the use of different accents can be seen as mocking or ‘othering’ by reinforcing the idea that people from racial or ethnic minorities who speak with an accent are different from White or Western people.

Moreover, the research highlighted three potential types of harm that could develop from adverse portrayals of race and ethnicity:

1. reinforcement of *existing* stereotypes through the repeated use of certain portrayals (often described as ‘always showing us the same way’, e.g., the casting of Asian men as shop keepers, waiters and taxi drivers or subtle reinforcements of a servile role). The perceived harm in relation to this was seen in making it easier for others to see people from racial or ethnic minorities as different to the mainstream (‘othering’);

2. the emergence of *new* tropes which continue creating a one-dimensional picture of Black, Asian and other minority racial or ethnic groups; and
3. perpetuating or implicitly reinforcing racist attitudes by depicting racist behaviour: such depictions were felt to pose a risk of evoking past trauma and reinforcing prejudice (even where it was understood that the advertiser's intention was to challenge negative stereotypes within the messaging of the ad).

The research did not give the ASA reason to believe that its interpretation and application of the Codes' rules were generally out of step with consumers' and stakeholders' opinions. The findings can, however, bring more clarity and valuable insights on the types of ads that pose a risk of causing harm and/or offence. At the end of 2022, the regulator will conduct a review of its rulings in this area to identify newly emerging areas of concern and ensure that it is 'drawing the line in the right place'.

At this stage, it is not anticipated that a new targeted rule will be introduced into the Advertising Codes to ban the kinds of portrayals identified in the report. Nevertheless, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP), which are responsible for writing and updating the UK Advertising Codes, will consider whether specific guidance on racial and ethnic stereotypes is necessary to encourage creative treatments that challenge or reject problematic stereotypes and diminish issues arising from the repeated presentation of a specific race or ethnicity in a particular way. Finally, the research findings will be presented to industry stakeholders and training will be offered to support advertisers where necessary.

Research into Racial and Ethnic Stereotyping in Advertising (Report for the Advertising Standards Authority, prepared by COG Research)

<https://www.asa.org.uk/static/3cf6ba4a-67a4-4992-aae39888f6687e94/ASA-RES-research-report.pdf>

BCAP Code

https://www.asa.org.uk/type/broadcast/code_section/04.html

CAP Code

https://www.asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_section/04.html#:~:text=Marketing%20communications%20must%20not%20cause,image%20merely%20to%20attract%20attention.

