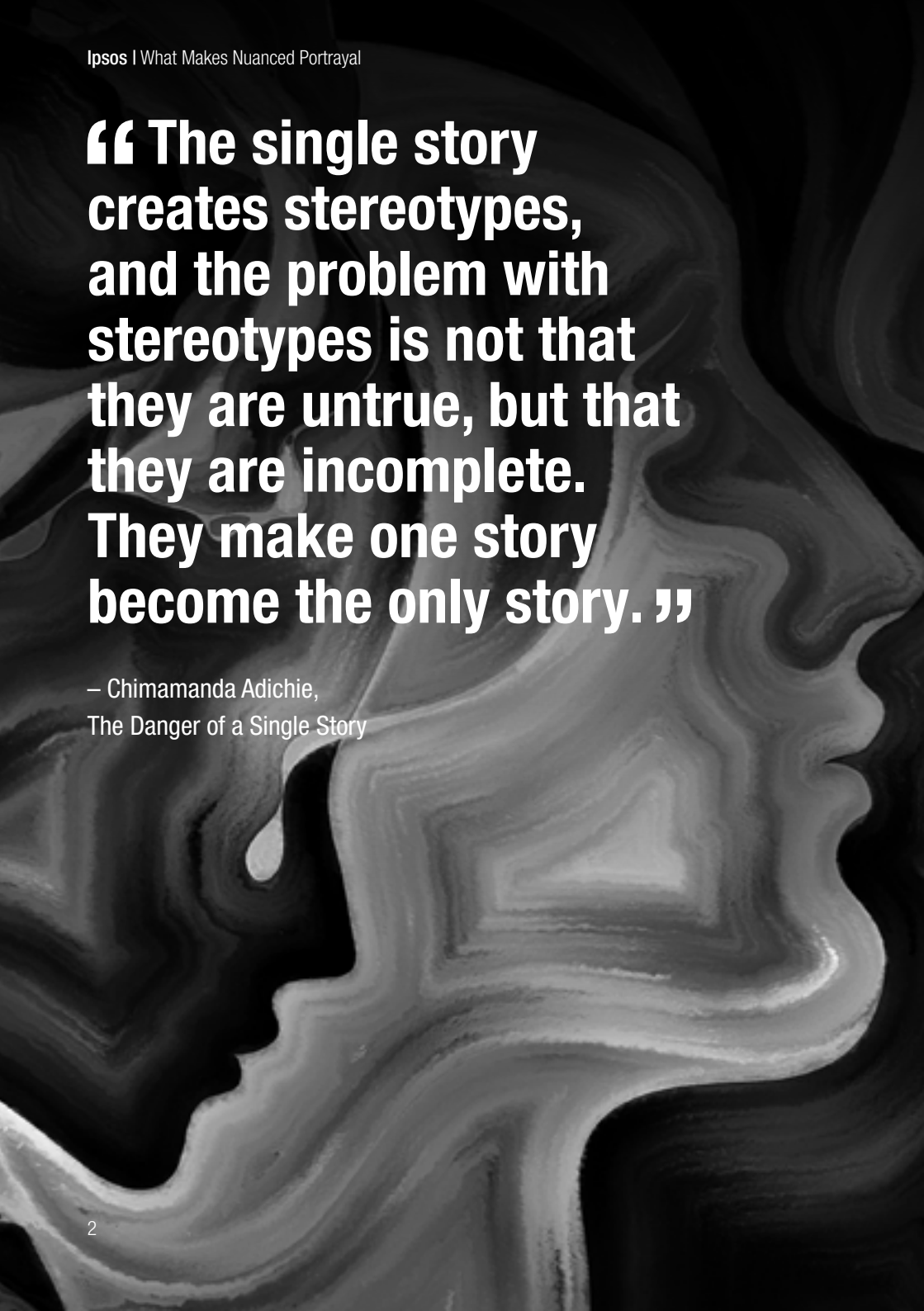# WHAT MAKES NUANCED PORTRAYAL?

Avoiding the unconscious stereotype trap

Ipsos

> **" The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. "**

– Chimamanda Adichie,
The Danger of a Single Story

We are living through a period of extraordinary change; a global movement sparked by the events of 2020 forced millions around the world to step up, recognise and address issues of inequality. The impact of COVID-19 and the tragic murder of George Floyd have brought the topics of social prejudice and injustice to everyday conversations. Many brands and businesses have been compelled to act, increasing their efforts to achieve greater inclusion and authentic representation within their teams, practices and communications. As such, the events of 2020 have kick-started a journey of reflection, education and empathy that was long overdue.

Introduction

The media industry has been at the heart of this movement, playing a crucial role in the coverage of key events, sharing commentary and points of view with audiences across the globe. Moreover, many media outlets have embarked on their own reflective journeys, challenging the role that media has played in perpetuating prejudice and inequalities. Through media content, audiences are given access to depictions of people, places and experiences that help shape their understanding of individuals, society, and the world around them. This comes with great responsibility. When those people, places and experiences are not represented authentically and are regularly reproduced and shared at scale, those depictions can result in inaccurate perceptions and lack of understanding, with the potential for serious impact and harm.

Stereotypes are a notable example. They reduce the identities of people and communities into over-simplified versions of themselves, by focusing on single characteristics that certain groups within society share, whilst ignoring the nuance and complexities that make individuals unique. In doing so, they create a disconnect that not only impacts how stereotyped individuals view themselves, but also how others view and subsequently treat them.

Research carried out by Ofcom has highlighted the ramifications of over-simplified portrayals on the everyday lived experiences of real people, across a wide spectrum of social and cultural identities.

As such, on behalf of the BBC, BBC Studios and UKTV, Ipsos conducted a qualitative and semiotic study to investigate stereotypes in media portrayals and implications for content creators committed to greater inclusion across the UK. Here we will present learnings designed to empower and equip media and tech brands to provide informed and accurate representation, with a view to positively contributing to moving our industry's understanding of these topics forward.

The Context

The word 'stereotype' has its origins in media and, more specifically, in the 18th century printing press. On the surface, its original meaning may seem far removed from our understanding of stereotypes today: a cast or mold, created from a page of text, allowing that text to be 'fixed' reprinted and reproduced. But, more than that, it was a means of shortcutting; of bringing efficiency to the previously rigorous task of setting and printing individual words on a page. The introduction of stereotypes enabled the information contained within those pages to be reproduced and shared more quickly, more easily and more widely, than previously possible.

In this way, the stereotype (technology) was instrumental in the diffusion of the stereotype (the concept of overgeneralization) because it allowed ideas to spread more widely and quickly. This shift in the meaning of the word underlines a point relevant today: global media plays an essential role in 'fixing' the representation of groups, with major consequences for identity politics and social inequality. Representation is not something passive, devoid of the socio-political developments.

Representations actively participate in the creation of meaning in society, and how people are seen based on stereotypes have huge implications on how we are perceived by one another. This is particularly worrying when these perceptions are circulated through political discourse, travel through school playgrounds and seen repeatedly on screen. Eventually they are woven into the structures of power in society and stereotypes reflect society's power structures and its divisions.

The stereotype is sometimes seen as a representational faux pas: an embarrassing or awkward mistake that should be avoided. But media scholar Sarita Malik argues that this is a limited and flawed view.

> **" It's impossible to eliminate them and thus a mistake to try; the goal instead should be to distribute better the power to make and contest representations of difference "**
> – Sarita Malik

Because of this it is essential complexity and accuracy are built into representation.

Media portrayals have evolved significantly over time, often in parallel with social movements and events. Through viewing the history of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) and media representations of minority communities, we can gain a snapshot of the changing politics of difference within society. For example, if we consider representation of the LGBTQ+ community:

There has been a dramatic shift of representation amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual people over the past three decades. From Ellen DeGeneres' show being cancelled after her character came out as gay to the normalisation of gay and queer relationships seen today in such shows as Glee and Sex Education.

For trans people the shift has been even more dramatic and recent, with a shift towards more frequent portrayals (e.g., Pose and Orange Is the New Black) after a history of sensationalising representation in the past.

It is important to note not all shifts in media portrayal are linear. As we will see from the timeline below which provides a potted history of representation of ethnic minorities within PSB, there are moments in time where a move towards more inclusive portrayal can regress before progress is seen.

A snapshot of ethnic minority representation

EARLY YEARS

In the early inception of PSB there were few minority ethnic voices on the airwaves. When they were heard, it was for light entertainment. This would change throughout the 20th century, but not always for the better.

1950s

A rise of diverse voices and faces, but through a paternalistic 'white gaze'. The depictions of black and Asian faces on screens were often exploring racial differences as a problem white people had to solve. Meanwhile, representations of disability and the LGBTQ+ community were still largely absent.

1960s

With the radical social politics of the 1960s came the British Realism movement. A greater voice was given to working class communities and regional dialects that were previously marginalised.

1970s

Paternalistic portrayals were toned down, but often replaced with increasing levels of satire. Cultural discussions about racism became more prevalent, but brownface and blackface were still prominent (e.g., The Black and White Minstrel Show, 1958-1978).

1980s

Concerted efforts by the media to recognise and address ideas of representation. A political and public policy multiculturalism project focused on understanding the unequal power dynamics of a diverse society resulting in more diverse shows often produced and starring minority ethnic communities (e.g., Desmond's).

1990s

The birth of the 'War on Terror'. This period saw a regression in the representation of Muslims and South Asians, as well as a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric.

2000s

9/11 provoked racial profiling causing stereotypes to begin to have serious and material consequence for minorities, setting back the progress of the 80s and 90s. There was a shift to 'cultural diversity'; a deliberate approach to present difference due to the unique public mandate of PSB.

2010s

British society was seen to have succeeded in assimilation and become multicultural in identity, causing PSB to redefine their policy on representation as 'creative diversity' (due to the perception that the more politically charged cultural diversity movement was no longer necessary). However, the rise in minority appearances in content raised criticism. Despite more representation, characters lacked depth allowing audiences to learn very little about the minority experience. Black Lives Matter and protests against the murder of George Floyd changed the conversation, putting pressure on PSB to embrace an anti-racist stance.

The Problem

It is impossible to eradicate stereotypes altogether. Our brains are wired to take shortcuts and compartmentalise information, therefore, stereotypes are a form of shortcut that can help us navigate the world around us by organising people into groups.

However, as we've just seen, stereotypes are also shaped by societal and cultural events, along with the media output around us. It is these representations of the world that inform our unconscious biases. So, although it is impossible to overcome the act of stereotyping itself, we can and must be more conscious and aware of it.

Ipsos research has uncovered how audiences identify and see themselves can be markedly different from how they are portrayed. The stereotypes they experience are based almost entirely on visible, societal and demographic markers, elements that are often out of people's control.

"The black and fat stereotypes affect me the most, because I can't take off my skin and can't unzip my body, it's the identities I carry around with me regardless and can't hide from. Sometimes I can play around with them and reclaim but sometimes they're the most dangerous for me." - Non-binary, LGB, C2DE, 28

"My basic physical identity is that I am female, middle-aged, and of Chinese ethnicity. But I am also an approachable, friendly and loyal person." - Female, Chinese, 60

"Also, the stereotype of being a Bristolian is a fairly embarrassing one. Most people hear the accent and again don't think you are intelligent." - Female, Pakistani, 23

In contrast, how audiences identify is based much more on **values, personality traits** and **beliefs**, which some feel they have more agency over. These elements show the complexity that makes up who we are as individuals.

"Some people presume that I am demure, a pushover and overly polite due to my race. They expect me to be subservient and very quiet. The truth is I am the opposite of what they think I am." - Female, Chinese, 60

"I relate to Anita Rani in Countryfile, you can relate to the issues identified in the drama, issues that affect mainly women. Her young, spirited behavior, her recklessness. Her friendship group who are all close-knit." - Female, Pakistani, 23

The representation of disability is a strong example of the harm stereotyping can have on individuals. For example, autistic characters are often represented as 'savants' with genius level skills, but lacking empathy or social skills. This can contribute to a view of the condition as exotic and 'beyond' the world of human feeling, which can lead to mistreatment or misunderstanding of people with disabilities.

Similarly, Ipsos research shows us there are other examples of stereotypes creating misconceptions; many of those in their seventies and above, are often misrepresented as 'doddering' and 'mentally incapable' as one participant noted, or those without formal qualifications are seen as 'dumb' or homemakers depicted as 'lazy' mums impacting levels of self-esteem and confidence. "I often hear the stereotype that Welsh people are thick or uneducated, or older people are not good with technology. I feel like at times it has got in the way of people seeing me for me". - Female, White British, 70

Where the media reinforces stereotypes (positive or negative) it causes the audience to internalise or adapt their behaviour in response, often in harmful ways that can include:

Self-sabotage: in attempting to subvert a stereotype the individual might affect behaviours that are detrimental. "Being perceived as lazy because of my disability makes me often ignore my body's needs and over strain myself because I feel worthless and want to prove that I am not a burden. This has actually made my disability worse." - Non-binary, Black African, Heterosexual, Physical Disability, C2DE, 26

Code-switching: conscious or subconscious changes to behaviour, mannerisms, accent or other aspects of identity to fit in and avoid discrimination. "I change queer to gay or lesbian, it doesn't encapsulate my whole situation, but it stops awkward questions and people being rude about my gender stuff. I'd change femme in some circles. I feel like I have to "butch" up to be respected or taken seriously." - Non-binary, Black Caribbean LGB, C2DE, 28

Belief: whilst some stereotypes can be motivational, others can

lower confidence and impact self-image. "My son, he was told when young that Asian people should be good at maths, and now he's older he's a maths teacher because he believed what he was told." - Male, Bangladeshi, 65

Feeling pressure: living up to expectations in order to be recognised or accepted. For example, the 'all gay people are flamboyant' stereotype: "Seems positive and harmless but it's actually not great, it hurts gays growing up without seeing the widespread representation that they don't have to change to recognise who they are." - Non-binary, Black Caribbean, LGB, C2DE, 28

Emotional stress: experiencing stereotyping can lead to feeling frustrated, upset and conflicted at being pigeonholed into one particular narrative.

"I felt extremely upset and sometimes I felt vulnerable as if it was them against me. I would also feel anger because they did not try and get to know me, they just made a judgement." - Female, Black African, 71

Whilst it may not be possible to eradicate stereotypes, these could be diluted through varied and complex characters portrayals which can help audiences recognise themselves in the content they watch, listen to and read. Accurate portrayal is vital; portrayal can hold up a mirror to viewers, reflecting their lives, experiences and cultures showing them people they can relate to, and providing a sense of identification and inclusion. It can also work like a window revealing other people to us and providing visibility of ourselves to others, which can encourage mutual understanding and break down barriers.

The Implications

While this research is not prescriptive, there are steps media owners and brands can take to develop a strategy for more inclusive and well-rounded portrayal. In becoming familiar with the unconscious stereotype trap and creating more nuanced views of identity, media owners can better engage audiences. There is an opportunity for better portrayals in what one participant describes as, "decentre[ing] the identity from the character without making it simply an "add on". It is integral to them, and their movement through the world, without it being their whole self."- Non-binary, White, LGB, 34

Focus on the five key aspects that shape identity

There were five key markers of identity that came through in our research: personality traits, values and beliefs, their role in society, their situation, and shared cultural and social experiences. Using these elements to develop characters moves away from one dimensional, stereotypical portrayal, instead forming well rounded individuals audiences can identify with, regardless of demographics.

01. Personality Traits

Portraying audiences as nuanced individuals with different character traits who evolve and develop over time. Within the research many spoke about the growth their identity and personality had gone through throughout their lives, shifting as they experienced different moments within their lives. It's important that characters show depth and are not limited to demographics in their portrayal. The television drama Silent Witness provides us with an example of nuanced portrayal through the character of Clarissa. Her disability is not a key marker of her identity. She is presented as a strong minded, professional and multifaceted character.

02. Values & Beliefs

Values and beliefs were at the core of what many of the people we talked with felt made them who they are. This focuses on their perspective of how they want to live their life, the type of person they wish to be and (for some) the role their faith plays within this. Language people used includes: honesty, tenacity, caring, their political views, dedication, Muslim, Nigerian Culture. For example, David Attenborough and his passion for

the environment and climate change resonates across ages as many can relate to his dedication and tenacity as well as this caring and kind nature.

03. The roles

Depicting a wider, more varied set of roles (work, family and hobbies) was important for many to demonstrate a more accurate, modern representation of the varying roles many uphold. This also provides a fresher perspective vs. portraying the scenarios depicted many times before. Examples include:

- Women as the breadwinner
- Stay at home dads
- Black men as present fathers
- Disabled parents
- Teachers that love their jobs
- Chefs that love cooking for their families.

For example, Arrested Development depicts Michael's mother as the matriarch of the family who orchestrates all the moves, whereas typically this may be seen from a father figure.

04. Their Situation

Telling stories that go beyond relying on just specific demographic markers is essential, as this is often stereotypical portrayal. Instead, telling stories that many can relate to is key, such as:

- Young women in their 30s building a family and career,
- Family being a burden
- Feeling the weight of responsibility as the male head of the family to lead and provide
- Being a good father
- Struggling to have children
- Growing up, discovering who you are
- Chasing dreams at a young age.

For example, television drama series Peaky Blinders shows a stereotypically masculine protagonist being affected by the burden of maintaining and supporting his dangerous family. The audience can see the character in a wider set of situations, moving away from stereotypical depictions.

These are the types of stories many can relate to regardless of background.

05. Shared Experiences

That said, it is important not to ignore demographics completely and this was particularly true for younger people and within black, Asian, lesbian, gay and bisexual groups. There is power in shared experiences, and these experiences can relate to other identity markers such as personality and values. Examples from our research include:

- Characters that are open about their sexual orientation and gender,
- Northern background which 'reminds me of home',
- Successful and mature black women,
- A focus on humble beginnings.

What is key is to ensure it is not the sole focus within the narrative. Through incorporating the four markers above we get a more well-rounded, accurate portrayal.

Our study also illuminates the overarching best practice to create more nuanced portrayal.

Consider the collective of stories that already exist about a particular group and understand how the cumulative impact is shaping stereotypes. The overall context and bigger picture can determine the extent to which new content could be potentially reinforcing commonly held beliefs. It is important to evaluate both current and historical content to understand how the groups you wish to present have previously been portrayed. Are you providing a fresh, nuanced and new portrayal, or reinforcing a stereotype?

"It's about telling complex tales where people aren't reduced to social identities, but rather emotional and intellectual ones." - Non-binary, Black African, 26

Language is critical in shaping portrayal; vocabulary is powerful in creating the narrative. Connotations and tones can influence an audiences' attitude to certain groups. When portraying minority audiences, it's important to think carefully about the language used; is it inclusive or excluding? Is it the language and tone that particular group would adopt, or is it relying on stereotypical tropes?

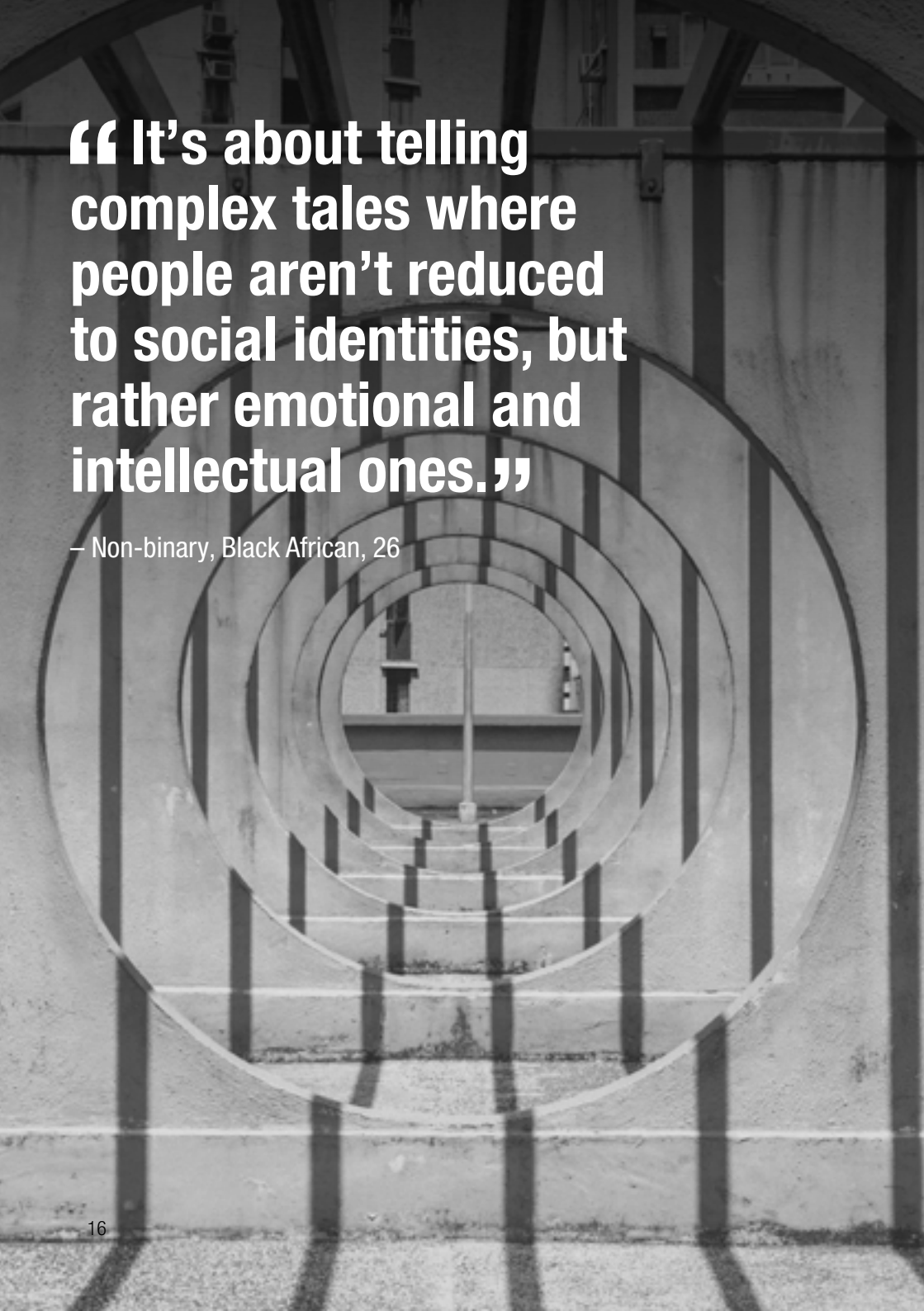"News is a classic example of how they describe a lot of young black males as thugs. If it's a Caucasian person, they tend to use different language when it's associated with crime. Same with Asians labelled as terrorists." - Male, Pakistani, 37

Aesthetics coupled with language can reinforce or create stereotypes. Media and content creators have agency over the images they put into the world. Consider whether it's factual, or if it is a commonly used image/representation. The aesthetics created coupled with language can reinforce or create stereotypes when used repeatedly, so we can be proactive in avoiding this.

Topics such as religion, gender identity, disability, race, culture, and sexual orientation need greater consideration of how they are handled, who delivers it must be relevant and appropriate. When deep diving into an audience's experience, exploring culture, relationships, community, etc., and the potentially sensitive topics that surround them, it is even more important to get it right. It is key to get the representation of the nuances and microaggressions right to ensure the intention is not misunderstood. Transaction and Pose are both praised for being authentically done by people that have first-hand experience of the subject. That said, it is possible for creators to build their cultural confidence through research and putting in the work to get to know their audience, regardless of their background.

"You can almost tell when there is a straight person writing a story about a homosexual, or a white person writing a story about a black person. Not to say this is wrong, but the writer needs a level of understanding into that other person's experiences and identity to write a story properly and not play into stereotypes or portray the plot in an insensitive or reductive way." - Male, Mixed Heritage, 24

> **" It's about telling complex tales where people aren't reduced to social identities, but rather emotional and intellectual ones. "**
>
> – Non-binary, Black African, 26

Conclusion

This is not a prescriptive way of creating nuanced portrayal, but instead a guide of how to contribute to more varied depictions which move away from the stereotypical tropes.

We cannot eradicate stereotypes, nor can we decide or dictate the level of harm they create (as all stereotypes are ultimately harmful). The focus must be on how to dilute the stereotypes that exist by refraining from depicting them and offering a wider set of high quality, varied portrayal. Portrayals should show audiences in many shapes, forms and situations beyond the current narrative that reduces them to a single story.

As we've seen, research can support the development of more accurate, balanced and nuanced portrayal.

Multi-methodological approaches involving qualitative and quantitative research, semiotics and cultural analysis can help content creators better understand the collective of stories and the language used to describe stereotypes. It can also provide recommendations on how to approach complex narratives, aesthetics and topics.

As June Sarpong, Director of Creative Diversity at the BBC, highlights:

"We have to get to a place of balance. The default in media is non-disabled, white, heterosexual, middle class. In that context, you get nuanced portrayal. But we don't have this with other audience groups. When we do represent underserved people, it needs to be as well-rounded and balanced as possible. But we need to understand the stereotypes in place so as not to fall back on them."

Methodology

This research was conducted between April and September 2021 by Ipsos, commissioned by the BBC, BBC Studios and UKTV. A literature review and multiple stakeholder workshops were followed by a Semiotic analysis of 42 titles and qualitative online communities over a 3-day period with 92 participants (split evenly across eight ethnic groups - Black African, Black Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Mixed Heritage, White British - and balanced across Age and Gender, as well as being split by– Regionality, Disability, Social Class, Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity/Expression).

For more on the topic of Diversity and Inclusion research with guidelines on inclusion within content, please find the **Language Guide** research paper and **BBC Creative Diversity Toolkit**

About Ipsos

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This is why our passionately curious experts not only provide the most precise measurement, but shape it to provide a true understanding of society, markets and people. To do this, we use the best of science, technology and know-how and apply the principles of security, simplicity, speed and substance to everything we do.

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Ultimately, success comes down to a simple truth:
You act better when you are sure.

Our Media Experts

We are a close knit team of experts who work exclusively to help you understand the media and tech landscape. Through our work we leverage our deep understanding of people, society, and culture to make sense of audiences and how they use technology and consume entertainment. We work with integrated data sources and curated insights to contextualise your business challenges, so we are in the best position to help shape your strategy and ultimately create greater impact.

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