

ASA ASA System briefing note on body image, weight loss, prescription only medicines (POMs) and cosmetic surgery



Background

The UK Advertising Codes contain general rules that all ads should be prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and society. The rules prohibit ads from containing anything likely to be irresponsible or that can lead to harm.

A particular issue we're aware of is societal concern around the impact of negative body image. A wide range of contributing factors can affect people's body confidence and how they see and think about themselves. To mitigate any role that advertising might have, we've established a strong track record of banning ads that are likely to encourage / condone harmful behaviours or attitudes related to body image.

We can and will take action where ads depict people in a way that makes them appear unhealthily thin, whether that's through airbrushing or simply the angle of a photo, the model's pose or the way it's lit.

Our rules also prohibit ads that mislead about the effect a cosmetic product can have, or where an ad for beauty treatment or product is inappropriately targeted, irresponsible or harmful.

Reflecting the law, our rules don't allow the advertising of prescription only medicines (POMs) to the general public. We've been using our AI-powered Active Ad Monitoring system to monitor for such ads and working with platforms to get them swiftly removed when they do appear.

We respond quickly to consumer complaints, banning ads on the infrequent occasions when the rules are broken. But we have rebalanced our regulation, shifting away from complaints-led investigations towards front-foot, ASA-led, tech-assisted monitoring and enforcement action.

The ASA continues to work with the beauty, cosmetics and fashion sectors, through the provision of advice, guidance and training resources including seminars and webinars, to maintain high rates of compliance with the rules. And we continue to assess the evidence base around the potential for body-image advertising related harms to ensure our rules continue to provide effective protections.

It's important to note that our rules apply to advertising only - products and services themselves are regulated by bodies such as the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the Department of Health and Social Care and the General

Pharmaceutical Council. We have strong partner relationships with these bodies, and work with them on a regular basis to tackle body image-related issues.

This briefing covers:

- Ads which promote an unhealthy body image
- Ads for cosmetic procedures
- Ads for weight loss / slimming products
- Ads for POMs (including weight loss drugs)
- Influencer advertising
- Our next steps on body image

Ads which promote an unhealthy body image

Whilst the use of thin models is not automatically considered socially irresponsible, ads must ensure that models are not depicted in a way that makes them appear unhealthily thin or underweight, through the use of lighting, makeup, a choice of clothing and pose. Ads must also not suggest that being unhealthily thin is somehow glamorous or otherwise desirable.

We have taken action, and will continue to take action, against ads which irresponsibly exploit the insecurities of children, young people and vulnerable groups about their bodies.

Additionally, in 2018, we introduced a rule which prohibits ads from including gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm or serious or widespread offence. The accompanying guidance advises that advertisers must take care to avoid suggesting that an individual's happiness or emotional wellbeing should depend on conforming to an idealised gender-stereotypical body shape or physical features.

Ads should also be sensitive to the emotional and physical well-being of vulnerable groups, such as children, young people or new mothers, who may be under pressure to conform to particular gender stereotypes.

Key rulings:

JA Physique Ltd: An ad on Jake Abbott's Instagram was irresponsible as it exploited young people's insecurities about body image.

Maje SAS: A paid-for Instagram post featured a model who appeared unhealthy thin and was irresponsible.

Ads for Cosmetic Interventions

Our rules contain various restrictions on how cosmetic interventions can be advertised as well as an overarching principle that all ads should be responsible.

Ads for cosmetic interventions should not detract from the seriousness of the interventions offered.

Ads for cosmetic surgery procedures mustn't:

- Give the impression that a procedure should be undertaken lightly

- Use a tone or approach that could be seen to trivialise the seriousness of the decision to undergo cosmetic surgery
- Play on consumers' insecurities or suggest a cosmetic intervention would be able to solve a consumer's personal or emotional issues
- Portray the procedure as "safe," "easy" or "risk free" because no surgery is without risk
- Put undue pressure on consumers to purchase or take advantage of a time-limited promotional offer
- Use countdown clocks and claims such as "hurry, offer must end Friday"

We are working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to clampdown on irresponsible cosmetic surgery ads by foreign-based clinics/practitioners targeted at UK consumers. We issued an [Enforcement Notice](#) to cosmetic surgery providers based abroad, setting out the strict advertising rules in place that are designed to protect people from potential harm. We've been working with regulatory partners both in the UK and abroad, including in Türkiye, where many UK nationals travel for treatment, to make it clear to advertisers what we expect. We also continue to use our AI-assisted Active Ad Monitoring system to effectively trawl Meta (Facebook and Instagram) for non-compliant adverts, which has led to Meta removing just over 900 adverts to date.

Taking action to protect children and young people

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to body image pressures which can have an impact on their self-esteem, wellbeing, mental health and behaviours.

In 2021, we introduced new rules banning ads for cosmetic procedures from being directed at under-18s.

The rules require that:

- Ads for cosmetic interventions mustn't appear in non-broadcast media directed at under-18s
- Ads for cosmetic interventions mustn't appear in other non-broadcast media where under-18s make up over 25% of the audience; and
- Broadcast ads for cosmetic interventions mustn't appear during / adjacent to programmes commissioned for, principally directed at or likely to appeal particularly to under-18s.

Key rulings:

Grand Clinic: A paid-for Facebook ad for a cosmetic clinic in Türkiye was irresponsible for exploiting mothers' insecurities around body image; making time limited special offers, pressuring consumers into purchasing surgery; and misleadingly omitting information around the need for a pre-consultation.

MYA Clinics Ltd: Two display ads for MYA Cosmetic Surgery seen on the Quizlet website, an online resource providing tools for studying, were inappropriately targeted to under 18s through the context in which they appeared.

Weight loss/slimming ads:

Our rules contain various restrictions on the claims that can be made in ads for weight loss products or regimes.

- Any claims made for the effectiveness or action of a weight-reduction method or product must be backed (if applicable) by rigorous trials on people.
- Ads for lifestyle weight management programmes can't reference obesity unless the programme meets certain standards.
- Ads for weight reduction programmes must not be directed at or contain anything that is likely to appeal to under-18s or those for whom weight reduction would produce a potentially harmful bodyweight.
- Advertisers must be able to show that their diet plans are nutritionally well-balanced.
- Diets of under 800 calories per-day must only be promoted for short-term use and must encourage users to take medical advice before embarking on them.
- Ads must not claim that people can lose precise amounts of weight within a stated period or that weight can be lost from specific parts of the body.
- Health claims in ads for food products must not refer to a rate or amount of weight loss.

Key rulings:

The Clean Supps LLC: A paid-for Facebook ad for a weight-loss supplement made unauthorised health claims, made claims that people could lose fat from specific parts of the body and referred to a rate or amount of weight loss which is prohibited by our rules.

BoomBod Ltd: Ads on Instagram for weight loss products were banned for making unauthorised health claims, claims about rate or amount of weight loss and promoting diet products in an irresponsible way.

Not Guilty Food Co Ltd t/a The Skinny Food Co: An Instagram Reel on Katie Price's account was not obviously recognisable as an ad, irresponsibly promoted a diet that fell below 800 calories a day, and made weight loss claims for the products shown that aren't authorised on the GB NHC Register.

Prescription-only medicines:

Prescription-only medicines (POMs) cannot be advertised to the general public.

We identified a trend of these ads appearing on social media, particularly in organic Instagram posts, and took action to ensure advertisers reviewed their advertising. We used monitoring technology to identify where these ads were appearing and flagged them with the platform to have them quickly removed.

In 2020 we sent an Enforcement Notice on Botox ads to **130,000 businesses** across the beauty and cosmetic services industry.

Our Compliance Team have been proactively monitoring online ads for products like Botox and reporting them to the platforms to get them taken down. In 2023 we had **23,676 POM ads** taken down.

Weight loss drugs:

We've seen a growing trend in the advertising of weight-loss drugs, such as Ozempic and Wegovy. These drugs fall into the category of POMs, and so aren't allowed to be advertised to the public. Recognising the urgency of the issue, we're working in partnership with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the General Pharmaceutical Council to tackle these ads and the advertisers failing to comply with the rules.

The ASA is also carrying out ongoing proactive work around ads for weight loss treatments. This includes using our Active Ad Monitoring system to identify potential problem ads online and taking action where the rules are being broken.

This system monitors thousands of organic social media posts a day and determines which are likely to be ads and which of those ads are likely breaking the rules before they are assessed by our human experts. We place a particular focus on monitoring ads in non-paid space such as on Instagram where we are doing a lot of work, alongside the platform, in taking action against ads for prescription only medicines (including weight loss treatments such as Ozempic). While not every one is a weight loss specific ad, we are removing just shy of **100 posts a day** for these types of product.

Key Rulings:

Skippy Revolution Ltd: Four Instagram post by a weight loss injection provider were banned for making irresponsible weight loss claims, for promoting prescription-only medicines to the general public and for exploiting people's insecurities around body image during lockdown.

Lucy Isabella Beauty & Aesthetics: We banned an ad for advertising Kenalog, a prescription-only medicine, to the public.

Influencer Advertising

In the same way as any other ads, influencer advertising must comply with our rules, be it in the form of a blog, vlog, tweet, post, story or other channel-specific format.

Influencers advertising cosmetic interventions mustn't target under-18s and similar rules apply to ads for slimming/weight loss products/regimes in that they must not be directed at under-18s or appeal particularly to them.

Influencers and advertisers promoting beauty products, and indeed any other appearance enhancing products, are advised to avoid applying filters to photos or videos which are likely to exaggerate the effect the product is capable of achieving. For example, we banned a post by an influencer for using an Instagram filter to exaggerate the efficacy of a tanning product.

As part of our [More Impact Online strategy](#), we are investing significant resource and effort into helping the influencer marketing industry understand their responsibilities under the ad rules.

Body Image Call for Evidence

We ran a Call for Evidence seeking an up-to-date understanding of the current evidence base surrounding potential body image related harms from advertising and the potential detrimental impact of those harms on consumers. The primary objective was to determine whether there are harms arising from advertising in this area that are not adequately addressed by existing rules and guidance.

Having analysed the submissions, we ran in-depth evidence reviews into the following issues:

- The labelling of digitally-altered images in advertising
- Depictions of muscularity in ads
- Depictions of women from minority ethnic backgrounds in ads and the potential for creating new and unattainable body image ideals

This briefing will be updated when the final statement on this call for evidence is published.