

Sydney Stein

Dear Brian Ford,

I would like to draw attention to our most recent project, the Pop Chips 'Dating' Ad starring Ashton Kutcher. I understand the intent to promote the various flavors of Pop Chips by attributing them to different types of men found on dating services. However, I think that this advertisement offers up issues of racist stereotyping and specifically the propagation of "brown face" that could potentially cause controversy.

On its face, the commercial portrays Ashton Kutcher creating fake dating service videos dressed as four different characters— a hippie, a biker gang-type, a fashion guru character and an Indian man named Raj— all "bachelors" looking for love. Each character got their own clip which included sharing an affinity for a certain brand of potato chips. The character 'Raj,' is a Bollywood producer in brown face makeup, wearing stereotypical Indian garb and mocking an Indian accent. Casting a white male to play an Indian character is problematic because it diminishes their representation in mainstream media as well as perpetuates stereotypes about their culture.

"Brown face," which is the practice that is being used in this commercial, is a variant of "black face" which is a form of theatrical make-up used by non-black performers to represent a black person. The history of black face is disturbing onto itself as it was used in the 19th century when black actors weren't allowed to perform in theatre and white actors wore darkened make-up to mock and ridicule African Americans. By casting Ashton Kutcher as brown face to play a vessel of stereotypes and projections of an Indian man, it effectively reduces the character to a one-sided, superficial and exaggerated depiction of an entire minority group. "Rather than represent[ing] a wide range of "real people" who reflect the diversity of the nation, TV repackages difference into comfortingly familiar stock characters and stereotypes" (Wang, 2010: 405). In entertainment media, a majority of the representation we have of South Asians are

when they are casted as taxi drivers, convenient store owners or doctors who often have thick “singsongy” accents, with either an overeagerness or unwillingness to assimilate (Gajjar, 2015). When white actors are casted to play Asian actors, especially with this already existing lack of representation in entertainment, “Hollywood portray[s] one dimensional stereotypes that feed into and strengthen public perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans” (Mok, 1998: 191). This is problematic because it can ultimately influence American perception of an entire culture the wrong way. When the same recurrent stereotype of an Indian man is reproduced, especially when parroted by a non-Indian person, it mimics racial micro aggressions and slurs against people of Indian and South Asian heritage.

There is a long history in the American film industry of “whitewashing,” which is when white actors play non-white character roles. Minorities account for almost 40% of our population, and while an average of 75.2% of speaking roles already go to white actors, some of those parts are actually characters of color (Huffington Post, 2017: Latino Voices). Although previously executed entertainment media was able to get away with whitewashing, we no longer live in such a culturally insensitive time. Hollywood actors and opinion leaders such as Mindy Kaling, Kal Penn, Aziz Ansari and Priyanka Chopra are just a few major players in the movement to change Indian representation and prejudiced perception through platforms such as their own TV shows. As we move towards a more progressive society, the conversation of whitewashing and misrepresentation of culture in the media is starting to gain traction, which is why I believe this campaign could potentially cause controversy.

Although the concept of this commercial is to correlate the various flavors of Pop Chips to the humorous aspect of online dating, I think that the execution suffers because of the microaggressions it proclaims against a stereotypical Indian man. I would recommend to simply remove the Raj character as a whole and replace him with a different character that doesn't perpetuate racial and cultural stereotypes. Since Ashton Kutcher is a white actor, he should be

playing a white character. I believe that replacing the Raj character will effectively communicate the message without causing controversy and backlash. I am available at your convenience if you would like to discuss this issue further. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sydney Stein

Word Count: 728

Pop Chips 'Dating' Ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW5aLNpiV-s>

CITATION:

Wang, G. (2010). A Shot at Half-Exposure: Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows. *SAGE Publications*, 405.

Mok, T. A. (n.d.). Getting the Message: Media Images and Stereotypes and Their Effect on Asian Americans. *Cultural Diversity And Mental Health*, 4, 191.

Gajjar, S. (2016, October 20). Aziz Ansari, Diversity, and Being Able to Finally See Yourself on TV. Retrieved December 04, 2017, from <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2015/11/indian-american-representations-television>